

Arts



Review: 'Moby-Dick'

Opera San Jose stages adaptation of Herman Melville's 18th century classic
 February 13, 2019 by Tad Malone



After being seriously disfigured by the opera's titular white leviathan, Captain Ahab dedicates his life—and the lives of his crew—to exacting vengeance in 'Moby-Dick.' Photo by Pat Kirk

Opera San Jose's *Moby-Dick* is a fresh take on an American classic. The opera, a contemporary adaptation by composer Jake Heggie and writer Gene Scheer—debuted by Dallas Opera in 2010—is based on Herman Melville's magnum opus about a whaling ship, the *Pequod*, its crew of philosophical sailors, and the obsession of its monomaniacal, one-legged commanding officer, Captain Ahab.

The overture opens on a massive matte painting of swelling waves, which itself rolls up to reveal an impressive geometric set, featuring large cylindrical blocks and curves, textured with old maps that constitute different parts of the whaling ship while looking almost like an observatory. The show commences with soft, melancholic tones and minor chords that phase into bold, bombastic phrasings in step with the reveal of the

ensemble cast—sailors toiling away aboard their doomed vessel and dramatically bellowing in unison.

Soon, we are introduced to Queequeg, an American Indian sailor who proceeds to wake up the rest of the ship with an indigenous ritual and dance. This leads to a religious argument between Queequeg and Greenhorn, the opera's main protagonist, who in the original book is called Ishmael. From there, we are introduced to the ship: There's the peg-legged, scarfaced Captain Ahab; his first mate, the shrewd but conflicted Starbuck; and their squadron of ragtag shiphands.

This adaptation is a dramatic, visually impressive anthology of poignant moments that unfortunately don't add up to cohesive whole. While the performers bring their A-game, there are plenty of problems with this show, mostly stemming from the script.

Ashraf Sewailam, who plays Queequeg, has a deep, mellifluous baritone. It is matched in its richness by Noah Stewart's, whose Greenhorn has a more buoyant timbre, allowing it to rise above the other baritones in the cast, such as Justin Ryan, who plays Starbuck. The deckhands, when singing together, work as a Gregorian-chanting Greek chorus. The power and depth of their combined voices is palpable, though at times the ensemble works against the leads, swallowing up or muddying their melodies.

Appropriately, Captain Ahab (played by Richard Cox) has a delicate tenor that pierces through his men's bassy chorus and shows deceptive power in certain moments. Throughout, the cast bring intimacy and tension to this otherwise hard-to-place adaptation.

As is so often the case with and Opera San Jose production, the sets are simply stunning. The

stage is centered around a two-story mast, which lifts and turns with other large set pieces depending on the scene. The backdrops are abstract yet effective. Whether the cast is out on the open water in search of the great white whale or interacting within the bowels of the ship, they are completely enveloped by their surroundings.

Unfortunately, despite its strong cast and impressive stage design, *Moby-Dick* suffers from numerous issues, most of which trace back to the music and libretto by Heggie and Scheer. Everything about this adaptation feels bastardized, cheapened or infantilized.

Though the score starts out moody and interesting, it is difficult to discern any real separation between movements. Instead, the orchestra seems adrift, floating aimlessly from one dark and somber phrase to the next with little distinction.

The action and dialogue also feel hurried and misinterpreted. This operatic adaptation completely misrepresents the complexities of character, life, philosophy, death and dualism that are brought so magically to life by Melville in the original story. Characters that were originally full of depth are reduced to shallow caricatures. This extends to the libretto, which seems like a mix of actual prose from the book slapped together with convenient plot-moving explication—injected haphazardly and incongruously.

It is common for adaptations to suffer when moving from the page to the stage, and though this epic opera has its shortcomings, it is certainly worth seeing. It is *Moby-Dick*, after all.

Moby-Dick

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