

How Aerial Staging Makes the Sea Come Alive in This *Moby Dick*

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By [Michael Gioia](#)

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The production, cruising to theatres around the country, takes the epic Herman Melville story to new heights.



Anthony Fleming III, Christopher Donahue, Emma Cadd, and Jamie Abelson Liz Lauren

“I very often stand in the aisles and listen to people walk in and go, ‘Oh my god, it’s *inside* the whale,’ which is awesome because it’s very abstract, but people get it right away,” explains Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, the aerial and acrobatic choreographer of the Lookingglass Theatre Company gravity-defying production of *Moby Dick*.

“Because Ishmael is returning to the story many, many years later, we wanted it to feel like a ghost story—not an elephant graveyard, but a whale graveyard—and, in some of our early research, we found these great pictures of whale bones on a beach, sort of haunted and lonely,” adds David Catlin, founding ensemble member of the Chicago-based company who adapted the classic novel for the stage and directs this production.



Raymond Fox, Micah Figueroa, Javen Ulambayer, Kareem Bandealy, Jamie Abelson, and Anthony Fleming III
Liz Lauren

Moby Dick began development a few years back at Illinois' Northwestern University, where Catlin teaches. He worked with the students at The Actors Gymnasium, a circus studio in Evanston, Illinois, co-founded by Hernandez-DiStasi. Since then, it debuted at Chicago's Lookingglass in 2015 and went on to play Atlanta's Alliance Theatre and D.C.'s Arena Stage in 2016. Now it plays through February 19 at South Coast Repertory in California.

When audiences walk into *Moby Dick*, they first notice the cylindrical aesthetic, with curved poles lining the stage, and ropes, platforms, and masts hanging from above. Catlin aimed to create a visceral experience with the production. After all, the classic tale by Melville—about Ahab, the captain of the Pequod, who seeks revenge on the massive whale Moby Dick—has been called one of the greatest stories of the sea.

“There are parts where it feels like a rollicking sea adventure, right? And then there are points, [which] are sometimes frustrating for readers, where it shifts into academic, encyclopedic writing. At other points, it shifts into very dramatic writing,” Catlin says. “I felt like that gave me permission to say, ‘Maybe there are different modes of storytelling that we can bring to this.’”

“At Lookingglass, we’ve often been really interested in circus. There’s something about Melville’s novel—these guys going on an adventure; the danger of going out on these whaling ships, which aren’t that big, out into the unexplored regions of the world, where you can’t see any land...so there’s something about the use of circus or physical movement that felt right to try to capture that for the audience. To have rigging that was soaring up in the air felt an exciting way to tell this story.”

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First Look at the Aerial Production of *Moby Dick*

The production originated at the Tony Award-winning Lookingglass Theatre Company.

5 PHOTOS



Micah Figueroa, Anthony Fleming III, Javen Ulambayer, and Christopher Donahue Liz Lauren



Raymond Fox, Micah Figueroa, Javen Ulambayer, Kareem Bandealy, Jamie Abelson, and Anthony



Raymond Fox, Anthony Fleming III, Javen Ulambayer, and Micah Figueroa Liz Lauren



Anthony Fleming III, Christopher Donahue, Emma Cadd, and Jamie Abelson Liz Lauren



Kasey Foster and Christopher Donahue Liz Lauren

With the help of sound and lights, the violent waters come alive in *Moby Dick*. The aerial and acrobatic work weaves into the staging to illustrate the characters coping with the currents. Hernandez-DiStasi uses acrobatics to flip the perspective; characters can transition from on top of a boat to underwater in a single maneuver.

Catlin adds that there are drowning sequences, “where a sailor is being drowned and pulled down by mermaids,” he says. “Basically, in circus, it’s called a straps routine.” He explains that the aerial work makes the theatre feel like an aquarium, when characters are being pulled down by the undercurrents, and a vast seascape, when they are riding the waves.

Moby Dick will voyage back to its home, opening again at Chicago’s Lookingglass in the late spring following its current run in Costa Mesa, California. But Catlin hopes that the play can journey to more cities in the near future.

“There was a student group that came and saw it in Atlanta, and one of their teachers was a former colleague of our executive director at Lookingglass,” says Catlin. “She wrote her a note saying that she’d just seen it with a group of her high school kids, and on the bus ride home, [the students] were demanding that they read the book for class. This teacher said, ‘That never happens, [where] people demand to read *Moby Dick* in high school.’ So that felt like success.”

Michael Gioia is the Features Manager at Playbill.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@PlaybillMichael](https://twitter.com/PlaybillMichael).

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