

# Chicago-launched ‘Moby Dick’ splashes into Arena Stage

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By Nelson Pressley



Christopher Donahue as Captain Ahab and Javen Ulambayar as Mungun in “Moby Dick.” (Greg Mooney)

Since Herman Melville published [his landmark American novel](#) in 1851, all kinds of “Moby Dicks” have followed: film and [TV](#), [opera](#), [avant-garde theater-concerts](#). The acrobatic “Moby Dick” now crashing ashore at Arena Stage by way of Chicago is the kind you’d call a feat. Using only 10 actors, who are hoisted to the rafters and tossed through well-rendered tempests, the adventure is worked to a frothy high as the crew of the Pequod follows mad Captain Ahab’s orders across a sea that at one point seems to sweep over the audience.

This dashing adaptation is by director David Catlin of Chicago’s [Lookingglass Theatre Company](#), and the circus skills supplied by the Second City’s [Actors Gymnasium](#) have made this show enough of a hit that it’s now on a circuit that includes Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre and Costa Mesa’s South Coast Repertory. Catlin’s show burrows into the stormy mind of Ahab, played with roaring tunnel vision by a genuinely commanding Christopher Donahue — the very picture of obsession as he squints at the sea and leans into the elements on Ahab’s wooden leg.

[\[The creative team on making “Moby Dick”\]](#)

Courtney O’Neill’s set is defined by curved poles that simultaneously suggest the ribs of the ship and the belly of the whale that so thoroughly consumes Ahab. Actors Gym founder Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi is in charge of

aerial/acrobatic choreography that has sailors scurrying up those tall masts with the ease of circus performers. She also has actors descending from the utmost heights of Arena's Kreeger Theater; an aerial ballet suggesting how whales get processed after they've been harpooned and brought on board is a stunner.

So, too, are scenes of near-drowning, of the stage seeming to flood via billowing silk unfurling from a single skirt, and of the angry whale itself, effectively rendered in a terribly simple, clever, and surprisingly human way that I wouldn't dare spoil here.

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Anthony Fleming III as Queequeg, Christopher Donahue as Captain Ahab and Emma Cadd as Fate. (Liz Lauren)

The teamwork is consistently impressive as the actors operate the set's dozens of rope lines to raise sails and hoist small hunting boats — and yes, the characters register clearly, too, in Catlin's poetic distillation of Melville's massive novel. Jamie Abelson's bookish Ishmael bonds charmingly and comically with Anthony Fleming III's proud, quirky Queequeg, the charismatic cannibal in a top hat and a sumptuous fur. Three women cast as fates — Kelley Abell, Cordelia Dewdney and Kasey Foster — function as alluring, crooning sirens and double as widows and innkeepers. In such ways does Catlin keep the tale moving broadly and briskly, yet with the whispering mystery of lore.

Gradually, Donahue's performance gains force and concentrates attention. The show's increasingly dramatic action is geared to be a psychological gale generated by Ahab's madness, and the bearded, scowling Donahue is so crazily focused that you can feel everyone around him getting sucked through the wormhole of his mind.

Here's the asterisk: As the show crested into a tidal wave of light and sound effects, I detached. It felt like the border dividing theater from amusement parks finally got crossed — although as the burbling audience exited Friday night, the overwhelming sensationalism was exactly what prompted comments like "That was intense," and "Awesome." True enough, and I later wondered whether this "Moby Dick" is the most spectacular thing I've ever seen in the Kreeger. Might be.



**Moby Dick** adapted and directed by David Catlin. Costumes, Sully Ratke; lights, William C. Kirkham; sound design and original music, Rick Sims; rigging design, Isaac Schoepp. With Micah Figueroa, Walter Owen Briggs, Raymond Fox and Javen Ulambayar. About 2 hours 15 minutes. Through Dec. 24 at Arena Stage, 1101 Sixth St. SW. Tickets \$40-\$110, subject to change. Call 202-488-3300 or visit [arenastage.org](http://arenastage.org).