

Ahoy there! Actors overhead!

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By Nelson Pressley



“Moby Dick” is now at Arena Stage. The show was created by Chicago’s Lookingglass Theatre Company in association with the Actors Gymnasium. (Liz Lauren)

Chicago stage director David Catlin tugs at the heavy ropes crisscrossing the set of his “Moby Dick” at Arena Stage and talks about the overlap between theatrical terms and nautical language: *Rigging. Deck. Crew.*

The seagoing adventure of Herman Melville’s [1851 novel](#) is getting a highflying treatment from adaptor-director Catlin and Chicago’s Lookingglass Theatre Company. The [Chicago Tribune called the show](#) “exceptionally enjoyable and accessible,” in part because of the unusual circus choreography used to suggest life on the water, created by Lookingglass in collaboration with the Actors Gymnasium.

“Learn to Fly,” goes the slogan on the [Actors Gym website](#). The company launched in 1995 as a training ground for actors interested in broadening their physical skills. Over the years, the outfit has frequently collaborated with Chicago troupes and created some of its own shows and showcases for emerging talent.

In “Moby Dick,” performers will swing from ropes and climb tall, curved poles that double as the Pequod’s frame and the ribs of the [great white whale](#). The training is intensive, and plainly not for everyone.

“It hurts, it’s scary, it’s hard,” Actors Gym artistic director and co-founder Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi says as she joins

Catlin in an Arena meeting room, repeating the skepticism voiced by wary newcomers. “Why would anyone pay us to teach them this?”

Hernandez-DiStasi, who left the circus more than 20 years ago, grew up in such an acrobatic family that she was in the clan’s teeterboard act by age 7, eventually being tossed into the air and landing on a chair perched on a pole. “That’s kind of easy,” she says with a grin.

Melding such skills with a story and characters has been a continuing interest as Hernandez-DiStasi — a Lookingglass artistic associate credited with the aerial and acrobatic choreography for “Moby Dick” — has partnered with Catlin for what they reckon to be two dozen shows.

“Adding circus,” Catlin says, “you can take your canvas from the floor up into the air.”

“Sylvia does push people,” says actor Anthony Fleming III, arriving for the third phase of the conversation and sitting next to Hernandez-DiStasi.

The muscular, deep-voiced Fleming plays Queequeg in “Moby Dick,” and he appreciates the confidence gained by climbing, leaping or hanging upside down while in character. “It lets you realize you’re stronger than you think you are, and it’s a safe place to fail,” he says of the Gym. “It blends athleticism and storytelling. You get to really let go and play.”

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Hernandez-DiStasi doesn’t dispute her craft’s demands. Bruises and cuts come with the territory, so she has developed an eye for people who are game for the workout. She also senses what actors can do physically, even before the actors themselves realize where their own edge lies.



Anthony Fleming III, right, as Queequeg and Jamie Abelson as Ishmael in “Moby Dick,” which runs through Dec. 24 at Arena Stage. (Liz Lauren)

Harpooning and swimming will be among the actions displayed in this adventure, which demands not only special skills from the cast, but also particular equipment onstage. Catlin could practically be on a sailing vessel as he handles the smooth wooden pins holding knots of rope in place. The tall, arcing poles are made of bent steel — schedule 40 pipe, to be precise about the size — and coated for tackiness so the actors can keep a grip as they scurry up and down.

Lookingglass was one of three Chicago troupes commissioned a few years ago to create “Moby Dick” adaptations, with each company working in its own style. House Theatre of Chicago’s result was called “Season on the Line,” while the Blair Thomas & Company Puppet Theater forged something called “Moby Dick, or the Brotherhood of the Monastic Order of Ancient Mariners Purges the Ills of Society Through a Reading of the Tales of Moby-Dick.”

For Catlin, the Lookingglass/Actors Gym project was a welcome chance to get back to a novel he’d blitzed through at the last minute for a college assignment. Melville’s obsession-fueled saga fit the profile of adaptations that most often appeal to him and to Hernandez-DiStasi: “Doing things,” he says, “that are a little bit impossible.”