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WINDY CITY TIMES

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by Jonathan Abarbanel, Windy City Times
2015-07-01

Playwright: David Catlin, adapted from Herman Melville novel. At: Lookingglass Theatre, Water Tower Pumping Station. Tickets: 312-337-0665; www.lookingglasstheatre.org; \$40-\$80. Runs through: Aug. 28

I've seen six stage adaptations of Moby Dick, among them versions by the House, Redmoon and Remains theaters. This one is best by far because it follows the massive novel more comprehensively (to the degree possible at all) than other versions and retains more language from the novel, thereby giving it a stronger narrative voice. Indeed, this spectacular and creative staging weakens slightly only when it abandons narration almost completely during the ultimate chase of the Great White Whale. Nonetheless, Moby Dick is a must-see show.

The initial focus on the narrator, Ishmael (Jamie Abelson), and his dramatic meeting with Pacific Islander Queequeg (Anthony Fleming III) quickly takes second place to the dynamic between Capt. Ahab (Christopher Donahue) and First Mate Starbuck (rock-steady Kareem Bandedaly), personifying the spiritual dichotomy of Melville's deeply metaphysical novel. As staged, however, this is an ensemble work of the highest caliber with seven actors representing the 33 crewmen of the whaleship Pequod, and several non-crew characters as well. Three women wearing widow's weeds take the few female cameos and also portray The Fates, Moby Dick and even the sea itself.

Scenic designer Courtney O'Neill's deceptively-simple platform stage is irregular in shape and framed by enormous upward-curving beams, suggesting both whale ribs and the Pequod's masts and spars. The set is richly used for ritual-like physical sequences portraying the whale hunt, stripping blubber, lamp lighting, drowning and falling among other vivid actions, which would be awesome but meaningless if they did not illuminate the story. Not to worry: aided by a gifted team, director/adaptor David Catlin's physical staging remains in nearly-perfect lockstep with the narrative, and also with abstract ideas such as the eternal rhythms of the sea. Kudos to William C. Kirkham (lighting), Rick Sims (sound), Isaac Schoepp (rigging), Amanda Hermann (properties), Carolyn Sullivan (costumes) and Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (choreographer).

Circus skills, a frequent hallmark of Lookingglass work, are utilized selectively in Moby Dick, chiefly by lithe and graceful Javen Ulambayer (as Mungun) on aerial straps, but the entire nimble company clearly is well-trained for this exhausting show.

The performances are dominated by Fleming's powerful Queequeg and Donahue's complex Ahab, a "grand, ungodly god-like man," a stalwart captain who's not a conventional villain. Abelson's appealing Ishmael is given diminished focus as the play progresses, even though Ishmael in part mirrors Ahab. Catlin lightens the mood whenever possible, mostly through Raymond Fox's puckish delivery in several small roles.

Necessarily, Catlin successfully combines characters and condenses incidents. I felt short-changed only during the ultimate confrontation 'tween Ahab and leviathan, perhaps too condensed and—minus narration—not always clear. Melville's often-discussed homo-erotic undertones receive scant attention, but are secondary to the larger tale Lookingglass presents in sweeping Shakespearean style.
