

Orson Welles Stage Adaptation of **Melville's Moby Dick** at Theatricum Botanicum

By Kriss Perras | Photos by Ian Flanders



Colin Simon & Gerald C. Rivers

“**T**hey call me Ishmael!” declares the actor Dane Oliver as he was illuminated by the precision stage lighting of the night. That famous line was bellowed over the crowd on opening night with such conviction the audience was immediately drawn into the story. Canyon frogs burping in the distance faded away. The rolling waves of the ocean grew out of the darkness of our imaginations. Ahab’s whaling ship, the Pequod, seemed to assemble before our eyes. The actors brought the yardarms, sails, masts, tables, chairs and anything that could be used as a prop in this play was brought to stage creating a minimalist skeleton of the captain’s vessel. Now we’re ready to hunt the white whale!

This production, titled “Moby Dick—Rehearsed,” is a 1955 adaptation by Orson Welles of Herman Melville’s famous 1851 novel. A Shakespearean acting troupe works between performances of “King Lear” to create a play about “Moby Dick.” The actors freely rehearse their parts at the beginning of the play, in a sense breaking the fourth wall—acting as though they are speaking directly to the audience at times. After a few funny attempts by the sound crew, who later on will definitely impress you with their prowess, to make some ocean and whale sounds, the actors begin. Then at one point, Gerald C. Rivers, who plays the part of Captain Ahab, tells the troupe as he looks at the audience, the actors will roll through the lines to the end, unless they completely bungle their parts. The production continues from that point forward as one would expect a play to be performed.

One of the most outstanding aspects of this performance is the actors resourceful ability to draw on the audience’s imagination to create the set, whales, danger from the whales, ocean squalls and lightning, which is in no small part helped by the Sound Designer,



Dane Oliver, Michael McFall, Gerald C. Rivers and Cavin Mohrhardt

Marshall McDaniel, and the Lighting Designer, Zach Moore. Instead of a huge set that would create a ship, this production utilized the vast expanse of our imagination—far more effective in the long run. Rivers’ performance was outstanding! There are many deep threads of socio-political conflict in this play, racial justice and vengeance purely for the sake of vengeance. Rivers manages many of these threads in his conversations with Pip, a colorful character in the form of a cabin boy. Welles gives Pip more emphasis than Melville did in the original novel. Perhaps this is because the conversation concerned racial justice, something relevant to the time the play was written (1955).

“Moby Dick—Rehearsed” is directed by Ellen Geer and choreographed by Dane Oliver, Robby Award Winner and LADCC nominee for his extraordinary fight choreography for last season’s “Haiti.” The original production premiered in at the Duke of York’s Theatre in London, in a production directed by Welles. The original cast included Welles, Christopher Lee, Kenneth Williams, Joan Plowright, Patrick McGoohan, Gordon Jackson, Peter Sallis and Wensley Pithey.

The Theatricum Botanicum cast includes: Gerald C. Rivers (Captain Ahab), Dane Oliver (Ishmael), Travis L. Baker (Stubb), Tim Halligan (Peleg), KiDane Kelati (Pip), Jacob Louis (Elijah), Melora Marshall (Flask), Michael Mcfall (Queequeg), Franc Ross (The Director) Dante Ryan (Tashtego), Colin Simon (Starbuck), Isaac Wilkins (Daggoo).

The creative Team includes: Costume Designer Beth Eslick, Lighting Designer Zach Moore, Prop Master Dante Carr, Original Music and Sound Design by Marshall McDaniel, Production Stage Manager Kim Cameron. ■