



'All Girl Moby Dick' is Melville for a Modern Audience

By Anthony Morgano

April 27, 2012

<http://chicago.gopride.com/news/article.cfm/articleid/28808881>

CHICAGO, IL -- The Mammals' "All Girl Moby Dick" opened Saturday April 21 to a sold-out crowd. The show features nine talented young Chicago actresses in an adaptation of Herman Melville's classic tale, favored by high school lit teachers everywhere, about a wandering sailor called Ishmael, a sea captain driven mad by his obstinate quest for a great white whale and the rest of the ill-fated crew of the Pequod.

The Chicago Mammals Theatre Company was founded in 1998 and is dedicated to exploring American mythology, history and destiny via the horror, science fiction and phantasmagoria genres. According to one of the company's co-founders, Bob Fisher, The Mammals was starting to get a reputation as something of a "Boys' Club." To counteract this, Fisher decided to ask his actress friends what he could do that would be fun, be part of what the company was into and challenge the expectations of the audience.

"Rather than just doing a show that was heavy with actresses, we decided let's do a show where women get to play roles they almost never get to play," said Fisher, who also co-wrote and directed "All Girl Moby Dick."

Melville's classic featured everything Fisher was looking for: the story is populated wholly by strong male roles, the antagonist appears to be supernatural and the story is part of the American cannon. Along with Sarah Gorsky, Fisher began adapting the epic and incredibly dense classic novel, deciding what would stay in the stage adaptation and what would go. Focusing mostly on scenes of action, the two condensed the over-600 page book into an 80 page script that runs for just over two hours on stage.

This isn't The Mammals' first gender-bending cast, Fisher told ChicagoPride.com referencing a female Jekyll in a past production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This didn't stop him from receiving a flood of questions regarding the handling of gender in the story. Would he change all the pronouns? Would it essentially be a big drag king show? In the end, Fisher opted not to worry about pronouns and deceptive hair and costume, but rather to focus on having the actresses embody their roles as characters, which lead him to believe that character does not have to be synonymous with gender.

"It's different for everybody, but I think there are a lot of people who come in and they notice that they're watching women for the first five minutes and then after that they're just watching our adaptation of a classic," Fisher said. "They're not watching Ahab as a woman, they're just watching Ahab."

Fisher admits that he might not want to go back to working with mixed gendered casts after having the pleasure of being surrounded by nine beautiful, talented and intelligent women so exclusively for this show. The Mammals wanted an all-girl show both onstage and offstage and nearly succeeded -- Fisher, who couldn't bring himself to give up the opportunity, and John Wilson, who created the sets, are the only men involved in the production.

Opening weekend created a lot of good buzz. One critic called "All Girl Moby Dick" a "visually stunning" work, saying the set made audience members feel like passengers aboard the Pequod. Critics are especially praising Amy Harmon's portrayal of Captain Ahab, a character Fisher believes we as a society can learn from.

Pointing to recent cultural obsessions centering around death, think vampires and zombies like AMC's "Walking Dead," Fisher believes that we as a society have lost hope in our ability to make things better and have turned to romanticizing the end. Ahab's quest too, he says, is a quest for armageddon. In the way he portrays this quest, Fisher wants to impart a message to the audience: it's too soon to fall in love with going down with the ship.

"It's the biggest risk we took, and so far it's the most rewarding," Fisher said. "To find a way to pay homage to Melville, but also enter into a conversation, as opposed to merely repeating him. That's why it's in the cannon."

Whether through what Fisher referred to as the "final reel" which he refused to spoil or the exploration of these classic characters by an all-female cast, "All Girl Moby Dick" seeks to do more than simply replicate Melville, it responds to him.

Performances continue at the Zoo Theatre, located at 4001 N. Ravenswood Ave., Ste B-1, this Saturday April 28 and every Friday and Saturday from May 4 to May 26 at 8 p.m.

The show is BYOB with a suggested donation of \$20 and reservations can be made by calling 866-593-4614 or emailing themammals@gmail.com. For more information, visit <http://themammals.blogspot.com>.