

Moby Dick

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The cast of *Moby Dick*, directed and adapted by David Catlin, at Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre.
(© Liz Lauren)

With its world premiere adaptation of *Moby Dick*, [Lookingglass Theatre](#) pulls off a theatrical feat worthy of the great white leviathan that drives Herman Melville's Great American Novel. Attempting to depict that all-but-unfathomably-gargantuan creature within the confines of a stage seems like an exercise in futility. Surely any special effect-generated whale will fall short of what swims in the audience's imagination. Not so in the adaptation by David Catlin, who also directs the astonishing Lookingglass production.

Melville crafted one of the most indelible symbols of American literature in *Moby Dick*. The titular beast is the Holy Grail for Captain Ahab, a one-legged seaman whose obsession with the beast leads the seafarer into the realms of insanity. Ahab's monomaniacal hunt for the monstrous whale that took his leg makes for a ripping fine adventure story, but it is also a vivid, chilling representation of fatal human folly and the ancient conflict between man and nature. The yarn unspools through the eyes of Ishmael, a rookie whaler who signs up for Ahab's trip and quickly learns he's in way over his head. The voyage of the Pequod becomes an awakening for Ishmael and his shipmates as the roles of prey and predator are upended, the massive whale turning the hunters into the hunted.

Catlin's highly physical adaptation demands an ensemble well-versed in acrobatics and aerial stunts as well as acting. As the Pequod is pummeled by waves and lashed by winds, choreographer Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi has the cast spinning far above the stage on silk cords, evoking the rocking of the ship and — in the production's most haunting scenes — the downward plunge of drowning men into the abyss.

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The production has a marvelously unnerving Ahab in Christopher Donahue, whose boring eyes are so intense they seem capable of fathoms down to the ocean floor. Jamie Abelson's Ishmael is a compelling everyman who seamlessly moves between narrating the story to being in its turbulent midst. Ishmael has an air of wonder to him when *Moby Dick* begins, an innocence that has long vanished by the final scene. Abelson makes that evolution unmistakable. Anthony Fleming III seems born to play Queequeg, the formidably muscular, exotically tattooed son of a South Pacific cannibal king. Fleming is fearsome to behold but also succeeds in making Queequeg's core of nobility and steadfast shine through. Also memorable are the three fates, played as an otherworldly cross between sirens and angels by Emma Cadd, Monica West, and Kasey Foster.

Courtney O'Neill's set is a beautiful maze of ropes, riggings, nets, and (what looks like) deeply weathered driftwood. Carolyn Sullivan's costume design is equally atmospheric, from the drably colored, minutely detailed hoopskirts of Ishmael's innkeeper to the tattered breaches of the Pequod crew, to the ghostly, fluttering gowns of the fates. The production is further enriched by William C. Kirkham's dramatic lighting design, which takes the audience from the sunny docksides of Nantucket to the dark, whirling chaos of a storm at sea. Rick Sims' sound design is essential in making that infamous whale come to life, whether it's as a distant plume spouting ominously on the horizon or a monstrous creature taking down a mast with one flick of its terrible tail.

It wouldn't be right to disclose precisely how Lookingglass manages to credibly get that whale on stage. *Moby Dick* the whale is only a physical presence for a few moments in *Moby Dick* the play, but when she finally shows up, her impact is overwhelming and all-consuming. And that makes for a whale of a tale.

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