

The Washington Post

July 31, 2011

Encore's lavish new 'Moby Dick': There whale be blood



(Jan Betke) - William Hurt as Captain Ahab in Encore's "Moby Dick."

By [Hank Stuever](#), Published: July 31

High school English teachers, your attention please! I have wonderful and terrible news.

Encore, that glorious waster of weekend afternoons on cable's desolate seas, has finally decided to show something besides an endless loop of "[Dumb and Dumber](#)." For its first offering, it's

bringing out “Moby Dick,” a lavish, exciting, well-acted and admirably thorough movie adaptation of Herman Melville’s 1851 classic.

It’s more than three hours long and airs in two parts, Monday and Tuesday night.

That’s what — four, maybe five whole lesson plans? Enough to fill up that entire dead zone after the futile ritual of standardized testing. True, the kiddies might skip the book for the movie, but better they get *this* “Moby Dick” than no “Moby Dick” at all, right? Set your DVRs and thank me later.

William Hurt is Ahab. Ethan Hawke is Starbuck. Gillian Anderson of “[The X-Files](#)” is Mrs. Ahab. . . . Mrs. Ahab? There was no Mrs. Ahab in the book, was there? “I’m in [the movie] for about five minutes,” Anderson sighed to a roomful of TV critics in Beverly Hills last week, most of whom, including yours truly, only ever read the CliffsNotes version of “[Moby-Dick](#)” (Melville hyphenated his title; Encore doesn’t) in school — hence our tragic career trajectories. From hell’s heart we stab at thee.

So is this a good “Moby Dick” or a really cheesy “Moby Dick”? I happen to think it’s a great “Moby Dick.” Better than John Huston’s “Moby Dick”? Well, no. And *yes*. (And definitely better than the Patrick Stewart TV movie more than a decade ago.)

This is the “Moby Dick” for fans of the 2003 film “[Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World](#)”; it’s also the “Moby Dick” for those of us who think Steven Spielberg’s “Jaws” is the best version of “Moby Dick.” This version — bloodier, action-packed — was financed by German producers and filmed mostly at sea, in late 2009, off the coast of Malta, on a meticulous replica of a 19th-century whaling vessel, Ahab’s legendary Pequod.

You know the story, surely. There’s no such thing as a 160-year-old spoiler alert, therefore: Mentally deranged captain drags his frightened, starving crew on an obsessive, global pursuit of the giant white whale (Moby Dick) who devastated the captain’s last voyage and bit off his leg. This vengeance-filled journey ends badly, with only one survivor. (Call him Ishmael.)

The script, by Nigel Williams, manages to elegantly excise the pages and pages (and pages) of details Melville wrote about the whaling trade. Gone are the ruminative explications, the chowder recipes, the very long passages that deter even the most willing reader from getting through the original book, which — I know *in* my heart, if not exactly *by* heart — remains the greatest piece of American literature ever written.

Instead, Williams accesses the very themes (ego! micromanagement! suicidal tendencies!) that make “Moby Dick’s” story of human darkness forever relevant.

Charlie Cox, a charming British actor, plays a serviceably doe-eyed Ishmael, the young narrator who longs to join a whaling vessel. Arriving in Nantucket (having rescued the young slave Pip from a brutal master), Ishmael winds up on Ahab’s doomed Pequod with his other new friend, Queequeg the Indian, played with revitalized depth by Raoul Trujillo.

Hurt, the Oscar-winning actor who's discovered meaningful work in TV projects ("Damages"; "Too Big to Fail"), conjures up a wonderfully layered Ahab. Both Melville and the screenplay give him the very best lines, and as he becomes increasingly cuckoo, it's up to Hurt to make sure not to overdo it. (For the most part he succeeds.) Meanwhile, it is the nicely middle-aging Hawke, as the honorable but helpless second-in-command, Starbuck, who finds the poetry in understatement.

Though the film is long, keep in mind how long it could have been. The Pequod is a-sea for more than a year, its crew taunted by glimpses of Moby. With so much time elapsing between fearsome encounters with the beast, the movie nevertheless sustains the anxious tension that has always been "Moby Dick's" allure. The screenplay must necessarily winnow and reduce, yet the bones of the story are undeniably compelling. Both nights of "Moby Dick" sail along at a nice clip.

The titular whale? Naturally he's all CGI animation, but he's impressively rendered. You're supposed to root for him, right? (Or did I really miss the point of "Moby Dick"?) Perhaps the highest compliment I can pay this version is that it makes me want to go back and read the book — but I make no promises about finishing it.

Moby Dick

(190 minutes, in two parts) begins Monday at 8 p.m. and concludes Tuesday at 8 p.m. on Encore.