

Cats: The Jellicle Ball

Andrew Lloyd Webber music, based on the poetry of **TS Eliot**
Perelman Performing Arts Center, Off Broadway 13 June – 11 August 2024
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Cats on the catwalk: The all-strutting company; Sydney James Harcourt's swaggering Rum Tum Tugger; the high-kicking Emma Sofia plays Skimbleshanks

If there's any bygone hit musical that's ripe for reinvention, it's Andrew Lloyd Webber's bombastic furball *Cats* – a show with mostly interchangeable characters crooning lite-rock-ish tunes with lyrics drawn from TS Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, his least-remarkable poetry. (To call it mere doggerel would probably prompt cat fanciers to release their claws.) The new immersive production at New York's year-old Perelman Performing Arts Center, a black box space housed in a jewel box-like translucent marble shell overlooking the 9/11 Memorial at the World Trade Center, draws on an entirely new framework that breathes fresh energy, and a human-scaled depth, to the material. The cats are now contestants in a voguing battle of the sort made famous in the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, the TV series *Pose*, or any number of drag competition shows.

Purrers are burning, all right, and the introduction of ballroom and 'house' culture fits more easily than you might imagine. In one of the first numbers, 'The Naming of Cats,' MC Munkustrap (Dudney Joseph Jr) informs us that a cat has three names – one for daily use, one for fancier occasions to 'cherish his pride,' and a third secret 'ineffable' name he keeps to himself. Is there any more apt explanation of how queer people, especially those engaged in drag performance, see themselves – as forgers of their own identities, with the ability to shift between chosen monikers, personas and even genders?

Reconceiving the show's Jellicle Ball solves other problems too – including why all these disparate cats are gathered in one place. (The opening number's call for the cats to 'come out' for the ball takes on another LGBTQ-friendly layer of meaning as well.) Each number becomes part of a contest for individuals to strut and flex

and grind to Arturo Lyons and Omari Wiles's bouncy, ballroom-ready choreography. They perform on an elevated catwalk, strikingly designed by Rachel Hauck and lit by Adam Honoré, with the audience seated on three sides – who are often craning to see where performers are vamping at any given moment.

“The introduction of ballroom culture fits more easily than you might imagine”

The ball gives a throughline to ALW's eclectic score, which remains recognisable despite the addition of some rapped lyrics and synthed-up house beats from the unseen nine-person band. Sydney James Harcourt's Rum Tum Tugger, a playah with a toned body and a heavenly falsetto, swaggers away with the 'pretty boy' trophy, while Bustopher Jones (Garnet Williams rather than Nora Schell at my performance)

shows off her curvy charms in the 'body' competition. The duet for Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer (Jonathan Burke, Dava Huesca) now falls into the 'tag team purrformance' section – though the two are upstaged by the lithe and acrobatic duo of Baby (as Victoria) and the ballet-trained Primo (Tumblebrutus).

Other standouts include high-kicking Emma Sofia as Skimbleshanks, and Robert 'Silk' Mason, whose Mistoffelees is a magically limber human bungee.

Queen Jean's costumes and Nikiya Mathis's hair and wig design serve memorable looks that would make RuPaul jealous – particularly the velvety royal purple suit and ombré lion's mane for André De Shields's Old Deuteronomy. Directors Zhailon Levingston and Bill Rauch also amp up the pathos for the former glamour cat Grizabella by casting ballroom legend and Maison Margiela founder 'Tempress' Chasity Moore. She brings a regal presence to the role, as well as a gravelly alto that suggests the character's overplayed ballad, 'Memory,' might just have a tenth life in it after all. (It's a pity that the lyrics frequently get lost in Kai Harada's overamplified sound design – or perhaps the acoustics of PAC's barn-like space are to blame.)

The remix efforts only go so far. The sudden appearance of sirens and NYPD officers around cat burglar Macavity (Antwain Hopper) is an unnecessary stab at political relevance that's all-too-quickly resolved. And *Cats* itself remains a lightweight bit of fluff, with most of the large cast an indistinguishable clutter. But there's no denying how much fun this production is – and how even a flawed show can find a path to rebirth via Eliot's vaunted Heaviside Layer.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast André De Shields, 'Tempress' Chasity Moore, Sydney James Harcourt, Robert 'Silk' Mason, Baby, Primo, Antwain Hopper, Dudney Joseph Jr, Jonathan Burke, Emma Sofia *et al*

Direction Zhailon Levingston, Bill Rauch

Choreography Arturo Lyons, Omari Wiles

Music Direction, supervision William Waldrop

Set Rachel Hauck

Lighting Adam Honoré

Sound Kai Harada

Costumes Queen Jean

Hair, wigs Nikiya Mathis

Make-up Rania Zohny

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman