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Review: CATS

Toronto falls in love with Andrew Lloyd Webber's feline fantasy all over again

By [Victoria Bégin \(/users/victoria-begin\)](#) • June 12, 2013

Presented by Nu Musical Theatricals in association with Classical Theatre Project and Starvox Entertainment
 Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber
 Based on "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" by T.S. Eliot
 Directed by Dave Campbell



(Ma-Anne Dionisio as Grizabella in CATS. Photo by Rachael McCaig.)

In the 1930s, the English author T.S. Eliot wrote a collection of whimsical poems that focused on feline mannerisms and psychology. In the book, human characteristics and personality traits are attributed to various cats, such as Gus the Theatre Cat, and The Rum Tum Tugger, a self-centred and rebellious cat. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was a childhood favourite of composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, inspiring him to turn Eliot's poetry into a 1981 stage production featuring songs and outstanding dance numbers, simply titled **CATS** (<http://www.mirvish.com/shows/cats>) (it remains the second longest-running show in Broadway history). Now, 28 years after it opened in Toronto at the Elgin Theatre, the Tony Award-winning musical is back on stage at the Panasonic Theatre in a new production featuring an all-Canadian cast.

The Jellicle tribe of cats, as explained in the production's first number, "Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats," consists of a very diverse group of characters. In "The Naming of Cats," a song taken word-for-word from Eliot's poem, the audience learns how the cats were named, providing the perfect lead-in for the "Jellicle Ball," which showcases Gino Berti's phenomenal original choreography. At the Jellicle Ball, Munkustrap (Michel Lafleche) tells the audience that Old Deuteronomy (Charles Azulay), the patriarch of the tribe, will choose a cat to be reborn into a new life on Heaviside Layer.

What ensues is a non-linear, exuberant presentation of the different personalities within the Jellicle tribe. Jennyanydots (Susan Cuthbert) is an old Gumbie cat who likes to sit all day, The Rum Tug Tugger (Martin Samuel) is a larger-than-life cat, strutting onto the stage with the energy of a rock star, while Mungojerrie (Michael Donald) and Rumpleteazer (Neesa Kenemy) are mischievous felines who are always causing trouble. Not all of the cats have such enthusiastic introductions, however. The scraggly-haired outcast Grizabella (a powerful Ma-Anne Dionisio), is welcomed by hisses and stares from the other cats. Dionisio's rendition of "Memory," the most famous song from **CATS**, is a major highlight of the production.

Other stand-out moments include the nostalgia of Gus, the Theatre Cat (Cory O'Brien), as well as "The Magical Mr. Mistofflees," a dazzling number by performed by Devon Tullock, whose beautiful acrobatic dancing is a feast for the eyes.

CATS is a musical with an abundant cast, relying heavily on song and choreographed dance to convey personality and emotion. The Panasonic Theatre's average-sized stage often feels crowded, and it seems as though *CATS* would have been better presented in a larger venue. The setting, however, does not take away from the beautiful performances, making this production a must-see for all ages.

CATS runs until July 28 at the Panasonic Theatre. Visit [mirvish.com](http://www.mirvish.com) (<http://www.mirvish.com/shows/cats>) for more information and to buy tickets.

Show Dates: Tue, 2013-06-11 - Sun, 2013-09-01

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