

Adaptation of 'Moby Dick' puts theatergoers in the belly of a beastly obsession

Mike
Fischer

Arts



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Chicago — Whether you're one of the true believers who consider "Moby-Dick" the greatest American novel, among the many who couldn't get through it or just a fan of great theater, your ship has come in at [Lookingglass Theatre Company](#).

Captain Ahab's "The Pequod" is hoisting sail at Lookingglass through Aug. 28, in [a thrilling adaptation](#) of Melville's classic by [David Catlin](#) (who also directs) that incorporates song, dance and gorgeous aerial acrobatics while doing full justice to the novel and its stirring poetry.

Even before this three-act show gets under way, one is already immersed in the belly of the beastly story to come.

Courtney O'Neill's scenic design enfolds both stage and audience in a structure reminiscent of a whale's skeleton, underscoring how each of us is consumed by our single-minded search for a white whale — Melville's embodiment of that unattainable something for which we ambitiously strive, sacrificing friends and fortune as well as love and life in our demented efforts to find it.

Captain Ahab is as monomaniacal as they come, and Christopher Donahue — staring hard into an undiscovered country only he can see — makes clear that nothing is going to get in this captain's way as he seeks vengeance against the monster that's already devoured one of his legs and scorched his soul.

But as was true when he channeled another obsessive at the [Milwaukee Repertory Theater](#), where he played Scrooge in 2012 and 2013, Donahue's Ahab is more man than devil.

Torn between his crippling compulsion and his desire to return home to his wife and son, Ahab's Donahue — like his Scrooge and so many of us who press on, long after we've forgotten why we started — wears the exhausted and sorrowing visage of a man desperate for release from a quest that is killing him.

But none of Ahab's fellow travelers has the magic or moral strength of the Dickensian spirits who help Scrooge help himself before it's too late.

As presented here by an excellent Anthony Fleming III, Queequeg the harpooner is too busy wrestling with demons of his own. Second-in-command Starbuck (an earnest Kareem Bandealy) means well, but he's overmatched. Third-in-command Stubb (a hearty Raymond Fox) is engrossed by the smell of the kill.

As a result, the three spirits Donahue listens to instead are the three sirens — Emma Cadd, Kasey Foster and Marquette University graduate [Monica West](#) — luring Ahab on toward his doom.

When not inhabiting a few smaller roles in the narrative such as New Bedford innkeeper or Nantucket prophet, this trio appear as sorrowing, black-clad New England widows of men lost at sea. Or as mermaids luring drowning men to their graves (beautifully choreographed by [Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi](#)). Or as the rolling waters themselves.

Or, most memorably, as both slaughtered whales and the great white avenger who makes the killers pay for their crimes against nature.

In one disturbing scene drawn from Melville's detailed description of a whale's dismemberment, a cowering woman becomes a piece of meat, with her dress unwrapping as though it were strips of flesh, reducing her past a corset suggestive of whalebone to her white undergarments. In another, these terrifying, white-clad furies embody Moby's great tail, smashing Ahab's boat and then dancing him to his death.

All that remains after Ahab's ship goes down is a man telling us to call him Ishmael (Jamie Abelson). Who is he, really? And as this story repeatedly drives home, who are we to presume we can ever answer that question, about him or anything else within the inscrutable world in which we live?

IF YOU GO

"Moby Dick" continues through Aug. 28 at Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave. (adjacent to Water Tower Place). Visit lookingglasstheatre.org/.