

Precision and grace mark Merry-Go-Round's 'Cats'; Taylor Dayne delivers soulful 'Memory'



Pop singer Taylor Dayne is performing in the role of Grizabella, the Glamour Cat, in the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical "Cats" at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse. She appears in the production through Sept. 11. *(Photo courtesy of Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival)*

By Tony Curulla
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Merry-Go-Round Playhouse has chosen "Cats," a multi-Tony Award winner (seven in 1983), as its fourth mainstage offering for this year's Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival. And judging by a full-house audience's reactions on Thursday evening, it was a very judicious choice, indeed.

With music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, the show is based on T. S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" (1939), and even though it doesn't come close to the thematic depths, musically and narratively, to "bigger" Webber shows such as "Phantom of the Opera", "Jesus Christ, Superstar", and "Evita", it, nonetheless, commands the distinction of being the second longest running musical in Broadway history, surpassed only by "Phantom."

Directed and choreographed by Jacob Brent, best known for his portrayal of Mr. Mistoffelees in the Broadway, London and video productions of "Cats" where he worked closely with Lloyd Webber, this production also boasts another "heavy hitter" in its stage line-up. National recording artist and multi-Grammy nominee Taylor Dayne headlines the cast in the key role of Grizabella, the Glamour Cat.

Probably the most interesting piece of music is "Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats" (according to Eliot's poem, a jellicle cat sleeps all day and is active at night, as in the show) which not only opens the show, but also runs throughout in various scenes as a musical underpinning. The show's signature song, "Memory" which is sung at the end of Part I by Grizabella and reprised in Part II, of course, is the most hummable of the bunch, but I find the "Jellicle Song" to be the one most infused with the real spirit of the show.

Having a relatively thin storyline (we meet the various jellicles and their idiosyncrasies), but bolstered somewhat with metaphorical themes (*Are we the cats?*), "Cats", for all intents and purposes, is a dancer's show. Movement trumps everything else for two-plus hours. That's great for those of us who can't get enough of it, and Brent's snap-to choreography doesn't disappoint. There's even a traditional Broadway-style tap number tucked in there, which I hadn't seen done in other productions of the show.

Robert John Andrusko's scenic design of the junkyard, with a variety of multi-level performance spaces and a plethora of tossed-off objects, is perfect accompaniment to the exacting movements of this talented ensemble. In many scenes, found objects assembled by the cats turn into fantastic and creative renditions of things such as a pirate ship or a train locomotive. These serve to illustrate and embellish the personalities and behaviors of specific cats such as, here, Gus, The Theatre Cat (Christopher E. Sidoli) and Skimbleshanks, the railway cat (Andrew DiConcetto), respectively.

Adam Ryan Tackett's Rum Tum Tugger, often commanding the stage like a rock and roll frontman, keeps much of the Jellicle Ball hopping at a riveting pace as various cats are introduced for their turn in the spotlight.

Of particular note are Macavity's (Jonathan Tylicki) athletic dance routine and Mr. Mistoffelees's (KC Fredericks) extensive dance number, which, although done with considerable precision, seemed, to me, somewhat diminished by the repetitiveness of the accompanying lyrics.

Patrick Mellen's sage leader, Old Deuteronomy, commands ultimate respect and reverence from the gathering, while Dayne's delivery of Grizabella's "Memory" is soulful and poignant.

Garth Dunbar's costuming is a high point in the show, and it's first-rate in its communication of character. Musical direction by Jeff Theiss is precise, cranking out interesting rhythmic twists and turns from the exceptional eleven-piece pit orchestra.

Details: Length of Performance: two hours, twenty minutes, including a 15-minute intermission.

Attendance: A very appreciative full-house on Thursday evening.

Family Guide: Suitable for all ages.