

NATIONAL OPERATIC AND DRAMATIC ASSOCIATION LONDON REGION

Society ; **Starmaker**
Production ; **"CATS"**
Date ; **Thursday 10th October 2013**
Venue ; **Wilde Theatre, Bracknell**
Report by ; **Henry Hawes –NODA Representative – Area 13**

In the early 1980's there were no fewer than three new Lloyd Webber shows given their premiers, and the first and the most vastly successful one was "*Cats*", a dance musical based on T.S. Eliot's cat poems. If the musical theatre world had thought that the folk who created "*A Chorus Line*" were a touch crazy in their choice of a subject what did it think of this one – a show full of dancing, poetry singing cats cavorting about in charismatic and energetic dance routines, all presented in a rubbish tip. Its history now and "*Cats*" has become one of the most successful shows of all time. This is a sung through show using the poems of T.S.Eliot but it was the dance element what made "*Cats*" a most unusual show as the entire show is choreographed. Like the previous Lloyd Webber shows, "*Cats*" had its hit parade song. That hit however was not one of Eliot's poems, but a number put together from fragments and ideas taken from the poet's work and attached to a Lloyd Webber tune to make a solo for the despised 'Grizabella,' "*Memory*".

On Thursday 10th October, I was privileged to attend the Wilde Theatre, Bracknell to revue "*Cats*" presented by a group of 8 to 18 year old members of the 'Starmaker' company who are celebrating 25 years with three shows, starting with 'Les Miserbles', followed by this production and finishing with 'Miss Saigon', all recently released as School Editions for amateurs. I was fortunate in reviewing 'Les Miserables' and was most impressed with the production, so I was looking forward to this one. I was not disappointed. This was one of the finest amateur shows I have ever seen, the singing and the choreography was mind-blowing. I was fortunate in seeing the original production in the West End with the likes of Bonnie Langford, Brian Blessed and Elaine Page, but I can honestly say that this production surpassed the professional production. The singing and the dance routines were quite incredible and as such there is nothing I can criticize, or even suggest how it could have been done better. The casting of the 29 principals was faultless and the 30 in the ensemble entered fully into the performance with all performers presenting an array of feline movements making this a once in a lifetime experience.

Josh Gwilt – (Rum Tum Tigger) – From 'Fagin' in "Oliver", the 'Major General' in "Pirates" to 'Rum Tum Tigger in 'Cats', Three totally different characters but one which **Josh** had no problems with being a bit of a playboy with an eye for the ladies. His singing of the number "*The Rum Tum Tigger*" was well presented which entertained the ladies as well as the audience.

John Ralls – (Old Deuteronomy) – For a young person to play an aged person, particularly a cat is not the easiest, but **John** excelled. His movements and characterisation was spot-on as the rheumy old cat.

Matt Harcourt – (Munkustrap) – From Valjean in ‘Les Miserables’ for which he won an award, to a dancing cat, what a challenge, but one in which **Matt** rose too magnificently. His feline dance movements were well presented which together with his exceptional singing voice which came to the fore in some six numbers, made this quite an exceptional performance, this young man should go far...

Rachel Warrick-Clarke – (Grizabella) – Taking on the role made famous by Elaine Paige is a challenge in itself, being the glamour cat who left the tribe and who now wants to come back being old and weary, but no one will accept her. Eventually ‘Victoria’ manages to get the tribe to accept her and she is then chosen by ‘Old Deuteronomy’ to journey to the Heaviside Layer. I would imagine that a number of tears were shed by the audience at **Rachel’s** portrayal. Her movements and acting was a joy to watch and her singing of that number “*Memory*” was a show-stopper bringing out all the pathos in the number, all beautifully sung, comparable, if not better than Elaine Paige, all topped by being flown at the end to the Heaviside Layer, i.e. the ceiling of the theatre – A terrific performance.

Ashley Wilson – (Mungojerrie)

Sophie Harvey – (Rumpleteazer) – This duo worked well together as the small time crooks and who are always causing trouble. Their musical number “*Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer*” was well sung.

