

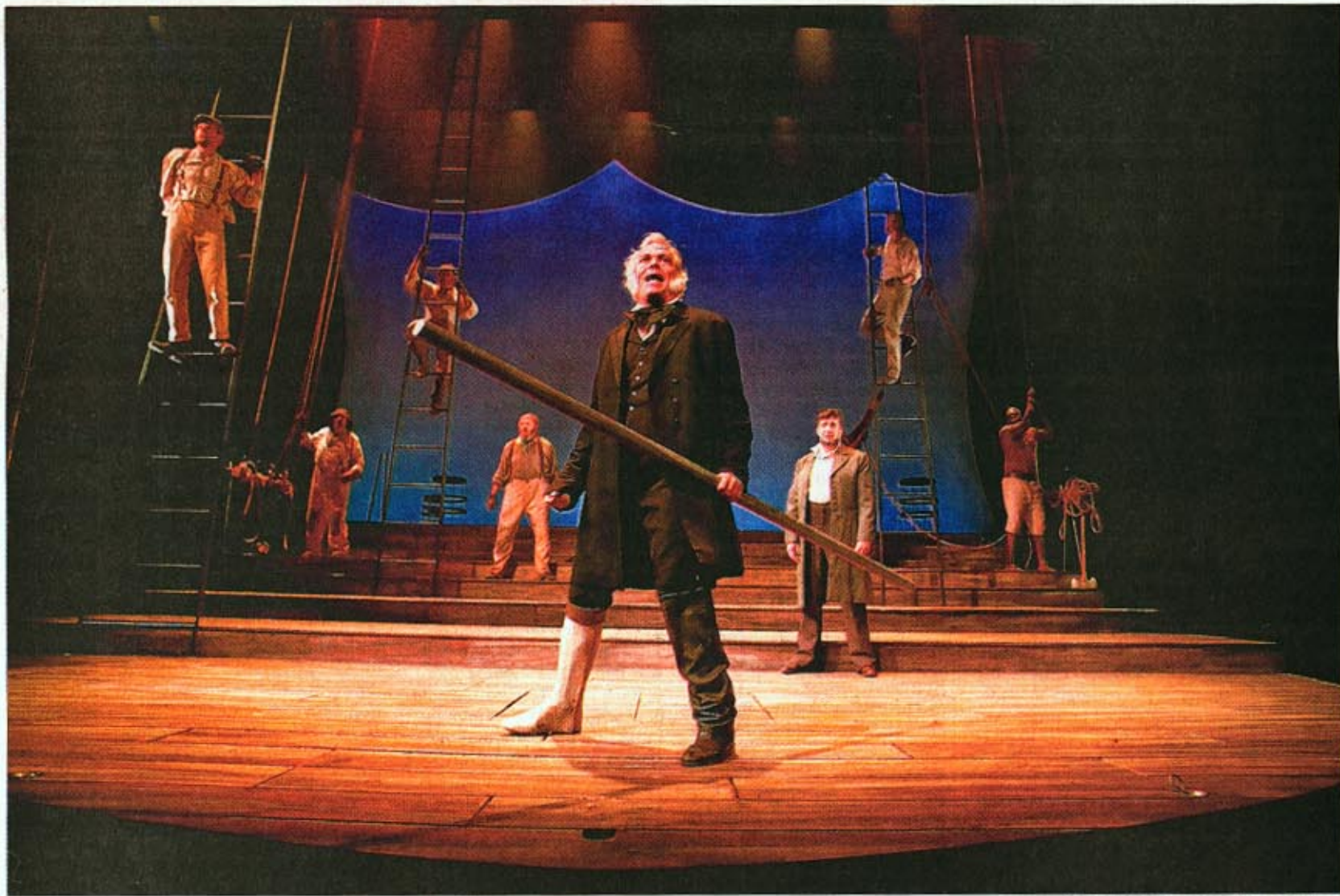


ARTS

CNY

ENTERTAINMENT

CLASSIFIED ADS INSIDE



Michael Davis / Courtesy of Syracuse Stage

CAPTAIN AHAB (center, portrayed by Kurt Ehrmann) and the cast of "Moby Dick." The spare adaptation of Herman Melville's novel opens Friday at Syracuse Stage.

WHALE OF A TALE,

STRIPPED OF ITS BLUBBER

SYRACUSE STAGE
ADAPTATION OF
'MOBY DICK' KEEPS THE
MEAT OF THE NOVEL,
ADDS PERIOD MUSIC

By Josh Austin
Contributing writer

After directing seven comedies last year, Peter Amster was looking for a change.

