Welles and the White Whale

When I was a boy, Broadway shows toured—and not just musicals, either. Many of the most popular theatrical productions of the 20th century went on the road, often with casts comparable in quality to the original ones seen in New York. Today, though, it’s far less common for big-budget stagings of straight plays to tour. To be sure, the Roundabout Theatre Company’s “Twelve Angry Men” continues to make the rounds (it opens next Tuesday in Des Moines, Iowa). For the most part, though, the road shows that travel from city to city nowadays are middlebrow musicals.

MOBY-DICK—REHEARSED

HUNTING AND GATHERING
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like “The Producers” and “Wicked.” As for the barnstorming troupes that used to criss-cross the country, the rise of regional theater has largely killed them off, save for the Shakespeare festivals that send bus-and-truck shows to local communities—and the New York-based Acting Company, whose productions of Orson Welles’s “Moby-Dick—Rehearsed” and “The Tempest” are playing this week in Tacoma, Wash., after which they’ll be seen in 40 more cities from coast to coast.

Founded in 1972 by John Houseman and Margot Harley, the Acting Company gives promising young actors and actresses a chance to appear in high-quality professional productions that tour throughout the U.S. Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone and David Ogden Stiers are its best-known alumni, which speaks well for its track record. The sets are simple but good, the repertory highbrow. (I first saw Jean Anouilh’s “Antigone,” for instance, in an Acting Company production directed by Alan Schneider that came to Kansas City, Mo., in 1978.) The company wraps up its tours in New York instead of launching them there, which is why I’ve never reviewed any of its shows. This season, though, it hit the ground running at Connecticut’s Fairfield University, close enough to Manhattan for me to drive up and catch “Moby-Dick—Rehearsed.” I was greatly impressed.

First performed in London in 1955, Orson Welles’s blank-verse adaptation of Herman Melville’s novel is a product of his wilderness years, the period when the creator of “Citizen Kane” had become a pariah in Hollywood. Though he started out as a stage director, Welles later became drunk on the possibilities of the silver screen and never returned to the stage in earnest, preferring to make independent films on an increasingly frayed shoestring. “Moby-Dick—Rehearsed” was to be one of his rare midlife ventures into the medium that won him his first fame. Never a fluent writer, Welles was an editor of Near-Genius, and here he uses that skill to create a surprisingly postmodern piece of lyric theater.

The setting is not the Pequot but the near-bare stage of an American theater circa 1890, and the characters are not sailors but members of a touring that an evening spent with them will be very well spent indeed.