

REVIEW: 'Cats' at the Paramount Theatre

★★★



Liz Lauren



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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When Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Cats" first opened in London in 1981, long before the kitty takeover of social media, I recall my teenage self marveling over a line in the newspaper advertisements of the time. "No admission," the ads would say, "while the auditorium is in motion."

That was one brilliant piece of marketing by producer Cameron Mackintosh, et al: What appeared to be an admonition against latecomers was, in fact, a promise of great spectacle on the level of a thrill ride at the seaside. Thus a musical based on a picaresque book of poems by a poet from an old Yankee family in Missouri was sold — and sold, and sold again — all across the globe as a show full of catchy tunes, power ballads, and actors with whiskers.

With cats now all over YouTube, research for the show has never been easier. Back in 1981, an actor cast in "Cats" actually had to read the poems — "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" by T.S. Eliot — and stare at the real things, which no doubt greatly irritated the real things. Fair enough. If any economically underorganized group deserves a cut of the new economy, it is that of the felines among us. Not that I find myself dripping with sympathy. I'm a dog guy, and one cat, Tiberius, which well knew that truth, treated me and my stuff with such contempt for so long, I see the lack of cat equity in social media, the denial of the due rights of prime content providers, as payback.

Not that I can't enjoy "Cats" on the stage — it is a job requirement of mine to listen to "Magical Mr. Mistoffelees" from time to time. No problem, it's a fun tune.

If you attend the latest "Cats" at the [Paramount Theatre](#) in Aurora, which arrives not long after the closing of "Cats" at the [Marriott Theatre](#), you will get to experience (and your kids or grandkids can experience) a genuinely spectacular show, very much in the 1981 gestalt. For good or ill. But hey, it's "Cats." What were you expecting? The minimalism of [Taylor Swift](#)?

You also get to hear the original full orchestrations. Now, that might sound like a weird thing to highlight — you generally read lines praising big orchestras in reviews of light opera or lush, string-dependent classics like "Carousel." But after years of hearing "Cats" scored with two computers, it really is exceptionally refreshing to hear the real flute, piccolo trumpet and English horn again. I'd forgotten some of the finesse in the original Andrew Lloyd Webber score. I know, you're scoffing at the very notion. But it's true, in a youthful, playful, pre-digital kind of way.

Director Shawn Stengel's production — which features a truly massive, eye-poppingly huge set from Kevin Depinet, replete with a climax that sends Grizabella up to the heavens in a kind of sewage-pipe spaceship, with full-thrusting jets — is packed with choreography from Harrison McEldowney, who did beautiful work with Lloyd Webber's music at the Marriott a couple of years ago and does so again with this most famous part of the Sir Andrew oeuvre.

McEldowney treats the material as, in essence, a contemporary pop ballet, with elastic cords on which a cat can swing and some truly spectacular numbers that create a very unified internal logic. I've seen productions in which the characters within the material feel more fully realized, personal and memorable, but I truly can't remember a "Cats" with so engaged, fluid and athletic an ensemble.

The show also is quite well sung: George Keating gives it up, movingly, as Bustopher Jones (long my favorite cat), Rhett Guter (as Munkustrap) has plenty of pop, and, in the lead role of Grizabella, the still-youthful Lauren Villegas looks appropriately grizzled — and we're all glad she's aboard that death-cheating craft, rising up the heavens where a kitty may play in eternity, sans cameras to bring down their dignity.

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When: Through Oct. 12

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena, Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$41-\$54 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

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