

New Toronto Production of *Cats* Meets Expectations

Cats, the long-running Broadway favourite, comes to the Panasonic Theatre intact.

BY NATALIE ZINA WALSCHOTS



Cats Ensemble. Photo by Racheal McCaig.

Panasonic Theatre (651 Yonge Street)

Friday, June 14–Sunday, July 28

\$60–\$110



Cats is a challenging musical to stage for a number of reasons. The narrative is thin and strange; the lyrics are drawn primarily from T.S. Eliot's poetry collection *Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats*, with more borrowed from some other Eliot poems, "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (which original director Trevor Nunn adapted into the song "Memory") and "Moments of Happiness." The result is not so much a story as ideas and character sketches. Old Deuteronomy, patriarch of the Jellicle Cats, calls the creatures together once a year to celebrate, and for one cat to be chosen to ascend to the Heaviside Layer (essentially, to die and be reincarnated). Most of the songs detail the adventures and virtues of a single cat in particular, essentially serving as that cat's audition for the honour of ascension.

The narrative thread is deeply buried, and often departed from, and so most of the musical's strength comes from the spectacle of the staging, the quirkiness and vitality of the different cats' personalities, and the sheer athletic accomplishment that the show demands. Despite being a smaller production, the Nu Musical Theatricals run of *Cats* currently playing at the Panasonic Theatre succeeds in all of these areas. The individual cats are all well rendered and performed, with well-developed personalities and styles (further accentuated with costume and makeup design). Judy Kovacs' Bombalurina possesses a growling, goofy sensuality, Susan Cuthbert brings a maternal fussiness to Jennyanydots and a sweet snarkiness to Jellylorum, and Lily McEventue in the role of Victoria is an incredibly physically arresting performer. Cory O'Brien, who plays the role of the aging theatre cat Asparagus, as well as Growltiger in Gus' memories, puts in a particularly moving performance, and is able to transform fluidly from the aging and palsy-stricken Gus of

Performance dates

June

10 11 12 13 **14 15 16**

17 **18 19 20 21 22 23**

24 **25 26 27 28 29 30**

July

1 **2 3 4 5 6 7**

8 **9 10 11 12 13 14**

15 **16 17 18 19 20 21**

22 **23 24 25 26 27 28**

the present into the swashbuckling and virile actor he'd been in the past. As a company, all the performers meet the incredibly high physical demands of the show, singing while dancing for almost every minute on stage, with grace and humour that makes it look effortless.



Neesa Kenemy as Rumpleteazer and Michael Donald as Mungojerrie. Photo by Racheal McCaig.

Charles Azulay as Old Deuteronomy projects both great power and command while still appearing physically frail, and his voice is at once vast and mellifluous. He often stretches out his arms to make his enveloping costume seem even bigger, standing over the other cats from atop a heap of garbage arranged in a makeshift throne. Ma-Anne Dionisio's limping, ruined but still dignified and grand Grizabella is heartbreaking. Her makeup is done in the style of an Elizabethan courtier, all arched eyebrows, pinched lips and rouge, and it makes her look even more vulnerable. *Cats*, perhaps unintentionally, serves as a parable for how men and women are valued differently as they age: while Gus is treated with respect and care, and Deuteronomy is revered, the former "glamour cat" Grizabella is cast out and reviled, actively rejected by the other cats now that she is no longer lithe and beautiful.



Lily McEvenue as Victoria and Ashley St. John as Sillabub. Photo by Racheal McCaig.

As a smaller incarnation of a large-scale Broadway production, there were some limitations on what could be done with the show's staging. Even so, Nu Musical Theatricals does answer the demands of the more challenging numbers, like "Growltiger's Last Stand" (where the stage must convert into a pirate ship) and "Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat" (where the cats build a makeshift train out of garbage on stage). There were a few technical difficulties when we saw the show, but they were only

minor hitches.

As the [second-longest running show in Broadway history](#), *Cats* has an undeniable appeal. Sacrificing cogent narrative for dynamic performances, poetic lyrics, and vibrant character sketches, the impressionistic and almost dreamlike progression is nonetheless satisfying. The production now running at the Panasonic Theatre does a solid job of capturing all the elements that make this musical entertaining.

CORRECTION: June 14, 2013, 2:50 PM This post originally identified a new Toronto production of *Cats* as a Mirvish venture. In fact, the production company responsible is Nu Musical Theatricals. (The show takes place in a Mirvish-owned venue.)

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While using a Mirvish theatre, this show is not in fact a Mirvish production. A company has chosen to rent a Mirvish theatre and Mirvish is advertising for them. Not that that should influence whether or not to buy a ticket.

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This is NOT a Mirvish production. Other producers are simply presenting it at the Panasonic, which was rented from Mirvish. At least do enough due diligence to read the program.

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SteveKupferman → Orpheus • 7 months ago

Thanks, both of you, for pointing this out. I've added a correction.

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