

# An Airborne 'Moby Dick' at Arena

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Photo by Liz Lauren. Courtesy Arena Stage.

The cast of "Moby Dick."

Beware when you go after the Great White Whale. It just might turn on you.

That danger always persists in what is a daring, dashing, athletic and sometimes feverishly imagined production of Herman Melville's classic — and who knows, maybe the great American — novel from 1851.

It's not only the obsessed Captain Ahab and the ill-fated crew of the Pequod who've run afoul of Moby Dick, the single-minded killing machine of a whale, but also any number of talented folks in theater, music, opera and movies.

Strangely enough, it's filmmakers, with the resources to create literal reality — including a believable whale nemesis — that have fallen short in recreating the novel. Even as great a director as John Huston couldn't quite get past Gregory Peck's inertia as Captain Ahab in his often fierce film version. A television version starring the estimable Patrick Stewart likewise failed to soar, although there is evidence that John Barrymore out-Ahabed Ahab in a strange silent-movie version.

Composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer got to the musical and literary essence of the novel, capturing its language and spirit onstage, if not quite its metaphysics or spectacle.

Now, in a production at Arena Stage through Dec. 24, adaptor and director David Catlin — schooled in the grandiose tasks set by Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company, of which he is a cofounder — mostly avoids a good many of the inherent pitfalls. What are the principal challenges? For starters: the ship, the ocean and, of course, Moby Dick himself. And let's not forget the role of Captain Ahab.

Catlin and the company have answered the main challenges by often making you forget about them altogether. The

book, Melville, metaphysics and suchlike stuff often end up overboard, as do many of the elastic crew members. This “Moby Dick” is not only set on the ship and in the world of the Pequod — it becomes literally airborne when it plays out high among the mastheads and rigging where many of the characters can be found. You almost wonder how this would play out as a Cirque du Soleil production.

Probably not as well, although the athletics of climbing, falling and swinging among the ropes make you almost dizzy just watching (and perhaps a little seasick). It’s a wonderful achievement, with sets of bleached whale bones, fairly simple props and plenty of action. The fundamental prop is movement itself: clambering, pulling oars, stumbling about.

“Moby Dick” is a metaphorical problem, in reading, in performing, in memory and in interpretation. You can argue with the choices made here on that score, which sometimes generate momentum-slowing confusion (until you straighten things out in your mind about what you’re seeing). The concept is surely interesting; it engenders issues that otherwise might not be a part of the story at all.

Insofar as Ahab goes, he makes perfect sense. He is in some ways the ultimate madman who’s lost his bearings, his compassion for his men. The only compass he has in his heart and head is where Moby Dick is churning in the waves. Christopher Donahue captures the irrational soul like a man grabbing a lightning bolt.

For a surprisingly small cast — there are only ten people doing all the parts — the production includes some fine portrayals of characters that aren’t always vivid in the book. A youngish Jamie Abelson plays Ishmael, for whom this is both a coming of age story and a survivor’s story, because his is the steady narrative. Micah Figueroa is particularly effective as Cabaco, desperately frightened in a storm. Anthony Fleming III is a fiery-funny figure as the Polynesian harpooner, Ishmael’s friend Queequeg.

Women people the play, on land, as widows, influences and metaphors. But the play comes most alive, even brilliantly alive, when it and its actors are in the air, in motion, at sea, pitching and floundering, driving into danger and waves. You can feel what it was for the men plying in a world that’s disappeared. These scenes are the muscle and beating heart of this production, in which Melville’s metaphysics are less solidly moored.