theatre...

Rod Steiger Heads 'Moby Dick' Cast

By Charles Foster Ford

When "Moby Dick" was filmed, Orson Welles delivered only the scenes of Father Mapple, an impressive hit near the beginning. Welles' latest venture is an arrangement of Melville's original words for acting on stage. Mapple and Ahab are played by Rod Steiger on the nearly bare stage of the Schubert, but honors are shared equally by him, by Melville, and by Welles. This "Moby Dick" is a great piece of theatre.

Rod Steiger is amazing in a long, difficult role. His Ahab is a full range of human, and even superhuman emotions. His brooding isolation, his tenderness with Pip, his vocations with Starbuck, his frenzy in the final chase, even his mere long-power, are unbelievable. In the prologue, Steiger portrays a baffling actor-manager whispering his unsettling cast into shape for the new play, and suggestions of the author himself are here inseparable. It is much to ask an actor to play Orson Welles, but Steiger is capable even of this.

There are no other stand-out performances; rather, the entire cast rolls into a thoroughly believable crew of whalers. They range from the vital young characters, to manufacture the Pequod itself out of simple gestures and movements. A few simple platforms and benches, a tall ladder, and some ropes pulled out of the flies are all the props needed. The act-curtain has been removed entirely, and is placed some rigging and sails hung above the stage. But this is the only concession to realism. Forecastle, after-deck, whaleboat, and all are manufactured when required by means of more simple gestures, and excellent lighting-effects.

"Some of this novel must be heard," pleads Bruno Gerussi, as the star of the show, Ishmael. He completely correct. Though the words are Melville's, the result is a completely theatrical experience. There is much which is Biblical about Melville's mouth-filling prose. The effect, when this is given shape onstage, is something like the power and magnificence of Shakespeare. Quotations from Lear and Henry V in the prologue are thus quite appropriate.

The major thrust of conflict in this play is Ahab with Starbuck, over Ahab's right to throw away his life and those of crew to take vengeance on a dumb beast. Roy Porter's Starbuck is a brooding, Bible-quotiting Quaker, whose argument is what convinces what is human in Ahab that the chase is insane.

The matter of the play is trag- comely on a grand scale, but there are flashes of genuine comedy. Several are the work of Hugh Webster. His Smith is a horripil- ingly merciful man even whose dreams are cosmic. The youthful Starbuck also greets his first whale voyage with a fresh and often witty eye.

Herman Melville's novel has been accorded a great deal of critical attention in recent years; a cult of American symbolists exists in finding a good deal more than they actually film in Ahab. There is much literary meaning. But this production makes it quite clear its monumental basis. When it moves to New York, it should be for quite a long run.

Experimental Theatre

Well speeding into its second year, the Experimental Theatre opens its 1962 season November 16 and 17 with two one-act plays—Oscar Case's "Orphee" and William Yeats' "Land of Heart's Desire." "Orpheus," a modern version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, tells of a magic journey to rescue his wife from the under- world. "Land of Heart's Desire" concerns a night in the life of an Irish farm boy whose sex has just been married—the night fairies persuade him to stand yer bride.

The performance starts at 8 p.m. in Jefferson Auditorium; admission 50 cents.

Theatre Schedule

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