

David Catlin helms whale of a tale with ‘Moby Dick’ at Northwestern

BY CATEY SULLIVAN For Sun-Times Media April 24, 2014 3:20PM

Veteran actor and Northwestern theatre professor David Catlin's adaptation of "Moby Dick," in collaboration with Actors Gymnasium, is on stage at Northwestern starting April 25.

‘Moby Dick’

April 25 through May 4

Ethel M. Barber Theatre, Northwestern University campus, 30 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston

\$5-\$25

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It's one of the most famous titles in the canon of American literature. But we'd wager that most people never get further than the book flap when it comes to actually reading Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." The tome is some 600 pages long and you've got to wade through roughly 300 of them before the dang whale shows up. Moreover, there's not a female character in the entire saga. And finally, Melville's writing style is decidedly not contemporary; for most people, the mid-19th century vernacular doesn't exactly make for a page-turner.

Evanston director David Catlin gets all that. But in bringing "Moby Dick" to the stage, the veteran Chicago thespian and Northwestern University theater professor hopes to capture precisely why Melville's 1851 classic is universally lauded as the prototypical Great American Novel.

"One of the things that struck me about the novel is that it's one of those books that everyone feels like they're supposed to read, but most people don't actually get through it," says Catlin, whose adaptation of "Moby Dick" opens April 25 in a Northwestern student production he's also directing.

"I didn't read it myself until I signed on to teach a class about it," he continues, "I ended up drinking like a gallon of coffee and staying up for three nights in a row with it. And it was amazing — exciting and strange and unlike anything I'd ever read."

In Catlin's adaptation, audiences can expect a full immersion in Melville's seafaring saga. The production uses circus stunts, dance, puppetry and music to spin the story of Captain Ahab, the scarred, peg-legged all-but demonically obsessed whaler intent on slaughtering the Great White leviathan of the title. The narrative unfolds from the point of view of Ishmael, a rootless, restless wanderer who signs on for Ahab's voyage and finds himself on a death-defying, life-defining struggle with both the whale and the maniacal captain.

Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Himself, Man. Vs Man — Melville takes on the struggles of the world in "Moby Dick," and filters them through the journey of whalers fighting for their very survival against rough seas, an unhinged leader and a mighty beast.

"I don't know that I will ever have the definitive answer about just what the whale represents," says Catlin, "but to me, part of what he symbolizes is the terrors we all have deep down, the things we are afraid to confront that lurk inside us."

Water obviously plays a significant role in Melville's symbolism as well, Catlin adds. "You think about the sea, about how Ishmael is drawn to its edge and then goes deep into it even though it's tremendously dangerous and unknown. I think we've all experienced that kind of lure."

As Ishmael, NU senior Samuel Zeisel is charged with delivering what is arguably the best known opening line in an American novel. "Call me Ishmael" may only be a three-word snippet of dialogue, but like the novel it launches, it's a sentence with layers of meaning that runs fathoms deep.

"There's a veil of mystery to that first sentence," says Zeisel, a Maryland native who has been working with Catlin since his freshman year at NU. "The way he says it, it's like there's a possibility that Ishmael isn't his real name. And there's a definite evocation of the biblical Ishmael, the outcast. What he's saying in that opening line is 'Call me outcast, call me outsider.'"

Ishmael's search for belonging lies near the heart of "Moby Dick," says Zeisel.

"One of the things that makes this novel great is that it explores the reasons people search, the ways we constantly try to figure out why we're alive and what our purpose is," he says. "What's beautiful and terrifying all at once about 'Moby Dick' is that Melville never answers those questions."

Like the rest of the roughly 15-member ensemble in Catlin's adaptation of "Moby Dick," Zeisel accumulated a fair number of scrapes and bruises over months of rehearsals. The cast began digging into the novel at the beginning of the winter term in Catlin's audition-only course, Finding Moby Dick.

Catlin broke the class into two sections, with students dividing time between literary analysis of the work and training in movement and circus stunts at Evanston's Actors Gymnasium. At the Gymnasium, the cast has — literally — been learning the ropes. Catlin's adaptation includes aerial stunts on the Spanish web as well as tumbling, gymnastics and acrobatics.

"The physical elements of the piece are so important," says Catlin. "For the massive storms at sea, we have the actors literally flying across the stage on ropes. I'm hoping that's something the audience will experience the physical elements of the production viscerally as well as cerebrally."

"I think most of us feel like we're on a sports team," says Zeisel. "The stuff we're doing isn't dangerous, but it is difficult. For instance, there's one sequence where I'm in the belly of a whale. I have to climb onto this platform and then just fall backward. I totally trust that the cast will always catch me, but it's still the scariest thing I've ever done."

In addition to its intense physical demands, Catlin's adaptation turns the all-male world of Melville's "Moby Dick" into a place with a strong female presence. Since the novel deals extensively with the idea of fate versus free will, Catlin has the women in the cast personifying aspects of nature, fate and the supernatural.

"There are no female characters in the book, but there's a lot about gender roles," says Catlin. "These men go off for years on ships they refer to as women. They travel on water, which to me has a distinctly feminine quality to it going back to the amniotic fluid of the womb. And when they see the whales, what do they scream out? 'Thar she blows.'"

Moby Dick is very much a story about passion, Catlin and Zeisel say, about devoting your very being to a life-defining idea or a belief or quest.

"To be consumed wholly is both a violent and a wonderful thing," says Catlin. "How much do we all yearn to be

engaged with, or devoted to, something with every fiber of our being? We all want to find passion, whether it's for our family or a sports team or a cause. Passion is the total opposite of boredom. But in the case of Ahab, that passion goes too far."

"I'm hoping people identify with 'Moby Dick' on all kinds of levels," says Zeisel. "I think at the core, the story shows us how simultaneously lonely and connected we all are. Every day, I find something new in the story. It's a constant process of discovery. Kind of like life."

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