

## Litter Kitties: "Cats" at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 11 April 2006 18:00

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The Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's latest production is, nearly element for element, an awesome technical achievement. The set, conceived by Dawn Robyn Petrlik, is a glorious mess of artful decay, Ron Breedlove's lighting effects are mostly extraordinary, and the sound quality is superb. (Dave Vanderkamp's continually outstanding sound design is overdue for mention.)

But for a musical about – and titled – *Cats*, Circa '21's current production is less playful than strenuous. It's big, and it's adventurous, and you can sense the hard work that's going into it. And that's the trouble; with precious few exceptions, the show feels like nothing *but* work. You can appreciate it tremendously without ever really *liking* it.

Most of this *Cats*' problems, though, stem directly from the musical itself. Of course, Andrew Lloyd Webber's adaptation of T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is, thanks to its staggering popular success, legendary, and God knows it has its fan base. But there's a reason that *Cats* is also a musical-theatre punchline, and not just to aesthetes and snobs – it's a show about *cats*, for heaven's sake, and as such, it takes itself *way* too seriously. (As *Cats*' Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer would croon: "And there's nothing at all to be done about that.")

Webber's opus isn't completely humorless, but it may as well be. *Cats*' tinny excuse for a plot is treated by the characters – and by the *composer*

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– with such undue pomposity that it becomes all too easy to start laughing at the show, and Webber's musical bombast overtakes the simplicity of Eliot's poetry.

*Cats*

is a musical revue that keeps refusing to  
*be*

a musical revue. (Circa '21's

*Cats*

program features two pages of explanation about the show's story and the characters, which proves absolutely necessary, as you'll barely glean that information within the production itself.)

The composer's grandiosity might have been ignored if *Cats* had some edge or mystery, but there's no dramatic tension between the characters – like a Greek chorus, all the cats share the same feelings for whichever cat they're presently singing about – and the storyline isn't exactly spellbinding. (You've heard "Memory" ... which character do

*you*

think will arise to the Heavyside Layer?) And although Circa's on-stage band plays with supreme skill, Webber's score is maddeningly uneven.

*Cats*

certainly features its share of terrific Songs That Everyone Knows, but the songs you  
*don't*

know? Dull as hell.

So, for the most part, are the characters, but I consider that a fault of the makeup. Upon first glance, the cast's kabuki-like cat features are impressive. Yet the whiteface-with-whiskers robs the performers of their features and, as a result, their personalities; *Cats'* performers have little chance to emerge as

*in*

*dividuals*

. The makeup and costumes in Circa '21's production are detailed enough so you can identify which cat is which, but more often than not, the performers

*underneath*

the makeup and costumes get lost. (The talented director/choreographer Stephanie Lang occasionally makes up for this deficiency with mischievous staging, as in the show's prelude, with the felines slinking through the darkened theatre sporting glow-in-the-dark eyes.)

*Cats*

is the sort of show in which only a remarkable performance will stand out as a  
*good*

one, and this production is sadly light on remarkable performances.

There are a few, though, and this is not to be undervalued – an actor who can pop in *Cats* can pop in

*anything*

. B.J. Scahill is an enjoyably boisterous presence in three roles, and Andrea Moore's Jennyanydots, with her bustling giddiness and infectious smile, leads the other cats in a rousing tap number. Erin Churchill (nee Dickerson), as Demeter, attacks her role with so much vocal and physical gusto that the thought of 17 performers matching her energy level is almost

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frightening. And although Kate Riley doesn't quite suggest the ravages of age Grizabella has endured – Riley's movements have a youthful fluidity – her performance of "Memory," delivered with startling emotion, is an exquisite, haunting show-stopper.

Yet these standout performers are, unfortunately, exceptions. While the production's dancing is often splendid (Jamie Grayson and Trevor Downey are particularly noteworthy), the athleticism of the routines, inevitably, proves exhausting – you don't see the sweat, but you feel the exertion – and the dancers' proficiency doesn't overcome the banality of their roles, or of the *show*

. Cats, we are told, have nine lives.

*Cats*

barely has

*one*

.

If you get on the musical's wavelength – and there's no denying it does have some transporting moments – you could easily have a ball; after the opening-night performance, friends raved about the production they had just seen, and the standing ovation *Cats* received seemed genuine. But how many of these people were standing out of legitimate enthusiasm and how many out of *duty*,

knowing that these performers were working so hard – and knowing that

*Cats*

itself is so revered – that

*not*

standing would be impolite? (Along with the post-show plaudits, I heard several pans, and without meaning to incriminate him, my father called the show

*The Emperor's New Clothes*

– a succinct, appropriate analysis.) Circa '21's

*Cats*

is bold, and impressive, and more than a little tedious – the perfect show for audiences who aren't all that interested in

*humans*

.

*For tickets, call (309) 786-7733 extension 2.*