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Cats



Some versions of "Cats" inspire childish laughter. Some versions cause riots of festive happenings. Some promote general respect for all feline kind. Others encourage more audience participation than most. Musical Theatre West's production of "Cats," directed by Dennis Castellano, can best be described by two rather paradoxical words: fast, and reflective.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Cats" is a world-wide phenomenon. It all came about from those lines of T. S. Eliot: "Midnight shakes the memory, as a madman shakes a dead geranium," from "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Webber and Trevor Nunn converted that poetry, along with Eliot's "Four Quartets," into a musical that is on-the-surface about different personalities of cats who gather once a year at the Jellicle ball to select one lucky feline to be ascended to the Heaviside layer.

This production is reflective from the very start. In the "Naming of Cats," the music stops, and voices start a repetitive chant. In this case, time slows down when we get to the part about how there's a name left over that will never be guessed (not Munkustrap, Quaxo, Coricopat, Bombalurina, or Jellylorum), "the name that no human research can discover, but that he himself knows and will never confess." The actors seem to slow down in their speech as well, letting us digest this point better than other productions. Whereas most of the time, we just zoom forward past these non-melodic elements, I find myself being quite attentive.

More reflective moments occur during the singing of the act two-opening "Moments of Happiness," and "Memory," mostly by Grizabella (Kelli Provart) the glamour cat. It starts with the proclamation that "we had the experience but missed the meaning," a point rather well avoided in a musical about cats supposedly having fun. Perhaps more fundamental is the lyric: "And approach to the meaning restores the experience, in a different form, beyond any meaning, we can assign to happiness." That experience not of one life, but of many generations, is encapsulated in the life of Grizabella, who steps in to sing of her past life.

Provart does a great job of saving her voice until the final line, but that also introduces a more thoughtful dimension of the first few paragraphs, as we listen intently and wait patiently for the inevitable climax. Evoking Eliot's poem, the lyrics tells of "memory all alone in the moonlight" and the old days when she was beautiful. Perhaps the most reflective moment comes when Provart sings: "tonight will be a memory too, and a new day will begin," predicting the inevitable ascend to the Heaviside layer. The "touch me" gesture of Grizabella is unusually long in this production, especially given the speed of the musical so far. "If you touch me, you'll understand what happiness is," she sings, but at this time, she's still not anywhere close to any cat, and the hands-up-to-her-back gesture seems a bit awkward in its duration.

Perhaps the exception to the reflective mood is Gus (Eddie Korbich) the theatre cat. Korbich does a

great time incorporating Bustopher Jones, Gus, and Gus's alter ego pirate performer into the musical, but his Gus is a bit less endearing than other Guses I've seen. His voice is not coarse enough at times for this role, and his palsy shake is less believable. The scene where he bemoans "these modern productions" that do not equal "the moment of mystery when [he] made history as Fireforefiddle, the Fiend of the Fell" goes by as fast as the rest of the musical, and misses that "moment of mystery" idea put forth in the song. However, Korbich is dynamic and strong as the original Asparagus who played in the theatre with a soprano cat and some ancient pirate-seizing pharaohs. He fixes his eyepatch, screams at the audience, and vies of attention. Korbich is better as the entertainer rather as the reflective old theatre cat.

There were some great acrobatics in this production, including Macavity (Chris Holly) leaping over some cats, Mistoffelees (Joseph Corella) spinning himself forever, and Rum Tum Tugger (Danny Gurwin) leaping into the audience. But in general, even those moments seem to past quickly. The only scene where I remember time having stood still for a long while was when the lights shut off during Macavity's entrance, when the use of spotlights and a cat hovering near it made the stage surreal. The subsequent appearance of Mistoffelees in lights was spectacular, and made those moments of reflection worthwhile.

"Cats" is performed at the Carpenter Performing Arts center (<http://www.musical.org>) in Long Beach, California, until 27th of February, 2011.