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Review: 'Moby-Dick' takes turn toward intimacy in beautiful San Jose production



Joshua Kosman | February 10, 2019 | Updated: February 10, 2019, 6:16 pm |





| Richard Cox as Ahab in Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's "Moby Dick" at Opera San José.

Photo: Pat Kirk

When we last encountered "Moby-Dick" in operatic form, this magnum opus from composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer was embodied in the San Francisco Opera's **sweeping, majestic 2012 production**. It was, among other things, a tour de force of stagecraft and visual design, which somehow managed to evoke the great watery vistas of Melville's novel.

So when "Moby-Dick" was announced as part of the current season by Opera San José one of the first questions was whether the magic of that epic reach could be replicated on a more modest scale.

The answer, revealed during the predominantly successful opening-night performance on Saturday, Feb. 9, at the California Theatre, was that it absolutely can — and in ways that reveal a lot about the greatness of this resourceful and beautiful work.

"Moby-Dick," as reconceived with imaginative fidelity by Heggie and Scheer, is still a mighty sea story, underpinned by a sense of the boredom and danger of the whale hunt. But at its heart it remains a highly personal and intimate drama — about love and friendship, morality and duty, and the terrifying monomania of one man, the fierce Captain Ahab, possessed by demons not even he can understand.

And that drama requires no more than a handful of canny artists ready to deliver Heggie's splendid score with the sensitivity and vigor it demands. Whether the piece is made to inhabit theatrical spaces large or small, its essential tenderness and humanity shine through.

For this production, director Kristine McIntyre and set designer Erhard Rom have created a world in which the close quarters of the Pequod register with almost claustrophobic intimacy. The whaling ship consists of one deck and a single mast, with a base that can swivel to impersonate one of the small, fragile boats in which the men cast off to hunt their prey. A pair of matching maps — stars above, the world below — serves as a backdrop, which is just enough to convey the hugeness of the setting.

Yet within that enormous world there are personal interactions playing out, which is what the San Jose production — led with tenderness and power by the company's music director and principal conductor, Joseph Marcheso — gets memorably right.

Much of it surrounds the perceptions of Greenhorn, the young, first-time whaler who will survive the final shipwreck to tell the story under the newly adopted nom de guerre Ishmael. As embodied with enormous vocal clarity, grace and vulnerability by tenor Noah Stewart, Greenhorn serves as a perfect vehicle for our own introduction to life aboard the Pequod.



| Richard Cox (left) as Ahab and Justin Ryan as Starbuck in Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's "Moby Dick."

Photo: Pat Kirk

On Saturday, the other elements in this wondrously varied collection of sea dogs mostly took their places with equal vitality. The Polynesian harpooner Queequeg, with whom Greenhorn shares an exquisitely turned love duet to begin Act 2, was nobly sung by bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam, and baritone Justin Ryan, though not always fastidious in matters of pitch, cut a commanding figure as the first mate, Starbuck, who often has to serve as the moral counterbalance to Ahab.

The cabin-boy Pip, whose assignment to a soprano provides the only exception to the opera's all-male cast, got a magnificent performance from Jasmine Habersham, singing with plenty of tonal heft and an air of tragic vivacity. Tenor Mason Gates and baritone Eugene Brancoveanu both provided buoyant presences as the mates Flask and Stubb, baritone Trevor Neal sang resonantly from the rear balcony as the forlorn Captain Gardiner of the neighboring whaler the Rachel, and the men's chorus — a central element of the score — made a rollicking, tonally valiant contribution.

At the center of things, unfortunately, was tenor Richard Cox, whose performance as Ahab was neither musically strong nor theatrically alert enough to shoulder the weight placed upon it. Now and then — especially in the touching Act 2 duet during which he and Starbuck reminisce about their families waiting for them at home in Nantucket — Cox rose to the occasion with singing of expressive depth.

But for the most part, he struggled to unleash the role's vocal lines with the heroic fortitude they required. And time and again, his dramatically tentative performance failed to create a sense of Ahab's unbridled fury, or make him the mercurial, abusive figure around whom the ship's entire life revolves.

Yet even without a strong center, "Moby-Dick" stood, revealed yet again as a theatrical work of enormous inventiveness, subtlety and insight — by my reckoning, Heggie's most triumphant creation since his maiden opera, "Dead Man Walking." **Like that earlier opera**, "Moby-Dick" seems to be well on its way to becoming a repertory staple, and productions like the one at Opera San José reveal why.

"Moby Dick": Through Feb. 24. \$55-\$189. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. 408-437-4450. www.operasj.org



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