

A.V. CLUB

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OTHER SHOWS *Moby Dick*



Encore Ethan Hawke (left), William Hurt

C+

by Phil Nugent August 1, 2011

Moby Dick
season 1, episode 1-2

***Moby Dick* debuts tonight on Encore at 8 p.m. Eastern. Part two airs Tuesday at 8 p.m. Eastern.**

Of all the doomed ideas that keep recurring in the movies, theater, TV, radio, and even comics, none is easier to understand than the urge to dramatize *Moby Dick*. 160 years after it was published, the book remains one of the most plausible candidates for the title of the Great American Novel--take it from a reformed English major who used to actually think about such things--and there may be few novels of its stature that seem to be crying out so loudly to be filmed or staged. It's full of scenes that you can't help wanting to see played out, images that visual artists can't help wanting to realize, characters that actors can't help wanting to embody, speeches and rhetoric that they want to hear themselves declaim. It's also got long, detailed descriptions of how to bleed a whale and the odd recipe chapter, but when caught in the fever that the book inspires in artists susceptible to it, it must be easy to decide that the unadaptable stuff isn't as essential to Melville's conception as it always turns out to be.

In just the past year, an acclaimed new opera based on the novel has premiered in Dallas, and Asylum, the direct-to-DVD "mockbuster" specialists who gave us *Almighty Thor*, have come out with a modern-dress update, complete with *Jaws* rip-off cover art, starring Barry Bostwick as a submarine commander Ahab and Renee O'Connor, of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as "Dr. Michelle

Herman". (I haven't seen it myself, but it sounds like an *SCTV* sketch.) As far as movies go, the most impressive adaptation remains the 1956 version directed by John Huston, from a screenplay credited to Ray Bradbury. That picture probably sums up what possibilities do and don't exist when you're trying to film *Moby Dick*. It looks great, and it has magnificent bits and pieces throughout, though in the end, it can only add up to a really good try. The movie has a mixed reputation at best, and Gregory Peck's Ahab is one of the all-time legendary strokes of Hollywood miscasting. But the real problem with it is simply that Melville's novel was the product of the unique consciousness of a great writer and very unusual man trying to create his own world and use it to say and preserve everything he knew, and there's no way for a filmmaker to duplicate that. The most Huston or anyone else could do is to give it everything he's got in the passages that meant so much to him that he had to make the movie, do the best he can with the rest, and hold on tight.

The new "Encore Originals" *Moby Dick* doesn't have the kind of fire in its belly that you feel in even the worst adaptations made by people who felt challenged and inspired by the book. It's one of those half-baked jobs you get when somebody looking for a prestige project picks a title, almost at random, out of the public domain box. The people who make things like this are never as interested in realizing the dramatic possibilities of the original material as they are in making it acceptable to modern audiences by updating and "humanizing" the characters who may seem weird and daunting and upsettingly different from Joe Everyshmuck. Meanwhile, they give themselves a gold star whenever they take some classic detail that everybody knows about the novel, whether they've read it or not, and reposition it in a way that'll make it "play" better.

Here, you find out in the first few minutes where you are, as soon as Ishmael (Charlie Cox), on his way to Nantucket to look for a job at sea, encounters Pip, the little black boy who signs on as the cabin boy on the *Pequod*. In the novel, they don't meet until they're aboard the ship. Here, Ishmael sees a white man viciously beating the child out in the middle of a field, and plucks the kid up and takes him along with him. The kid asks his savior his name, and Cox smiles at him and says, "Call me Ishmael!" In the Huston movie, Pip came across as an eerie, perhaps sinister figure, which may have been the filmmakers' way of making it up to the audience when they had to kill the kid off along with the rest of the crew when the ship sinks. (Oh, by the way, *spoiler alert!*) Here, he exists mainly so that the "good" adult characters--Ishmael, and the first mate Starbuck (Ethan Hawke), who comforts him at the end-- can use him to demonstrate their own decency.

It used to be that the two big questions you had to ask about any movie version of *Moby Dick* were, "How is the guy playing Ahab?" and "How bad does the whale look?" Thanks to the current state of computer effects, we now live in a world where, in any project made on a better-than-Asylum budget, you know the whale is at least going to look okay. Here, the second big question that springs to mind during the opening credits is, "What the hell is Gillian Anderson doing in this?" You may be surprised to learn that Ahab (William Hurt) is married to her, and that they have a round-cheeked little boy for Ahab to tuck in, so that the kid can look up at daddy and ask, "Are you scared of Moby Dick?" ("He's just a whale." says Hurt, a bit noncommittally.) In the novel, Ahab's marital status is mentioned in passing, but he doesn't get to feature in any scenes of domestic bliss. I can't say that I ever gave it a lot of thought, but if I'd tried to imagine what he could have had to come home to that made him think, "Screw this, I'd rather go back out to sea and reconnect that whale that bit my leg off", Gillian Anderson might well have been the last image that would've come to my mind.

