

# Theater review: Chicago troupe's 'Moby Dick' docks at the Alliance

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Few epic novels would seem to be any less adaptable to the stage than Herman Melville's 1851 classic "Moby Dick," the seafaring saga about the hunt for an elusive white whale.

Written and directed by David Catlin for Chicago's Tony Award-winning Lookingglass Theatre, where it premiered last year, the show is now making the rounds on the regional theater circuit, hosted/co-produced by a triumvirate of other Tony winners: the Arena Stage (in Washington, D.C.), South Coast Repertory (in Costa Mesa, Calif.) and [Atlanta's own Alliance Theatre, where it's setting sail through Oct. 30.](#)

Credit Catlin for having the courage of his convictions, but however bold his intentions, the results are a bit wishy-washy. Having actors periodically walk across the stage holding a miniature model ship is hardly very evocative in conveying the spectacle of the high seas. And no small part of the letdown, of course, is that the titular leviathan is nowhere to be actually seen, essentially represented instead by flashes of ominous lighting or sound effects (designed by William C. Kirkham and Rick Sims, respectively).

Which isn't to suggest that this "Moby Dick" is without its breathtaking moments. Interestingly, many of them involve the Greek chorus of women in the ensemble (Kelley Abell, Cordelia Dewdney and Kasey Foster) as a trio of mythological Fates or Sirens — and the occasional marine mammal.

One terrific scene depicts the gutting of a whale, stringing up one of the actresses by her ankles, turning her period gown inside out, and then unraveling the material to leave only the skeleton of her hoop skirt. In a couple more, the flowing fabric of another actress's dress practically covers the entire stage, literally engulfing and drowning any number of unfortunate sailors who fall overboard or are shipwrecked and otherwise lost at sea. (The costumes are by Sully Ratke.)

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"Moby Dick," a production by Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, performs at the Alliance through Oct. 30.  
CONTRIBUTED BY LIZ LAUREN

Several sequences include aerial and acrobatic choreography (by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi) — reminiscent of, but mostly paling in comparison to, the singular style of Cirque du Soleil (with all due respect to the especially agile cast members Micah Figueroa and Javen Ulambayar).



Christopher Donahue is suitably bombastic as the Pequod's deranged Captain Ahab. But co-star Jamie Abelson's Ishmael, who narrates the story, is somewhat ineffectual and lightweight for a presumably tormented outcast in desperate search of solace. Supporting actors Walter Owen Briggs (as the chief shipmate Starbuck) and Adeoye (as the African harpooner Queequeg) fare better.

A lot of us were probably compelled to read Melville's novel in our high-school or college English classes, and some people might even share my personal recollection of it as rather interminable. As if to assuage a pre-existing dread about seeing a stage version of "Moby Dick," much of Catlin's first act is basically pitched like a comedy: e.g., at one point, Ishmael turns to the audience and jokes, "Nantucket is no Fulton County."

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Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby Dick," continuing through Oct. 30 at the Alliance, features Jamie Abelson (foreground) as Ishmael. CONTRIBUTED BY GREG MOONEY

Ultimately, though, an arguably misplaced sense of humor doesn't make the sailing any smoother.

## THEATER REVIEW

### "Moby Dick"

Grade: B-

Through Oct. 30. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays; 7:30 p.m. Sundays (but there's no 7:30 p.m. show on Oct. 30). \$20-\$72. Alliance Theatre (at the Woodruff Arts Center), 1280 Peachtree St., Atlanta. 404-733-5000, [www.alliancetheatre.org](http://www.alliancetheatre.org).

Bottom line: Audacious but arduous.