David Wallace – (Gus) – The elderly theatre cat was well played by **David** whose movement and posture ensured you were watching an old cat in the twilight of his years – A well played character.

Phoebe Jackson – (Bombalurina)

Charlotte Tait – (Demeter) – These two worked well together with **Phoebe** as ‘Bombalurina’ portraying a flirt and **Charlotte** as her friend ‘Demeter’. Both played their parts very well and vocally came across in their musical number – Well done.

Nathan Isaac – (Bustopher Jones) – As the typical ‘cat about town’ who likes the finer things in life, particularly where food is concerned, **Nathan**, his movements and portrayal could not have been bettered – A good characterisation.

Lee Simmonds – (Mr Mistoffelees) – This was the cat who had magical powers and in his black cat suit **Lee** gave a superlative performance. Movement and vocal wise, it couldn’t be bettered and certainly had an impact.

Emily Grigoleit – (Griddlebone) – **Emily** was delightful as ‘Griddlebone’ the Persian cat. Her feline movements were perfect and she lent her excellent singing voice to the various numbers – Well done.

Jacob Smith – (Growltiger) – This character was presented as a theatrical member of the cat family and **Jacob** gave it just the right interpretation – Well done.

Hollie Watts – (Jellylorum)

Lili Reakes – (Jennyanydots) – These two generally worked together with **Hollie** as ‘Jellylorum’ looking after the younger kittens with the aid of **Lili** playing the elderly character of ‘Jennyanydots’ – These were two well constructed characters.

Noella Doran – (Jemima) – As one of the kittens **Noella** was great helping out ‘Grizabella’ through her problems. Her vocal quality was also excellent – A superb performance.

Joe Wilson – (Macavity) – **Joe** excelled in this role as ‘Macavity’ and one which he obviously enjoyed being the ‘villain’ of the show and the master criminal popping up at various times during the performance – Well done

Matt Snapes – (Skimbleshanks) – **Matt** made this character into a real railway cat and I loved your name ‘Skimbleshanks’ this was another super presentation.

Naomi Doran – (Victoria the White Cat) – Dressed in a pure white costume **Naomi** as ‘Victoria’ had tremendous impact with her solo dance at the ‘Jellicle Ball’. It was beautifully danced in true balletic style – Congratulations.

Jack Jennings – (Alonzo)

Ben Lewis – (Pouncival & Bill Bailey)

Austen Grigoleit – (Carbucketty)

Ben Tait – (Concopat)

Freya Foster – (Electra)

Polly Coombes – (Etcetera)

Nathan Cross – (Rumpas Cat)

Henry Bearman – (Tumblebrutus)

Zoe Longhurst – (Cassandra / Siamese)

Kia Lawrence – (Tantomile) – This group of minor characters played all their respective parts to perfection entering fully into this amazing production. Movements, characterisations were all well presented. This group also entered into the various choreographic routines ensuring that the stage was filled with dancing ‘cats’ - Congratulations.

Ensemble – This ensemble of 30 performers were terrific, they slithered and romped about the stage in a good representation of cats, joining in all the action and in particular the dancing which was athletic and precise. Apart from that they sang the many musical numbers precisely and with a good tonal quality, in fact some of the best singing I have heard. The exits and entrances through the rubbish could not be faulted – Stand up and take a bow, you deserve it.

Dave Savage – (DIRECTOR)

Emily Smith - (ASSISTANT DIRECTOR) – This is not an easy show to produce, it requires four exceptional elements, 1. A Director and Assistant who know their business. 2. A Musical Director who is at the top of his game, 3. A Choreographer and Assistant who can produce choreography and the many elements of dance to the highest order and a cast who believe in what they are performing and this is what I saw on the night of my visit. This was the finest amateur production in my many years as NODA Rep' and as stated previously this was as good if not better than a professional performance and when you take into account that the performers were aged between 8 and 18 years then it is even more exceptional. **Dave Savage** had drawn together all these elements presenting a show which I could find no fault with or suggest how it could have been done better – Many Congratulations and I look forward to your presentation of “Miss Saigon” with anticipation.