Anderson is, if course, there to help humanize Ahab. The fact that she's at home waiting to help him unstrap his peg leg every night just makes his behavior seem that much more unhinged, which might not be a problem if he weren't the wrong kind of unhinged. Other screen Ahabs have ranted and glowered and dominated the space around them. Hurt goes his own way, and it would be easier to give him credit for at least trying something if he wasn't so unrelievedly William Hurt. His thick, gray-flecked beard and cap make him look more like Tevye than any mental image of Ahab that anyone has ever had, and he shows the Captain making an effort to seem avuncular and down-to-Earth, with only glints of his madness occasionally shining through. When challenged by Starbuck, the Christian who's horrified to discover that they're on a mission he considers "blasphemous", Hurt doesn't shout or stare down his antagonist. He prefers to take the codescending-smile-and-"*Can you believe this guy!?*"-laughter approach.

I guess there's an idea behind the performance: Hurt's Ahab appears to be one of those men (*kaff kaff* Dick Cheney *kaff*) who others are eager to see power invested in, because they seem experienced and capable and even reassuringly boring, and who only reveal that they're raving nuts after it's too late. This makes it easy to understand how the crew that signs on with Ahab could mistake him for stable. Melville got around that one by keeping Ahab offstage until the ship was far out to sea, which made his belated entrance that much more exciting. "Exciting" is not a word one associates with William Hurt, even when he's good. He does have some good moments here, and his scaled-down approach to Ahab works surprisingly well in the big speech where he informs the crew of his true motives and draws them into his quest. And his dry understatement is sometimes hilarious, as in the debate with Starbuck, when the mate argues that "God made us to aspire to the best in ourselves and each other," and Hurt sarcastically replies, "Oh. Scruples." But, maybe because such lines as "I'd strike the sun if it offended me" don't come trippingly off his tongue, he seems less like a titanic madman with a malignant obsession than a cranky old weirdo who's into mind games, and the film, taking shape around him, starts to feel less like *Moby Dick* than like *The Caine Mutiny* without a mutiny.

The special interest he takes in Ishmael doesn't help. In the book, Ishmael starts out as both the narrator and the protagonist. Then, once the action shifts to the *Pequod* and Ahab first appears, Ishmael recedes more and more into the background, the ordinary man overshadowed by figures in his life who are more important and interesting than he is himself. Apparently somebody thought that wouldn't play well, but any idea that thrusts Charlie Cox's Ishmael closer to the center has to be counted as a bad call. Cox, who played the *Duke of Crowborough* in *Downton Abbey* on *Masterpiece Theater*, has so little character to project that, after awhile, the only time you notice him is when it crosses your mind that it would feel really good to wipe that supercilious smirk off his face. (In one highly enjoyable scene, Ahab himself can't take it anymore and throws himself a bitch-slapping party all over Cox's smug mug.) The fieriest, most intense performance comes from Eddie Marsdan as the second mate, Stubb, who turns into a sadistic martinet after he's contaminated with Ahab's madness. The character bears next to no resemblance to the Stubb of the book, but maybe it was decided to just cast Marsdan if they could get him, assign him a role, and then just let him do all that stuff that Eddie Marsdan is so great at.

Moby Dick won't do any lasting damage to Melville or his novel, any more than the 1930 version that began with John Barrymore, as Ahab, cavorting upside down in the rigging as his ship came into port, while the ladies waiting on the dock talked about what a sexy rascal he was and hoped that he never got his leg bitten off by a whale, for fear that it might make him bitter and cramp his style. And, as I said, the whale itself is not half bad. The scene of *Moby Dick* finally deciding that he's getting too old for this shit and taking down the *Pequod* is probably done about as well as it could be, and the climactic moments generate some excitement, though they're not as truly thrilling as hearing the way Ricardo Montalban, in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, delivered the line, "From hell's heart, I stab at thee! For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee!" (Has anybody ever done a study to see how many people saw that movie before first encountering *Moby Dick* in school and, getting to that scene, experienced an eerie feeling of *deja vu*?) Once upon a time, people cared enough about Melville's novel to attempt dramatic versions of it, even though they knew that, given the technology that existed at the time, the audience was going to collapse in laughter as soon as they saw the whale they had to work with. Now, we've got the whale down pat, and look at the crap we surround him with.