

Cats at the Merry-go-Round Still Amazes After 30 Years

By Barbara Adams

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Who doesn't know *CATS*, the legendary Andrew Lloyd Webber musical that's been pleasing audiences since its 1981 West End premiere? *CATS* swept the 1983 Tonys with seven awards and eventually became the second-longest running show on Broadway.

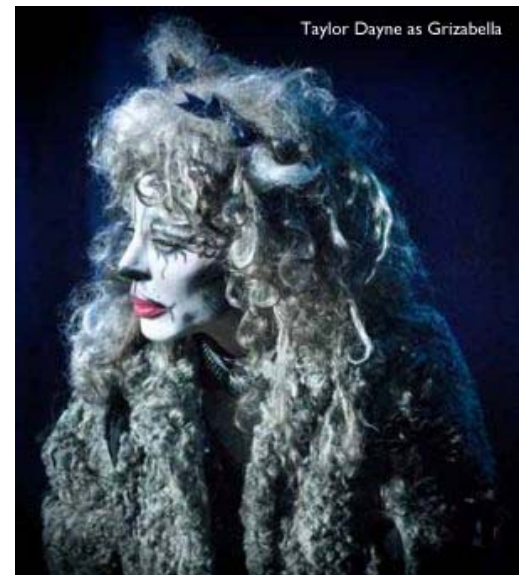
This show's fairy-tale charm derives from the lyrics, drawn straight from T. S. Eliot's poems for children: "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." With delightful rhymes and names that rival Dr. Seuss's, he brings to life a feline crew: Bombalurina and Griddlebone, Jellylorum and Skimbleshanks. Meet them all once again in Merry-Go-Round Playhouse's magical current production.

Much credit goes to the vision and experience of director/choreographer Jacob Brent, who played Mistoffelees in the London, Broadway, and video productions, and who worked closely with Webber. This local version fascinates from its opening moments, with one of the more lush sets this theater has seen. The stage, devoted to a chaotic junkyard, seems enormous, and designer Robert John Andrusko has filled it with random garbage and outsized, outworn objects: a toothbrush, a washboard, a floor lamp. Strings of red, blue, and green lights twinkle overhead, thanks to Dan Ozminkowski, whose lighting throughout is stunning.

Both set and moody lighting are highly expressive, providing an apt site for the Jellicle tribe to assemble. Transforming 20 actors into alley cats is partly the handiwork of costumer Garth Dunbar and hair and makeup stylist Jason Flanders; the varied furry costumes are splendid, a visual feast. The lithe actors, in turn, are as catlike as you could wish. At several points they invade the audience, exploring and pawing. Near me, Victoria the White Cat rolled in the aisle so convincingly I had to refrain from tickling her upturned belly.

Under Jeff Theiss's direction, Webber's music flooded the theater. Although soloists' lyrics were always clear, the ensemble songs, predictably, were hard to understand. Still, the simple storyline could be followed easily enough, despite the sacrifice of Eliot's clever wordplay.

Like humans, these cats have personalities, histories, and desires; they know how to party ("The Jellicle Ball"), how to love and to fight. Led by their respected patriarch, Old Deuteronomy, they eventually bring back into their fold the



ostracized old glamour cat, Grizabella. It's she whom their leader picks to be transformed, to pass to a better world, "the Heaviside Layer."

In this production, Grizabella is played by the celebrated singer/songwriter Taylor Dayne, looking like a tiny Edith Piaf waif, wide-eyed and tearstained. Dayne, who's had 18 hits on Billboard's top ten list, astonished the audience with her vocals, especially in the poignant classic, "Memory."

As Old Deuteronomy, Patrick Mellen is commanding and stately in a sumptuous frizzled robe; his rich baritone invests "The Moments of Happiness." Jonathan Tylicki doubles as Plato and Macavity, the latter being the scary criminal cat, who short-circuits the lights and has the wise old leader captured.

Andrew DiConcetto is briskly efficient as Skimbleshanks, the railway cat; Will Porter and Amanda LaMotte make havoc as Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer. All furry and feisty, Adam Ryan Tackett swaggers as Rum Tum Tugger. Sly ladies are Jessica Dillan (Demeter), Abigail Gatlin (Bombalurina), and Emily Palmquist (the elegant Cassandra).

Wonderful diversion is provided by Gus, the aged theater cat (Christopher E. Sidoli). Unlike Grizabella, he's cherished in his dotage, reminiscing about his dramatic triumphs. His Growltiger is a scrappy pirate, with a crew of musical sailors and fanciful painted backdrops completing this amusing sketch.

The cat who saves the day, bringing back the abducted Old Deuteronomy, is small, tidy and black Mr. Mistoffelees. He's a magician, of course, which nicely sums up the mystery that cats innately seem to have. This is a dancer's role, and KC Fredericks steals the show with his balletic grace and breathtaking fouetté turns.

Throughout, the talented, nimble ensemble fills the stage with movement – jazzy, balletic, and acrobatic, evoking an enchanted world. Over three decades old, *CATS* is as appealing—and as curious—a musical as ever.

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