

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

July 29, 2011

TELEVISION



Above, William Hurt as the obsessed Captain Ahab in 'Moby Dick.' Below, a Finnish phone-booth sauna in the documentary 'Steam of Life.'

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REVIEW

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Moby Dick

Monday, Aug. 1, and Tuesday, Aug. 2,
8 p.m. EDT on Starz Encore

Steam of Life

Tuesday 10 p.m. on PBS



PURISTS MAY GO wild over the latest film version of "Moby Dick," which is not 100% ripped from the pages of Herman

Melville's 1851 novel, and doesn't star the likes of Gregory Peck as a traditionally brooding and darkly tormented Captain Ahab.

What it has instead is William Hurt, whose Ahab is more cracked in the head than craggy and occasionally looks like he wandered in from the set of "Fiddler on the Roof." Ahab also has a buxom wife (Gillian Anderson) whom we only heard of and never met in the novel but who does useful service in the movie, along with a little son, to show us the life of loving domesticity that Ahab could have chosen.

Such a shift in emphasis, as brief as it is, undoubtedly steers the story in a modernistic direction. But the old themes are there, too. And the glory of this particular adaptation, intentional or not, is that what we bring to it with today's sensibilities can actually enhance the experience.

Never fear, though. The main action and most of the characters are the same as they ever were. The movie opens as a young man rescues a little black boy, Pip (Daniyah Ysrayl), who is being beaten by the side of the road. "Call me Ishmael" says the young man (Charlie Cox), who is on his way to Nantucket to

look for adventure aboard a whaling ship. That will be Ahab's ship, the Pequod, supposedly setting out to harvest the oil that lit America at the time, but actually on a doomed mission to find and kill the object of Ahab's obsession: the white whale Moby Dick.

There is much to marvel at in this production, which was filmed in Nova Scotia and Malta in colors that are mostly blues, grays and whites. It all feels right for mid-19th century New England—the draft horses with their enormous shaggy hooves, the crowded smoky taverns, and the dockside heaving with humanity and noisy enterprise. The sets, like the costumes, look detailed but not lush. In place of the gleaming silk and silver of an English costume drama, for instance, we have the patina of white clay pipes, the metallic glint of moonlight on swelling sea water or, when we first meet the Indian harpooner Queequeg (Raoul Trujillo) the glow of firelight on a fiercely tattooed squatting body.

There is one bright shiny thing: This is the gold doubloon nailed to the Pequod's mast, to be claimed by the man who finds Moby Dick. Ahab hammers it in during the movie's most magnificent scene, in which the captain makes his personal mission known with Shakespearean prose and a Svengaliesque passion that mesmerize the crew. Such is the power of the mass frenzy that it even breaks down the resistance of First Mate Starbuck (Ethan Hawke), the one man aboard who senses that Ahab is leading them all toward death.

On the eve of their journey, a preacher (Donald Sutherland) had said from his ship's-hull pulpit: "You may go down to the sea imagining that you will not surrender to its awful power..." but "the sea has a lesson to teach: humility." That lesson seems forgotten, Ishmael explains, as Ahab and the crew cry out for the death of Moby Dick: "Here, then, was this gray-



headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals.... How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire?"

This being a two-night miniseries, the richness in Melville's storytelling, with entire chapters about doubloon gazing or elaborations on various characters, doesn't get much space here. There is only the core narrative of a man willing to die and take others with him for the sake of what Starbuck calls "vengeance on a dumb animal." Or, as contemporary viewers might well interpret it, to commit suicide-by-whale.

So let the purists rant if they will about what is not here. This is a tale well told in the time allowed. Who cares that we see little of the whaling industry (though man vs. whale clearly was a fair fight back then)? Or that Queequeg sometimes lapses into the accent of a Fu Manchu?

Like the music of Mozart, "Moby Dick" connects us to our ancestors,

reaching across the generations as few things can anymore. Watching this production with the same thoughts and emotions as they did: Who could ask for more?

"Steam of Life" is set almost entirely in the saunas of Finland, where men, once stripped of their clothes, can also bare their souls. And that they do in this bittersweet documentary in PBS's POV series, recalling lost loves, sad secrets and missed opportunities until the tears flow. Many scenes were filmed in the rural north, which apparently attracts the same outlier types that Alaska does. Like the scrawny, middle-age man with one damaged eyeball (or is it glass?) that looks like a shattered star sapphire. He bungled his old life down south, he laments, while the steam hisses and a fat friend patiently listens. The friend in turn recalls his own hurts, starting with a cruel stepfather in childhood: "You grow numb with it, always being beaten, hit or strangled," he sighs.

All over Finland, it seems, there is a similar answer to pain: more steam. Not always inside a sauna building; apparently even a sealed rural telephone booth and a pail of hot rocks will do. Neither is everybody melancholy here. One man has found joy with an orphan he raised who, he explains when the enormous old bear finally lumbers into view, is a "loyal and true friend." Another gave up a long life of crime, finally found love and now has three little sons, who sit glistening beside him in the sauna.

A teary father who lost a child, a tattooed soldier whose home life fell apart while he was serving in Afghanistan, all these and many more speak with uncommon frankness when they have nothing to hide on their bodies either. And so when we see them clothed at the end—some singing a Finnish lullaby about a sleeping baby squirrel—the shock of intimacy is astonishing.