

Adaptation has power to sweep audiences away

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

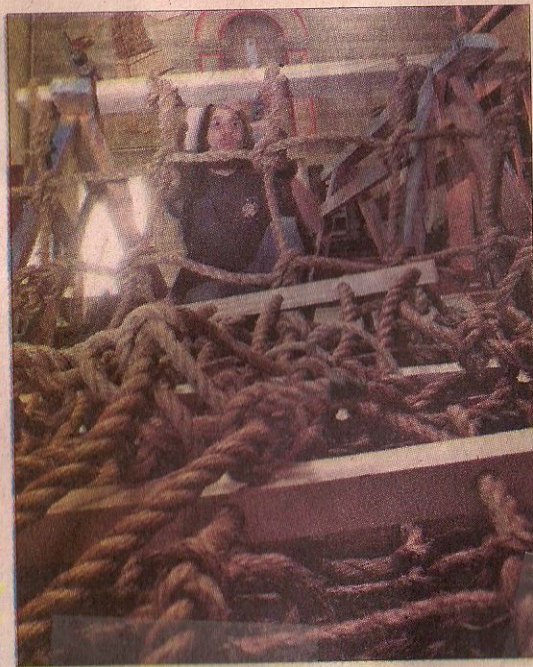
Where was God? A plaintive cry at the end of "Moby-Dick," a new play by Steve Burch adapted from Melville's novel, lofts that pivotal question into the wind.

Pursuit of power, and the answers and questions buried in it like the rich raw materials dug from a whale's carcass, is one of the many treasures, not buried but apparent, in this world premiere production at the University of Alabama.

It's orchestrated by director Seth Panitch with almost deific command, harnessing and harmonizing Burch's muscular carving of Melville's prose, a live score of violin and drums alternately haunting and terrifying, a design team opening possibilities for dreamlike magic and a wealth of performances from thundering Ahab to fluid acting corps embodying everything from storms to torments to whales.

This show has the power to sweep you away.

Trimming verbose Melville down to a two-hour run time means cutting to the chase, literally, of the adventure tale at the heart of his book, and the show in the Marian Galloway Theatre is at times utterly, viscerally thrilling. But the book and its central story — a charismatic, damaged leader chasing an elusive, massively powerful goal — is so rich in metaphor and potential that Burch would not stint on the language, heightened, heroic, lovely and tragic, Shakespearean, biblical and American. This production seems almost an opera with ballet at times, surprisingly often funny and sweet, building to an ending as nightmarish as a



Brian Elliott, a second year graduate student working on a masters in lighting design at the University of Alabama, builds a rope shroud for the set of "Moby-Dick" at the Marian Galloway Theatre on Feb. 11.

STAFF PHOTO
| MICHELLE
LEPIANKA CARTER

Putting a whale hunt on stage requires non-literal visuals, partly because realistic whales and waves would be "Spider-Man" costly, and also too limiting for the audience. It is one of the great fortunes of this endeavor that surreal imagery underscores this: The truth of the quest, the answer to what Ahab and crew

seek, is too vast and ineffable to be seen all at once. It can only be suggested by sounds, glimpsed in shadows and shapes wavering between water and wind.

Is ferocious Moby-Dick an element itself, dumb and unrelenting as a tempest? Or does that fury have a driving thought behind it? Perhaps even worse, is the whale/god of such unknowable power that the tiny things clinging to its skin, the pests pounding at its walls, are nothing more than minor irritants to be flicked away? The only symbol large enough to fit the tale would be too much for

Burch reads this as a man's quest to destroy God. Ahab's zeal has been described by many as messianic; Melville writes of a "grand, ungodly, godlike man," and Salman Rushdie, in writing about the novel, noted that "pursuit is a form of worship."

This production is wide enough to contain those possibilities.

Andy Fitch's set is a marvel of space and suggestion, from ship pieces that roll on and off, to height-soaring riggings and a massive humped white skeletal structure, visible behind an up-stage scrim, which frames the Nozomi Daiko drummers (Koji Arizumi, Laurie Arizumi, Andrea Esposito and Conner McCarty) and violinist Nib McKinney, who also wrote much of the lovely melodic score.

The eye is drawn, first and last, to the elementals, a simple way of describing 13 actors who dance, or dancers who act, in concert and singly, to create powerful effects throughout, from waves lashing a drowning sailor to the mighty soaring of a hurled harpoon, from internalized demons crawling into reality to the great snow hill itself. Many pieces worked together to make this an exceptional production; the elementals make it outstanding. Credit Panitch's concept, with choreography that's sometimes combat, to Qianping Guo and the dancers themselves.

Despite not fitting some visual images of Ahab past — not the scarred, oak-hewn description

of Melville, but with a full beard and body seemingly robust, save for that peg-leg, of course — guest actor Ted Barton wins the role with a mellifluous, musically adept voice, containing resonances and thrills in it like a cello or double bass. He plays his instrument commandingly, keeping the audience in thrall to even windier passages.

David Bolus' Ishmael is a marvel of dexterity in framing scenes, as he morphs from gnarled wraith to youthful sprite seamlessly as a sea rumbles from storm to calm. Bolus' open-faced buoyance — despite warnings that Ishmael can grow "grim about the mouth" — carries the show through Ahab's monomania and the occasional clatter of multiple stories bobbing to the surface.

His pal, and sometime comic partner, Queequeg is embodied with a vast dignity and control by Michael Luwoye, giving us someone to root for, and perhaps cry for, as the tragedy unfolds. It's easy to enjoy Ahab's dash without feeling at one

'MOBY-DICK'

■ **What:** New stage adaptation by Steve Burch, performed by the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance

■ **Where:** Marian Galloway Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall, UA campus

■ **When:** Performances continue at 7:30 p.m. today through Saturday, closing with a 2 p.m. matinee Sunday

■ **Cost:** Tickets \$18 general, \$15 seniors and UA faculty and staff, \$12 for children and UA students

■ **Info:** 205-348-3400

with him, given his bloody one-mindedness. So the story lends us its Ishmael, Queequeg, or sad, crazed Pip (a very sympathetic, nuanced Thaddeus Fitzpatrick) to love, or at least to latch on to as recognizably human.

The cast is uniformly top-rate, but list among the standouts Stephen Brunson's hearty Stubb, Amy Handra's stalwart Starbuck and Cooper Kenard's stout Bel-fast sailor. Many actors adeptly play multiple parts, including funny turns from Caroline Schmidt and Glenn Halcomb, a boisterous Coffin by Rebecca Kling, and a somberly effective Mapple by Matt Lewis.

And it's questionable, ultimately, whether enough of the text remains to explain an Ahab. Perhaps nothing short of a 19th-century novel can.

But this "Moby-Dick" is a remarkable effort, and one that, like Ishmael's memories, deserves to be heard, and to live on.