"I was ready for something to sink my teeth into, and what could be better than whale blubber?" asked Amster. "And trying to fit the tale of a whale onto a stage seemed to be a challenge worth pursuing."

Amster is directing "Moby Dick," which opens the 40th season at Syracuse Stage with a preview today and opening night Friday. Herman Melville's 600-page epic has been condensed by playwright Julian Rad into a 72-page script.

"Julian Rad's version is a miracle of compression in terms of taking the story and getting the whole thing done in about two hours' stage time," said the director.

Amster knows reading the book can be daunting. "At best, it's a leisurely read. At medium, it's a tolerable read, and at worst, it's an interminable read," said Amster. "You want to throw the book across the room if he tells you one more thing about whaling. Get back to the story."

Audiences who have not read the book will not be lost, assured Amster.

The play focuses on the revenge-bound Captain Ahab in the mid-19th century. Losing his leg to the whale, Ahab has sworn to kill the monster. The show centers around the tragic fate Ahab set for himself and his crew.

"This is a wonderful story about a man versus nature," he said. "The story of a man who thinks he can outdo nature, who considers himself one of the gods who tempers his har-

poon in the name of the devil. He's defying nature, and he's setting himself up to lose."

"Moby Dick" opened in New York City in 2003. It was the first off-off-Broadway show to be nominated for a Drama Desk Award. The show was praised for its bare stage and period costumes, which will be reflected in Stage's production.

"We don't have a cast of 30; we don't have the boat. We have a kind of bare, not bare bones, but very stripped-down, production," said Amster.

The cast of nine will portray the ship's crew, with some actors doing double duty as other characters.

To eliminate the whaling jargon and condense the novel's 135 chapters, Rad used 18 authentic sea chanteys to propel the story forward.



THE CHARACTER Queequeg, a native of a South Pacific island, is played by Antoine Pierre Whitfield.

THE DETAILS

What: "Moby Dick," playwright Julian Rad's stage adaptation of Herman Melville's 1851 novel.

When: 7:30 p.m. today, 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Oct. 19, 20, 26, 27, Nov. 2 and 3; 3 p.m. Saturday and Oct. 20, 27 and Nov. 3.; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Oct. 18, 25, 30, 31; 2 p.m. Sunday and Oct. 21, 24, 28 and 7 p.m. Oct. 28.

Where: Archbold Theatre, Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

Tickets: \$30 to \$51.

Information: 443-3275 or syracusestage.org.

Note: The Onondaga Historical Association has organized an exhibition in conjunction with the staging of "Moby Dick" at Syracuse Stage. The lobby exhibit, "Discovering Hidden Stories of Syracuse . . . Tied to American Whaling," features the Syracuse of the early 1850s, coinciding with the time of the story. The exhibit covers the history of the use of whale oil in Syracuse homes and industry; the story of fugitive slave Enoch Reed, with ties to Syracuse, the Jerry Rescue (a former slave freed from a Syracuse prison) and Melville; and the tragic tale of Burr Burton, a young whaler from Syracuse.

'Moby Dick' uses sea chanteys to set mood

'MOBY, FROM PAGE C-1

The a cappella songs function as the passage of time, or they suggest ongoing events while a character is narrating.

The chanteys set the mood and give the actor "a wave to ride on while they're working," said the director. "And, also, they're just fun to sing and fun to listen to. Nine good male voices singing out, sometimes in harmony. There's a couple of places where we're bringing instruments in where it would be right to do so."

The costumes will be of the

mid-19th century. Because some actors have double roles, costumes are intended to act as a stamp, so the audience can easily recognize each character and his job on the ship, the Pequod.

Amster hopes the show inspires audiences.

"What I would love 'Moby Dick' to do is send you back to the novel and read it," he said. "When you go back to the novel, you have an architecture in your head. And that might make it seem like it's less interminable."

Read the novel with celebrities

Organizers of the Moby Dick Big Read initiative describe Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" as the great American novel. "But it is also the great unread American novel."

So they are doing their part to remedy the situation. Actors, writers and directors like Tilda Swinton, Stephen Fry and John Waters are lending their voices to the effort.

For 135 days, a new, narrated chapter of Melville's saga will be posted online daily. Swinton kicked off the project Sept. 16. Others have signed on, including British Prime Minister David Cameron, teachers, authors, artists and everyday people to narrate the 1851 novel.

Each chapter is available as a free download on the website, mobydickbigread.com.