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Review: CATS (Nu Musical Theatricals, Classical Theatre Project & Starvox Entertainment)

By [Wayne Leung](#)



A new Canadian production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's CATS opens at Toronto's Panasonic Theatre

Firstly, full disclosure; I'm not a cat-person. Nor am I a [CATS](#)-person; I've never really understood the appeal of the mega-musical from the '80s or why it was such a hit. Fans of [CATS](#) undoubtedly love it for the campy, fun

quality of the show and those who grew up with the musical will probably want to see it again for the sake of nostalgia but when I heard that a collective of producers was mounting a new Canadian production of [CATS](#) my reaction was somewhere between a yawn and an eye-roll.

Initial gut-reactions aside, I decided to give the show another chance in hopes of finally discovering what fans of the show see in it.

For those of you who aren't familiar, [CATS](#) is literally a show about cats. Based on T.S. Eliot's collection of poems, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, the show takes place over the course of one night in a junkyard where a society of cats known as the Jellicles gathers to decide which one of them will ascend to the Heaviside Layer to be re-born into a new life.

The show is very light on plot and character development. It features a troupe of spandex-clad dancers styled as felines performing a collection of song-and-dance production numbers introducing the audience to about a dozen cat characters and it's all set to Andrew Lloyd Webber's bombastic, synth-laden, '80s-pop score.

The magic of [CATS](#) comes from its quiriness and sense of whimsy. It's a weird, silly piece of pop performance art but it's also one of those shows where you either get it, or you don't. Unfortunately, if you're not drawn into the show, it makes for a long, tedious night and after seeing this new production, I'm still left scratching my ears.

[CATS](#) is a dance-heavy show but the choreography felt very one-note to me; it seems like the same five or six steps are repeated in various combinations and there's a sameness that pervades the dance elements of the show.

The stage of the Panasonic Theatre is on the small side for a production of this scale; the intentionally cluttered junkyard set spills out into the auditorium but it also crowds the performance space to the point where the choreography feels constricted. Watching an ensemble of over sixteen cat-suited dancers flying around that tiny stage almost feels claustrophobic at times.

The cast works very hard to sell the thin material but the performances felt tentative on opening night. The stand-out is Ma-Anne Dionisio in the lead role of Grizabella; her wide, bleary-eyed take on "the glamour cat" drips with pathos and she delivers the show's iconic number *Memory* with all the over-the-top sentimentality the schmaltzy standard demands.

Other than that one song the score of [CATS](#) isn't particularly memorable except perhaps to people who grew up listening to the cast recording. Unfortunately, this production also skimps on the already thin orchestrations; the horns and strings are replaced with synthesizers.

The attempts to update the production design of the show aren't particularly successful. The press materials make a fuss about the use of 3D printers to create set elements but the end-result looks the same as traditionally hand-crafted sets. Most egregiously, what is supposed to be the dramatic climax of the show is diminished by the use of a holographic effect that's poorly-executed, looks cheesy and feels gimmicky.

Essentially, this [CATS](#) is a good production of not-so-good, somewhat dated musical. The quality of the performances and production design is admittedly a lot higher than in some of the embarrassingly cut-rate touring versions of the show that have visited the region in the past couple decades but at the end of the day it's still the same old [CATS](#).

Fans of the show will likely enjoy this production and kids aged eight and up might find it amusing but those of us who never got the show's appeal aren't likely to be won over by this version.

Details:

- [CATS](#) is playing from May 28 – July 28, 2013 at the Panasonic Theatre, 651 Yonge Street, Toronto.
- Shows run Tuesday to Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday at 3:30 p.m.
- Tickets \$40-\$110. Rush Seats \$25, available day-of, 2 hours before the performance, in-person at Panasonic Theatre box office (limit 2 per person, subject to availability)
- Tickets are available in person at the Panasonic Theatre box office, at the T.O. Tix Booth at Yonge-Dundas Square by phone at 416-872-1212 or online at [Mirvish.com](#).

Photo credit:

- Photo by Racheal McCaig

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This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 12th, 2013 at 12:23 pm and is filed under [Toronto Theatre Reviews](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. Both comments and pings are currently closed.



4 Responses to “Review: CATS (Nu Musical Theatricals, Classical Theatre Project & Starvox Entertainment)”

1.  *Bill* Says:

[June 12th, 2013 at 2:34 pm](#)

Fair enough. I'd also be interested to read a review of this production by someone who actually likes the show in general.

2.  *Megan Mooney* Says:

[June 12th, 2013 at 3:29 pm](#)

Hi Bill,

Thanks for taking the time to comment. The initial plan was actually to have Wayne and me attend together (I'm a cat and CATS lover). We would have been able to provide perspectives from both sides.

Unfortunately I ended up being ill and unable to go.



From everything I've heard though, from Wayne and from other folks who saw it, I'm betting if you like CATS, you'll like this. It won't be like when it was at the O'Keefe because it's a completely different venue (and over 30 years later), but it will be a fun.

Cheers!

Megan

Megan Mooney

Founding Editor, Mooney on Theatre

3.  *Linda* Says:

[June 17th, 2013 at 7:12 pm](#)

Unfortunate that you printed a biased review from a non-CATS lover.... The show is FABULOUS! Hopefully readers will not pass on the opportunity to see the show because of this one-sided review. Perhaps when you are feeling better you could see it and give your opinion...

4.  *Morgan* Says:

[June 25th, 2013 at 7:59 am](#)

CATS at the O'Keefe? Maybe a later touring show. The original Toronto production premiered at the Elgin Theatre before it was restored in the mid 80's.

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