



Josep Maria Pou dominates the stage as Ahab in *Moby Dick*. Photo: David Ruano.

Like Homar, José María Pou—another giant of the Catalan stage—is an actor who knows how to hold an audience. His star turn in *Moby Dick* is a wonderful thing to behold. Pou is a larger than life performer—a tall, sturdy figure who increasingly feels like he belongs in another era. When I think of this actor, figures like Charles Kean and David Garrick come to mind. Don't get me wrong, this isn't because he feels old-fashioned or out of step with current trends. On the contrary, Pou remains alert to innovations in dramatic writing and his track record of staging new writing; this is especially true for British plays by Hare, Bennett and Harwood, where he is second to none. Pou is quite simply an actor who knows how to take an audience with him on a journey. He fills a stage, physically and dramatically. In Juan Cavestany's feverish adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, presented at the Goya Theatre, he dominates the stage from beginning to end, a mighty Ahab who spreads across the stage like the whale he seeks to hunt down. Cavestany dispenses with narrative logic in favour of a stream of consciousness poetics where past and present meld to provide a window into Ahab's tortured mind. In the opening moments of the piece, Ahab emerges from the darkness. Sitting in his throne-like chair, his arm waves from side to side like the pendulum of a clock. It is as if he is waking from a dream, grunting and growling like a gruff waking bear clad in a rough coat.

It is clear from the production's opening moments that the sleep of reason has produced monsters of the mind. This Ahab is his own tormentor. Pou, Cavestany, and director Andrés Lima have conceived the piece as a manifestation of the workings of Ahab's obsessive mind. The Pequod's crew of 30 is here

reduced to two-bit players who weave in and out of Ahab's adventures. Ambience is substituted for storyline as the audience attempts to keep up with the shipwreck weaving through Ahab's imagination. Valentín Álvarez's lighting moves from spectral blue to blood red, capturing the different moods through which Ahab passes. *Moby Dick* remains always out of reach: a giant projection, a phantom presence, a sound in the distance.

The sleeves of Ahab's shirt act as billowing sails as his delirious ramblings echo across the stage's wooden surfaces. Beatriz San Juan's set is dominated by planks of wood shaped to create the outline of a ship. Ropes and ladders are lifted to give a sense of the *Pequod*'s different areas, from the watchtower to the stern. A giant sail floats above Pou and his two fellow actors—Oscar Kapoya in the role of Pip, and Jacob Torres in the dual roles of Starbuck and Ismael. The latter two use on-stage wind machines to lift the sail high above them so it races above Ahab's head. Miquel Àngel Raio's video projections show a bubbling sea that spits and snarls in the distance. The giant shadows of sailors float across the back wall, a reminder both of lives lost at sea and Ahab's impending fate. The spectral shapes serve as manifestations of Ahab's wild imagination. Ominous black clouds vie with the moon which rises from the water like a giant ball. At times, the images look like an X-ray. *Moby Dick*'s giant eye stares out both at Ahab and at the audience. Ahab clutches a fur rug desperately as if it were a comfort blanket. He clings to Pip like a dying animal, the pain in his leg a constant source of frustration and debilitation through the course of the performance. The prosthetic leg provided by *Pan's Labyrinth*'s Oscar-winning team of David Martí and Montse Ribé weighs Ahab down. A monstrous contraption, it keeps him grounded when he would wish to fly in his endeavours to hunt down *Moby Dick*. He drags it with him, a heavy, painful reminder of the maiming endured at the hands of the elusive *Moby Dick*.

Pou has noted that he has had to face Ahab “with the same passion, courage and determination with which Ahab faces the whale. With the same madness. Or perhaps even more” (*Moby Dick* Pressbook). His performance is a mighty tour de force and the cornerstone of the production's success. Pou's past roles flicker through his characterisation of Ahab. Indeed, there is much of Pou's raging, angry Lear from 2004 in his obsessive focus. Ahab's anger is relentless, a man at war with himself and his demons, pounding the stage like a deafening percussive sound. Oscar Kapoya's Pip cowers in his presence, Jacob Torres's Ismael disappears into insignificance next to him. I wondered at times if the production might not have been better served by Pou alone on stage. It felt at times as if Pip and Ismael were as much ghosts as the projections on the back screen. Tellingly Ahab incorporates lines that are attributed to Ismael in Melville's novel. There are moments when Pou has something of Orson Welles about him—Pou's performance as Welles in Richard France's 2008 play about the filmmaker is yet another ghost that haunt the production. Cavestany and Lima have a long history of collaboration through the company Animalario. The production's intensity of mood recalls their 2008 *Urtaín* while Jaume Manresa's operatic score gives the piece a haunting, epic quality. It is a rollercoaster journey of fire and brimstone, thunder and lightning, crashing waves and potent storms: 80 minutes of soaring emotions and unadulterated theatricality.