

Moby Dick Gets a New, Great Retelling at South Coast Repertory

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By [Joel Beers](#)



Debora Robinson/SCR

Much like all young, sturdy men with a yen for adventure, I took to the seas in my 20s by living in Seal Beach for two months, which is about how long it took me to labor through Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. It was a massive tome, and as much as I faded during the long, labyrinthine minutia of tying knots and the process of extracting oil, there were definite passages of metaphysical brilliance and engrossing meditations on everything from the existence of God to the nature of good and evil.

But Captain Ahab's obsessive quest for the Great White Whale is tailor-made for the silver screen, and there have been at least a dozen film adaptations, including ones directed by legendary directors John Huston and Orson Welles. That makes sense, thanks to the obvious visual allure of rough-hewn whalers on the ocean. But Melville's language, heavily inspired by such Shakespearian flourishes as soliloquies and asides, has also resulted in several stage productions, the biggest issue of each being some way to capture a sense of the, well, whale at the story's

center.

The latest is the Chicago theater troupe Lookingglass Theatre Co.'s production, which premiered at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., late last year and is now holding court at South Coast Repertory. Adapted and directed by David Catlin, it's a visually stunning production, complete with acrobatics and an effortless melding of lighting, sound and movement that requires the audience to use its imagination as much as to just sit there and take it all in.

Somehow, Catlin manages to condense Melville's 135 chapters and epilogue into a two-hour, 15-minute story that's not only heavy on spectacle, but also chillingly portrays Ahab's descent into madness, pulling the rest of his crew with him. That is impressive, but the story, like its source, still feels as if it has too much blubber that could have been excised, from a lengthy sermon about Jonah to an unnecessary meeting with another ship's captain who has lost his arm to the white leviathan.

Catlin tries to inject as much humor into what is, at its core, a story of mankind's hubris in the face of nature and one man's plunge into the abyss of insanity, such as when Ishmael (an excitable enough but not very sea-worthy Jamie Abelson) and the African Queequeg (a strong Anthony Fleming III) first meet in a dingy inn in New Bedford, Connecticut. The sharp divide between the civilized Ishmael, who yearns to find meaning in life through an existence on the open sea, and the savage Queequeg, who is attempting to become more of a man so he can take over for his father as tribal ruler, illuminates the clash of ideas and spirituality with the physical world that most of the story concerns itself with.



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But it's not until the appearance of Ahab (a powerfully detailed Christopher Donahue) that the story really takes off. Donahue's Ahab is a mélange of facial tics and hand gestures, physical characteristics that suggest the guy's psyche is as damaged as the wooden leg he has been saddled with since his last tête-à-tête with the monster from the deep. Spurred by the promise of a gold doubloon for the first crew member to spot the whale, the crew buys into Ahab's maniacal quest to hunt down and kill it, even over the protests of Starbuck (a strong Walter Owen Briggs), who is more concerned with returning safely home to his wife on a ship filled with ample amounts of valuable oil.

Ahab's iron-clad command of the vessel and his thirst for vengeance ultimately trumps everything else, and watching Donahue's descent from an eccentric, slightly off-balanced captain into a bellowing, insane tyrant is a thing of terrifying beauty—as are much of the visuals on display. A three-person chorus (Kelley Abell, Cordelia Dewdney and Kasey Foster) do yeomen work, portraying everything from St. Elmo's Fire and the great whale itself (sort of), but also serving as the Fates, tempting and luring Ahab to cast aside all vestiges of morality and decency in a quest that is truly less about finding that goddamn monster fish than it is about his own death wish.

As long as the story is focused on Ahab, as well as his ultimate realization that what he is stalking is less out there than inside him, things absolutely click. But the frequent diversions do drag down the pace of the story, and while it never feels as frustratingly long-winded as the novel it's based on, this *Moby Dick* does flounder at times. But it remains a powerful reminder that while theater can't come close to matching the scale, size and visual prowess of a film production, in the right creative hands that are able to imagine as well as they execute, it can create a visual vocabulary all its own.

Moby Dick at South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa, (714) 708-5555; www.scr.org. Tues.-Wed., 7:30 p.m.; Thurs.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2:30 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 & 7:30 p.m. Through Feb. 19. \$22-\$79.