

MUSICAL REVIEW

Cats: The eighties are back – and that’s a good thing

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- Title *Cats*
- Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber
- Lyrics by T.S. Eliot, Trevor Nunn
- Directed by Dave Campbell
- Starring Charles Azulay, Susan Cuthbert, Ma-Anne Dionisio, Cory O’Brien, Martin Samuel
- Company Mirvish Productions
- Venue Panasonic Theatre
- City Toronto
- Year 2013
- Runs Until Sunday, July 28, 2013

Suddenly, it feels like Toronto in the Eighties all over again. Marlene Smith just opened *Cats*, David Mirvish is bringing *Les Miz* in the fall – all that’s missing is for Parachute Club to release a new album. Mind you, it’s not quite the same. The feisty version of *Cats* that co-producer Smith unleashed on Tuesday isn’t playing at the majestic Elgin Theatre this time, but the 700-seat Panasonic. In other words, the original mega-musical is no longer mega.

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And that’s a good thing. For those of us who aren’t *Cats* fanciers, one of the biggest problems with the Andrew Lloyd Webber classic is that its razzle-dazzle trappings far exceed its modest source material – a batch of amusing children’s poems by T.S. Eliot. Scale back some of the spectacle for a smaller venue, however, and the musical is exposed for what it is: a showcase for Lloyd Webber’s facility as a composer and, in this case, for some terrific talent, both fresh and familiar.

Smith’s new production, like her landmark one in 1985, boasts an all-Canadian cast. And she and her collaborators have cannily invited back some of the original participants, including performers Susan Cuthbert and Gino Berti – the latter now serving as choreographer. They’ve also recruited Ma-Anne

Dionisio, star of the first Canadian production of *Miss Saigon*, so that it really feels like a throwback to Toronto’s mega-musical heyday.

But it’s also proof that, happily, an all-Canadian ensemble full of Broadway-class singer-dancers is no longer a big deal. There’s plenty of knock-out vocalizing and – to steal an Eliot phrase – terpsichorean power to be enjoyed in this show, even if you can’t escape the impression that you’re just watching a series of variety acts strung together on the thinnest of plot threads.

We’re in a moonlit junkyard, where a cluster of “Jellicle Cats” have gathered to await the judgment of their elder, Old Deuteronomy (Charles Azulay, looking a lot like Bert Lahr’s Cowardly Lion). At some point, he will decide which of them gets to ascend to a cat paradise known as the Heaviside Layer. In the meantime, they educate us in their Jellicle ways and introduce us to their Jellicle brethren.

These include Cuthbert’s lazy tabby Jennyanydots – lazy, that is, when she isn’t tap-dancing up a storm. And the maddeningly contrary Rum Tum Tugger, played by sexy Martin Samuel like a feline Freddie Mercury. Then there’s the mischievous duo of Mungojerrie (Michael Donald) and Rumpleteazer (Neesa Kenemy), who regale us with their antics in the style of a vaudeville team.

The second act is reserved for the big set pieces: the Italian opera spoof, sung with panache by Cory O’Brien as the ruffian Growltiger; the ode to the indispensable railway cat Skimbleshanks (a frenetically charming Jay T. Schramek); the conjurings of magical Mr. Mistoffelees (a sleekly acrobatic Devon Tullock). And, of course, there’s *Memory*, the show-stopping ballad by Grizabella, the long-faded glamour cat, with lyrics cobbled together from Eliot’s more serious poetry. It’s delivered here by Dionisio with full-on diva brio. Oddly, though, I found her performance less moving than O’Brien’s gentle portrayal of Gus, the palsied old Theatre Cat who recalls his past stage glories.

Director Dave Campbell brings some fresh ideas to his staging, while Berti fondly replicates Gillian Lynne’s original kitty choreography. Tim Webb’s production design envisions the junkyard as an overflowing landfill, complete with lurking backhoe. But to be finicky, not all of his junk items are to cat-scale. And an attempt to jazz up the Heaviside Layer finale with some holographic effects is just confusing and silly.

Lona Davis’s eight-piece band attacks the score like famished strays going after a dish of cream. They remind us of Lloyd Webber’s musical versatility. Dawn Rivard’s shaggy wigs and Lisa Magill’s spandex costumes remind us of something else – all those glam-metal bands that flourished at the same time *Cats* first hit the stage. We really are back in the eighties.