

‘Moby Dick — Rehearsed’ is magical

Orson Welles, that mad genius of American theater and film, who had so much trouble completing projects, wrote a stage version of Herman Melville’s classic novel “Moby Dick” and starred in a production of that play in

London in 1955. Although the play, called “Moby Dick — Rehearsed,” is not often performed, Stanford Repertory Theater opened an absorbing production of the show on Thursday.



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In Melville’s novel of American obsession, one-legged Captain

Ahab sets off from Nantucket on a worldwide mission to find and kill the huge white whale that chewed off his leg on an earlier voyage. It is a story of revenge and obsession, American style.

Welles’ unusual stage adaptation opens with a group of actors in modern dress rehearsing a production of “King Lear.” One actor, who is reading Melville’s novel, suggests it would make a more interesting rehearsal than the dreary post-modern “Lear” their director is forcing on them.

Gradually the actors begin to improvise off of pages of “Moby Dick” handed around, and slowly the show changes from a rehearsal of “Lear” to a rehearsal of “Moby Dick.”

A key motif in Melville’s novel is the sense that men who float out to sea



DRESS REHEARSAL — The cast from “Moby Dick — Rehearsed” at the Stanford Repertory Theater. Photo by Frank Chen.

for several years at a time lose connection with the organized world back on land. And with such a loss of bearings, it is easy to become unhinged. Welles’ adaptation, and Stanford’s staging, capture this important sense of disconnection.

In director Rush Rehm’s rich and high-energy production, the early transition from “Lear” to “Moby” is unexpected and magical. Elsewhere there are many strong scenes, such as when boats eerily float quietly on the sea listening for the whale.

Among the actors, Rod Gnapp is a hypnotizing Ahab, limping the deck of his ship, obsessed with his one goal. Louis McWilliams portrays a traumatized Ishmael, the narrator in Melville’s book, and for Welles the actor who suggests shifting rehearsals from “Lear” to “Moby.”

As a thoughtful second-in-command to the obsessed Ahab, Peter Ruocco fears the worst. Timothy James Borgerson’s high-spirited mate Stubb offers moments of joy that contrast with the ominous portents. Weston Gaylord’s

mate Flask is expressive, even with few lines.

Scenic designer Annie Dauber has created a ship out of scaffolding that serves well the complexities of improvisation. Michael Keck’s sound design includes a variety of sea noises, and Michael Ramsaur’s lighting a variety of weather conditions.

From composer Keck and movement director Courtney Walsh there are music and dancing segments, featuring violinists Noemi Ola Berkowitz and Sarah Gage, as sailors sing sea shanties and show off their moves.

This partying adds to the sense of a boat floating away from the “real” world.

Volumes have been written about “Moby Dick,” as a weather vane of American cultural spirit. There the wind runs free, and runs crazy, in the heart of 1851 America.

Melville writes about the elusive nature of freedom, and how a reverence for individuality can lead to madness. He also reminds us of what happens when human beings are motivated by hate and revenge.

“Moby Dick—Rehearsed” is part of a summer-long Orson Welles program at Stanford, which includes a symposium and free Monday night movies. For information and tickets, visit reperatorytheater.stanford.edu.

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