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Theater review: *Cats* at Garland Summer Musicals

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Don't miss your chance to see these Jellicles in action!



Courtesy Garland Summer Musicals

Canadian rock band Loverboy reminds us that we are all just "Working for the Weekend." And isn't it the truth? My first thought on Monday mornings typically is, "Only five more days until Friday. I can do this. I can DO this." Weekends are the time to re-connect with friends and family, slough off the stress of the work week, and unknot some of the tension in our shoulders.

Last week I especially looked forward to the coming weekend because I was set to review [Cats](#) at [Garland Summer Musicals](#) (running through July 31st) – and I'd never seen it before. I once

overheard a dear actor friend (who shall remain nameless to protect him from potential feline reprisals) say the following about *Cats*:

"*Cats* is the musical where you can go to the restroom during the second song, head to the concession stand and slowly eat an entire box of popcorn, smoke an full pack of cigarettes at your leisure, reenter the theater after intermission, and still manage to pick up the entire essence of the plot."

I've heard similar things about *Cats* through the years, so seeing it wasn't anywhere near the top of my to-do list. What changed my mind about seeing this show was seeing [*The Music Man*](#) at GSM last month and realizing that production value really could make or break a show. This week my Monday morning water cooler discussion at work will begin with, "What did you do this weekend? Oh, really? Well, I was invited to a Jellicle Ball."

In 1981, the same year Mike Reno and his band mates were working for the weekend, Andrew Lloyd Webber opened *Cats* in London's West End. A 1982 Broadway opening followed where *Cats* ran for 18 years securing its place (at least for now) as the second longest-running Broadway show. Incidentally, Andrew Lloyd Webber also wrote the longest-running Broadway show, *Phantom of the Opera*, which closed in 2006. People can say what they want about Webber, but it's hard to argue with his record-breaking success.

Cats is the story of a band of felines known as the Jellicle Cats, and the audience is brought into the action on the night of the Jellicle Ball. The Jellicles gather with their leader, Old Deuteronomy, and await his announcement as to which cat will journey to the Heavyside Layer (a Heaven-ish place) and become reborn. Prior to The Big Announcement the audience is introduced to many of the individual cats and we learn more about their lives, purposes, and personalities. If a cat has ever owned you, you already know how peculiar and distinctive their temperaments can be. Director Buff Shurr did a marvelous job of identifying and presenting the Jellicles' varied personas. For example...

Munkustrap, played by C. Nicholas Morris, was introduced as the show's narrator and second in command under Old Deuteronomy. Mr. Morris was authoritative but also protective of his charges, and his dancing was beautiful to watch.

Maija Johnson played Jennyanydots, "The Old Gumbie Cat." This bright tabby clad in an orange flapper dress over her cat suit tapped her heart out on the GSM stage. Backed by her army of cockroaches, Ms. Johnson pulled off what was my favorite group dance number of the night. Dare I say she spent at least one of her nine lives entertaining our audience? Ms. Johnson was endearing and likeable and comically gifted. Well done.

Demeter and Bombalurina, played by Christine Phelan and Dance Captain Taylor McKie respectively, were seductive and sexy – the hottest things on four paws! The form-fitting spandex cat suits enhanced their enviable figures, which is a feat given the unforgiving nature of that particular fabric. Ms. Phelan's singing was smooth and effortless, and my eye involuntarily popped back to Ms. McKie whenever she was on stage.

Let's talk about "The Rum Tum Tugger" for a minute. Good grief, People! Daniel Saroni, as the libidinous cross between Tom Jones and Mick Jagger, swaggered onto the stage with his shock of blonde fur and his low-slung belt, and there was no doubt this cat could start engines a-purrin'. I haven't seen this much pelvic rotation since Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean" video. Mr. Saroni commanded the audience's attention with his come-hither performance.



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Kyle Kelesoma played Bustopher Jones, the classy, well-respected "fat cat" who wore spats over his paws. Mr. Kelesoma's portrayal was cheery and magnetic and larger than life. The duo of Mungojerrie (Stephen Raikes) and Rumpleteazer (Lana Whittington) were playful and silly, and their dance number in Act I was perfectly synced. Their double windmill which they reprised during the finale was most impressive.

Ah, Old Deuteronomy. The Jellicle patriarch. Clad in what had to be a murderously hot full-length faux fur jacket as well as a long wig and beard, the leader of the pack at first reminded me of Father Christmas. But then he sang. Shane Strawbridge's bewitching baritone rang out loud and strong, and I was struck by the absolute control he held over his notes. Mr. Strawbridge's dynamic range – from fortissimo piano to pianoforte and everywhere above and in between – was nothing short of majestic. I've heard Mr. Strawbridge sing on other occasions but this was his finest work and the standout vocal performance of this production.

