

# SON OF BLUBBER

*STAGE / Wednesday, October 17, 2012 By James MacKillop*

In his copious program notes for the Syracuse Stage production of *Moby Dick*, director Peter Amster praises Julian Rad's adaptation of Herman Melville's novel for moving the complex, allegory-heavy narrative "with almost Sophoclean swiftness to its tragic end." Greek tragedies are indeed short: *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* run about an hour each. Rad's version of *Moby Dick* is a bit more than 2~ hours, but he started with 650-plus pages of dense, mid-19th-century prose.

The text Rad has given us is Greek in perhaps a dozen other ways. Violent action is evoked rather than presented. We never see the whale. The much-publicized sea chanteys serve as the chorus. And most of Melville's words are delivered in long speeches of declamation.

Melville's *Moby Dick* holds an unusual place in American culture; it's a rival of *Huckleberry Finn* as our greatest novel, or at least our greatest 19th-century novel. Ignored by the public when it came out in 1851, *Moby Dick*'s prestige ascended about 70 years later when people who were establishing American literature departments in universities needed a masterwork to stand comparison next to titles by Tolstoy, Stendhal and Dickens. They nominated Melville's book.

Wrongly libeled as unreadable, *Moby Dick* is more reader-friendly than, say, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Putting aside all the book's didacticism about the whaling industry and heavyweight biblical allusion, *Moby Dick* is now seen as a spot-on analysis of American obsession, especially when that mania leads to the obsessed's destruction. *Moby Dick* is also that rare book that someone can cite knowingly and accurately without having read.

That's another way of saying that no American citizen above age 16 can enter the theater without knowing the most important events about to unfold. Thus, it is playwright Rad and director Amster's job to keep us amused and engaged when the crew enters upon the doomed voyage of the whaling ship *Pequod*. Both do a better job toward the beginning, starting with the line we know has to be there: "Call me Ishmael."

In *Genesis* Ishmael is the illegitimate son of Abraham, whose name means, "God is heard." He must be a truth-teller. Here he is a fresh-faced youngster (Erik Hellman) open to new adventures, such as palling up with a tattooed roommate from the South Seas, Queequeg (Antoine Pierre Whitfield), ready to sell the

severed head he carries in a bag. Some other characters, like the Landlord (Craig MacDonald), pronounce Ishmael in three syllables: "ISH-MAY-al."

Playwright Rad scrupulously borrows characters from Melville without distortion, but lots of lesser ones have been jettisoned. Especially missed are the non-white people on board, such as the black cabin boy Pip (often seen as a Fool to Ahab's King Lear), Tashtego the Native American harpooner, as well as Daggoo the black one and Fedallah the Persian. Additionally, as most of the rest of the characters, other than Ahab and his first mate, speak a fraction of the words they are allotted in the novel, they can be confusing when they are portrayed by actors who often don't change costumes along with identity.

The most distinctive player in the smaller roles is tall, gangly Rob Johansen, still fondly remembered as a scene-stealer in *The 39 Steps* (autumn 2010), also directed by Amster. His roaring, barefoot prophet Elijah dominates the early action, foretelling trouble ahead. Later Johansen climbs the highest ladders, representing masts of the ship, and often stands as the crewman known as Masthead many feet above the stage. In great physical flourish, he can zip down the ladder with his toes locked to the outside, as if it were a mast.

In turning *Moby Dick* into a stage play, Rad must focus the conflict between the mad Ahab (Kurt Ehrmann), with his white mane and muttonchops making him look like a New England incarnation of an Old Testament prophet, and dark-haired, frock-coated first mate Starbuck (David Studwell), a voice of restraint. Both Ahab and Starbuck are Quakers from Nantucket, with lots of "thees" and "thous," but both appear to have betrayed their heritage. Ahab, named for the idol-worshiper in the *Book of Kings*, has clearly shed his faith's pacificism and also speaks casually of blasphemy. Starbuck does not look to the pages of revealed religion for evidence and instead speaks for something like secular rationality.

In these two big roles, Ehrmann inevitably has the upper hand. Madness plays better than restraint, in any case. Along with his peg leg (implied by a stiff white boot that forces him to limp), Ehrmann broke his right arm before opening night and insisted that he go on with the show. He's so convincing that many people, if they lost the note in the program, might expect that the arm-in-a-sling was part of the script. Every other part of his body is in excellent order, however: His look is what we could expect from a visionary, and his voice is that of a leader of men, the captain who could rally troops. For him to be the tragic figure Melville and Rad want, he cannot sound as crazy as he is.

Studwell, who played El Gallo in Amster's *The Fantasticks* (May 2008), has a harder job. Sensibility rarely drives oratory. He might be the person we would prefer for company, but he's going to go down with the ship. And, yes, Starbuck lends his name to the coffee company, apparently for euphony; they earlier rejected *Pequod*.

The dialogue between Ahab and Starbuck presents us with the production's major weaknesses. The characters are not equivalently matched to give us dramatic conflict. Further, their speeches sound like Melville's prose, which was not meant to be spoken, or shouted, aloud. There is simply too much in them for the listener to grasp, no matter how well the lines are delivered. It would be the same if the prose passages were taken from George Eliot or Joseph Conrad. Friends have complained that they could not follow speeches because of the performers' diction; that was not your reviewer's experience. In the ancient world Sophocles' long speeches were sung.

In launching the 40th season of Syracuse Stage, this production of *Moby Dick* is admirable in every other way. Every player is in top form. Roderick Peeples delivers the rare comic relief as the skeptical Stubb. Bob Amaral's Captain Boomer, who has also lost a limb to the beast, strikes a contrast with Ahab. Alan Ball makes Flask a pugnacious and memorable third mate.

**Theatrical magic makes this an extraordinarily attractive production, with the crew miming all the hard labor. Scenic designer Linda Buchanan and especially lighting designer Thomas C. Hase bring us the terrors of the empty ocean as well as rising sails. Sound designer Victoria Delorio fills all the empty places,** and choral director Dianna Adams McDowell leads the crew in chanteys you'd be happy to have on CD. And dialect coach Malcolm Ingram places the crew at different points along the New England coast.