

Call him Ishmael's stage creator: David Catlin's reimagined 'Moby-Dick' comes to Costa Mesa

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Kathleen Luppi

David Catlin still remembers recoiling from the thought of reading "Moby-Dick."

It wasn't until he was enrolled in an American literature class at Northwestern University that a professor made it clear: The Herman Melville masterpiece was not optional.

"I was a terrible student," Catlin said. "I put it off and put it off until I over-caffinated on espresso for about four days and finished it in a blur before finals. It took me longer to read it than Melville to write it, but really, it was fabulous, amazing and I have fond memories of it."

Thirty years later, Catlin took on the challenge of re-creating for the stage a whale tale as spectacular and powerful as the novel.

The result: "Moby Dick," an approximately two-hour production by Chicago's renowned Lookingglass Theatre Company, which is making its West Coast premiere at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa.

As a founding member of Lookingglass, an arts organization that won the 2011 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre, Catlin adapted "Moby-Dick" for the stage and is its director.

The ensemble-based theater specializes in contemporary literary adaptations and is housed in the 148-year-old historic Water Tower Water Works building on Chicago's Magnificent Mile.

The location is fitting, Catlin said, since Lookingglass artists have long been fascinated with water stories.

People live near the water, vacation near the water or feel unsettled near water, but there's a pull to that water's edge, Catlin said. It's a trait he identified in Ishmael, a sailor and the narrator in "Moby-Dick."

"I kind of think all of us to some degree have felt disconnected in some way and feel apart from something, and I was drawn to that," Catlin said. "I feel like we have so much tugging at us for our attention, whether it's billboards or phones, and the idea of having a singular focus where the world disappears — that becomes important and beautiful."

Micah Figueroa, Anthony Fleming III, Javen Ulambayer and Christopher Donahue in Lookingglass Theatre Company's production of "Moby Dick" adapted by David Catlin. (Courtesy of Liz Lauren)

The story tells of Ishmael's voyage on the whaling ship the Pequod. The ship's captain, Ahab, is determined to find the white whale, Moby-Dick, who took his leg, and his obsession pushes him beyond the bounds of sanity.

Unappreciated in Melville's lifetime, the novel is now considered one of the greatest works of American literature as it shapes ideas of ambition, the drive to pursue an ideal and the disconnect between fate and free will.

Catlin, who is also a theater lecturer at Illinois' Northwestern University, said he envisioned adapting "Moby-Dick" for the stage with the help of Chicago's Actors Gymnasium, a circus and performing arts organization. He visualized trained acrobats and aerialists swinging through the air the way sailors would swing through the rigging of a 19th century whaling vessel.

He also wanted to show the stagehands contributing to the plot's action and women tackling a variety of roles. Ships are typically referred to with feminine pronouns, water expresses femininity and the life underwater holding thousands of creatures represents Mother Nature, Catlin explained of his desire to highlight the gender.

For instance, three female actresses dressed in white move about the stage synchronously to represent the moving whale.

The physically daring theatrical vision garnered four Joseph Jefferson Awards, which acknowledge excellence in theater in the Chicago area.

"You can expect to feel different from most plays you've seen," Catlin said. "It's very visceral and surprisingly funny. I want people to think about what their 'Moby Dick' is and think of the things that might tip them," or be a tipping point in their lives.

"And I also want them to go and read the book."

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IF YOU GO

What: "Moby Dick"

When: Jan. 20 to Feb. 19

Where: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

Cost: Ticket prices vary

Information: (714) 708-5555 or visit scr.org.

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