Al Hodgson – (MUSICAL DIRECTOR) – This was a good orchestra with a good balance of musicians who played the music most sensitively, blending well with the performers achieving an excellent balance. **Al Hodgson** had obviously worked hard with the performers on the difficult music with the principals giving a good account of themselves exhibiting excellent voices and together with the fine balance of the ensemble group ensured that musically this was a brilliant show – Congratulations.

Michelle Legg – (CHOREOGRAPHER)

Gabi Harris - (ASSISTANT CHOREOGRAPHER) – This show must have good choreography but on this occasion we had exceptional choreography devised by **Michelle** and her assistant **Gabi**. I knew I was in for a feast of dancing when I happened to visit a rehearsal some 10 weeks before the show, and I was blown away then. I don't think I have ever seen such athletic, precise and descriptive dancing for a long time, and which covered every discipline. It was absolutely brilliant – Congratulations.

Stage Managers & Crew – This was a well managed stage under the supervision of **Alistair McKay and his Team**, which is essential with such a large cast, but all the scenes were well managed with no problems which resulted in a very smooth operation. I was particularly impressed with the flying sequence at the end which was well executed and dramatic – Well done

Effects – Designed by **Alan Smith** was most effective in particular the pyrotechnics which certainly added another dimension to the performance coming in on cue.

Lighting Design & Operation – It is essential that this show has atmospheric lighting and the design by **Becca Simons** could not be faulted with each scene having its own lighting plot, the lighting on the back cloth together with the star curtain was most effective as was the coloured gobo's projected on the stage floor, I was particularly impressed with the many cats eye's being projected onto the backcloth during the overture and which gained the audience's attention from the outset. The control by **Sam Tait** was precise with no late cues and the lighting crew of **Kim Hollamby, Justin Simons, Sam Tait, Matt Tibbles** and **Louis Martin** had ensured the lamps were well positioned to ensure the greatest effect – Congratulations.

Spotlight Operation – The operation of the spotlights by **Erik Haxhilari** and **Louis Martin** was well controlled, being precise and well focussed.

Sound Design & Operation – I could not fault the sound design and operation, designed by **Brett Smith** and **Tom Horrox**. This must have been an enormous challenge with the large amount of personal mikes being used, but not once did I hear a late cue and the overall balance was excellent. How good it is to find somebody who knows how to run a sound desk in this area, although I would imagine you were exhausted at the end of the performance.

Properties – All the properties had been well sourced by **Jenny Green** they looked authentic and fitted the various actions on stage.

Set – Designed and built by **Alan Smith** was certainly atmospheric, particularly when lit. It depicted well a rubbish tip which took into account all the Health and Safety features. The design allowed the cats to climb over it with various entrance and exit gaps. It also allowed sufficient room for the many and energetic dance routines – A well constructed set which is a strong contender for the NODA Scenic Award.

Costumes – The costumes were made in-house, designed by **Glynis Smith** and **Cathy Savage**, and what a set of costumes. They fitted every member of the cast, all with the typical cat markings with every one depicting the various characters of which there were many. To make this number of costumes was a terrific commitment but the end result was fantastic – Congratulations.

Make-up – The make-up team under **Jo Stringer** did a fantastic job of the feline make-up for the cast of 59, an enormous challenge but one that helped to make the show the success it was. This make-up was enhanced by the wigs for the cast, supplied by **Fun & Frolic** – Congratulations.

Programme Design- What a super programme by **Gemma Wilson**, it had been produced in a different format on black paper with printing that stood out. It contained a wealth of information, well laid out with good cast biographies and clear, sharp photographs, all presented in a simple, but eye-catching cover. May I thank you for the coverage you gave to NODA and the photographs of the presentations – I strongly suggest that this programme is entered in the NODA Programme Competition (If you have any left!).

Front of House – As usual, friendly and helpful Front of House staff.

Thank you for inviting me to review “Cats”, this was an exceptional performance and one which will last with me for many years – Many congratulations to all concerned and I look forward in anticipation to your “Miss Saigon”, you will have to go a long way to top this one

Henry

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