Enter Grizabella, The Glamour Cat. Producer Patty Granville portrayed Grizabella with an honest stoicism relative to one who had left the group but returned to find she was no longer accepted. However, Ms. Granville showed us Grizabella's soft underbelly during "Memory" and she flexed her comedic chops when she appeared on stage and attempted to stretch in preparation to dance. This scene elicited several chuckles from those of us who could sympathize with some of those pains of aging. Sillabub (Krishma Trejo), one of the few Jellicles who remained loyal to Grizabella, sang some of the verses to "Memory" as well. In a cast full of terrific vocalists I was surprised that Ms. Trejo was selected to sing the show's signature song as she stumbled a bit and wasn't as strong as the other lady felines we had the pleasure of hearing.

Hamp Holcomb's turn as Gus, The Theatre Cat, was sensitive and sweet, and his scene with the rest of the cats was one of the show's most memorable. After the show Dr. Holcomb confided to me that Gus was a part he was "finally old enough to play". His passion for the part was palpable and I smiled the too few minutes he was on the stage.

While I'd had my eye on him most of the show we weren't introduced to Skimbleshanks, The Railway Cat, until near the middle of Act 2. Darius-Anthony Robinson's upbeat portrayal of the orange cat with the gargantuan grin was gregarious and outgoing. His vocals were polished and spot-on which I found fascinating given all the leaping and jumping around that was required of him.

The lanky Ivan Jones worked double duty as Coricopat and as Macavity, the enemy of the Jellicle tribe. His dance moves during Macavity's fight scene were well-rehearsed and wonderfully executed. In a show bursting with exciting dancers it's hard to pinpoint "the best." But if I was pinned down and forced to make a choice, La Mar Brown's turn as Mr. Mistoffeles would win. Mr. Brown seemed to be suspended above the stage more than he was actually on the stage – his movements were gravity-defying. His "conjuring turn" was magnificent and the move where he extended his full body from a kneeling position on stage floor up to a standing position on the tips of his toes left me shaking my head in wonder. These two dance moves alone were almost worth the price of admission.

The playbill notes that Paula Morelan's choreography was based on the original choreography by Gillian Lynne. While the dancers in *Cats* were undeniably talented on their own merits, Ms. Morelan (along with Linda K. Leonard for the tap and fight sequences) was tasked with teaching this cast and unifying them into a singular troupe. Ms. Morelan's reputation as one with genuinely high expectations was proved out in this production and I hope she was happy and proud of what she helped to create.



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To say that the set looked like a junkyard might not sound like a compliment but in this case it was. The large proscenium stage at GSM afforded tons of space for Set Designer Kelly Cox to work her magic and she and her staff of designers, carpenters, electricians and dressers did an outstanding, detailed job. I found myself noticing additional aspects of the set each time a new song was introduced. The oversized oven through which many of the cats entered and exited the stage was strikingly executed as was the motorized platform topped with a giant tire that elevated

Old Deuteronomy and Grizabella on her way to the Heavyside Layer. After the platform stopped, Grizabella stepped up onto a higher angled platform shaped and painted to look like a hand. This many large moving parts could've spelled disaster for the technical team but unless I missed something when I was distracted taking in all of the other set pieces, everything worked as it was intended.

Speaking of potential disasters, I noted only two items that kept me from appreciating the show as it was happening. There was some startlingly loud feedback from the sound system during "Jellicle Songs" but it was quickly repaired and the remainder of the show flowed without another sound-related incident. The other item related to the orchestra.

The trumpet was highlighted in a couple of songs in Act 2 and some of the notes were terribly off key. Musical Director/Conductor Mark Mullino and his 13-piece orchestra sounded otherwise amazing as they instrumentally told the Jellicle's story. I can't imagine seeing this show again with only a keyboard, or worse, a soundtrack because the live orchestrations played a big part in making this production so ... well ... BIG.

Michael Robinson and Suzi Shankle were charged with costuming this litter, and the result was absolute excellence. Each costume was individualized and tailored to the cats' personalities right down to the number and color of stripes on the Calicos' flanks. Linda K. Leonard designed the wigs and make up, and paired with the costumes, the effect was well-rounded and superbly complete.

I know productions of this magnitude have to be expensive and the producers likely don't want to pass these expenses down to their patrons by raising ticket prices, but I'm disappointed that GSM only runs their shows for two weekends. I will recommend *Cats* to anyone who will listen but with only three performances remaining, many might not have the opportunity to catch it. Don't miss your chance to see these Jellicles in action!



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