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*Certain conditions apply**Classic musical finds new life in smaller venue and with all-Canadian cast****SUN+ LOGIN**

JOHN COULBOURN, SPECIAL TO THE TORONTO SUN

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**Ma-Anne Dionisio as Grizabella.**

TORONTO - When it launched Toronto's love affair with mega-musicals 28 years ago, it was all about the production — fitting, considering the broad expanse of the stage in the all-but derelict Elgin Theatre.

Now, Cats has come back in a more intimate staging which opened Tuesday at the Panasonic, and this time out, the production takes a back seat to the players — good news for anyone who loves all the elements of musical theatre.

There are a few familiar faces — Marlene Smith returns as part of the producing team and Susan Cuthbert rejoins the ensemble — this intimate new take allows us to become invested in the individual players, revealing an admittedly sketchy storyline that, three decades ago, kept getting tangled up in Trevor Nunn's staging.

And while Cats has certainly used up more than its allotted nine lives on Toronto stages since it first opened, it now boasts an all-Canadian cast, demonstrating the depth of talent unleashed by that first long-ago production.

Principal amongst that talent, strutting its stuff under the direction of Dave Campbell, are performers like Ma-Anne Dionisio (who launched Toronto's Miss Saigon before moving on to Maria in a Stratford's West Side Story) as Grizabella, giving us a saccharine take on Memory, and Charles Azulay (familiar through Toronto productions of Rent, Les Miz and Ain't Misbehavin') elevated to the venerable role of Old Deuteronomy.

And while it is delightful (not to mention impressive) to see Cuthbert high-stepping still, what really delights throughout is the energy and commitment the entire cast brings. Michael Donald and Neesa Kenemy (as Mungojerrie and Rumpoleazer), Cory O'Brien (teaming up with Cuthbert in Gus, the Theatre Cat), Martin Samuel (part Jagger, part



as Rum Tum Tugger) and Jay T. Schramek (electric as the Mr. Mistoffelees) — this 20-plus member company is rich in talent and enthusiasm.

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And while there are moments when Gino Berti's choreographic recreation of Gillian Lynne's Broadway steps feels like an attempt to answer that age old question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, the enforced intimacy of the **STARTING FROM \$0.99/MONTH*** charm of T.S. Eliot's Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats more to the fore, making it

more in tune, if you will, with Andrew Lloyd Webber's ear-worm prone music.

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Technically, however, it is all — you should pardon the expression — a bit of a dog's breakfast, with costumes that already look a little road-weary and a set that forces perspective 'til its eyes cross.

As for the almost religious elevation that used to end the show, it's been replaced by a holographic projection that makes it look for all the world like they've drowned dear old Grizabella, stifling one last rendition of Memory with a burble.

Still, if you're one of those people who like shows where performance gets equal billing with technology, then this show is worth a look.

It's not your parents' Cats — and, frankly, that's the point.

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