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THE NATIONAL TOUR OF CATS - PHOTO © 2008, G CREATIVE

CATS

ALSO PLAYING... **EVENTIDE • LEGALLY BLONDE • WHEN TANG MET LAIKA**

Here come the Cats!



In case you were wondering where that loud, collective *MEEE-OOOO-OWWWW* you just heard came from, it came from the direction of The Buell Theatre, where the *Cats* cast (say that three times, fast) has been flexing and arching for another run in Denver. One of the most popular shows in the history of the theatre, Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, based on T.S. Eliot's delectable *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, tells the musical story of the Jellicle cats who, as darlings of the dumpsters and allies of the alleys, know a kitty by its stripes and the grave implications of the number nine.

Besides which, they can caterwaul, sing and dance.

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None of this would have come as less than a very major surprise to Thomas Stearns ("T.S.") Eliot—were he still alive. Most of his work ("The Waste Land," "The Love Song J. Arthur Prufrock," etc.) was written in a much more serious vein than this whimsical collection of verse about our feline friends, how they think, how they act and how they practice to deceive...

Considering its age—*Old Possum's Book* was first published in 1939—it's a testament to its timeless sense of humor that the book has survived all these years outside the nursery or the hallowed halls of the kindergarten. The original publication of Eliot's book

had cover illustrations by Eliot himself, but in 1940 was illustrated more fully by author/cartoonist Nicolas Bentley, the godson of another famous British author, G. K. Chesterton (to whom Bentley sold his first drawing). A later edition published in 1982 featured illustrations by that incomparable master of the macabre, Edward Gorey, which shows, if nothing else, how vivid our interest in this book remains.

Not only has *Old Possum's Book* survived, but it may well prove deathless in its most recent, bouncing, muscular musical form. (Who said cats have nine lives? And why just nine?)

Okay, so *Cats* has been criticized for its almost total absence of plot. That has not stopped the show from having tremendous success with each new generation. Besides, if you look over Lloyd Webber's string of shows, you will find that, with the notable exception of *The Phantom of the Opera*, it is precisely the shows that have child appeal (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Starlight Express* and *Cats*) that also have the widest audience appeal. A good thing, all in all, as children grow up, have children of their own and the audiences for these shows replenish themselves with regularity.

Cats does have a slender thread of events that strings its athletic musical numbers together, and that was achieved (as much of Lloyd Webber's *oeuvre* often is) by skillfully plundering other Eliot poems and works.

The Jellicles have come together at a junkyard for their annual Jellicle Ball, when they will make the annual Jellicle Choice and announce which cat will be singled out to be reborn that year. Each cat auditions with a different song and/or dance number for the honor of being resurrected.

Minor complications involve the abduction of the Jellicle patriarch, Old Deuteronomy, before a cat is chosen. The chosen feline eventually turns out to be Grizabella,

famously known—and envied—among cat populations as "the Glamour Cat" (whose now-faded charms do not prevent her from singing the show's best-known song, "Memory").

Grizabella is a testament to Lloyd Webber's cut-and-paste approach to putting a show together. Her character is nowhere to be found in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. She's pure invention, down to her name which is probably derived from the word "grizzle," meaning "grey" or "disheveled," and "bella," which means "beauty."

The lyrics of the show's signature song, "Memory," are based on two Eliot poems—"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Preludes"—neither of which is part of *Old Possum's Book* either. But the song itself is a hit, a moving and even haunting, composition.

It is worth noting that *Cats* was never beloved of critics who by and large find it less than the sum of its promise. But its popularity remains unchallenged thanks to its overwhelming family appeal—an appeal that is worldwide, since the show by now has been translated into more than 20 languages and has been performed, well, pretty much everywhere. ■

Suzanne Blandon, Sylvie Drake and Teri Downard contributed to this article.

CATS

Jan 13 - 17 • Buell Theatre

American sign language interpreted and audio described performance • Jan 17, 2pm

Tickets: **303.893.4100**. Outside the Denver calling area: 800.641.1222. TTY: 303.893.9582. Also available through TicketsWest at all King Soopers or buy & print online at **www.denvercenter.org**.