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MUSICAL THEATRE REVIEW

Temple Theatre Presents *Cats*

By [Viki Atkinson](#)

April 24, 2014 - Sanford, NC:

[Temple Theatre](#) closes its 2013-14 season with a production of the musical *Cats*. Originally produced in London and later transferred to Broadway, *Cats* is based on T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. As such, it has no real "plot" (other than the very thin one of the annual gathering of the Jellicle cats to choose the cat who will ascend to the Heavside layer and be reborn to a new life), but it is mostly a loosely connected series of stories and vignettes drawn from the poems-turned-songs. While the Temple production had its high spots and featured some talented performers, the show overall proved a bit too ambitious for this small regional theatre.

Director/choreographer Peggy Taphorn has assembled a cast of widely varying experience and abilities, and this showed throughout the performance. Cast members dropped in and out of character and focus, and group vocals, although the voices themselves were impressive, were often less than crisp. Dance abilities among the cast were mixed as well, which, considering that *Cats* is widely viewed as being a "dancer's show," was disappointing. As a former dancer who was wowed by the original Broadway production back in the early 80s, I have high expectations when it comes to *Cats*, and the Temple Theatre production didn't meet them.

There were, however, individual standouts in the cast. Timothe Bittle had the voice and presence for Munkustrap, and he managed the choreography well, even though he isn't a dancer *per se*. Mimi Presley (Jellylorum) has a lovely voice; her rendition of "Gus: the Theatre Cat" was touching and sweet. Alexander Copas (Rum Tum Tugger) and Patrick Holt (Skimbleshanks) delivered good vocals and characters and were two of the most consistent performers in the cast. Chuckie Dixon and Mallory Cunningham (Mungojerrie and Rumpleteaser, respectively) did a great job in their fun duet.

Megan Rozak (Grizzabella, the Glamour Cat) nailed the show's signature song, "Memory." Her vocal delivery was strong and full of emotion, and she never fell into the trap of oversinging. Arnez Ellis (Old Deuteronomy) possesses a rich, baritone voice and sang all of his songs beautifully. He didn't, however, come off as *old*; a bit more gravitas was needed.

Anne Marie Behr (Demeter) and Sunny Smith (Bombalurina) brought clear, powerful vocals to "Macavity." Smith was the better dancer of the two, however; indeed, she was probably the best dancer in the cast. Jesse Kramer obviously had the dance training to carry off Mr. Mistoffeles, but the choreography for his solo was disjointed and even awkward at times. He often had to stop and adjust for the next step because it didn't flow kinesthetically from the one that preceded it.

In fact, the choreography for the entire show was a mixed bag. It switched back and forth between awkwardly arranged sequences that clearly didn't feel natural to the performers and sequences that Taphorn had "borrowed" from Gillian Lynne's choreography for the original *Cats* production. The performers' widely ranging dance training/abilities also affected the effectiveness of the show's dance sections. I was also disappointed in the quality of the performers' cat-like movements. In the Broadway production, the performers embodied "cat-ness" in every step, every look. The slightest turn of the head or lift of a shoulder screamed "cat." Certain of the performers in the Temple production came close, but even they weren't consistent.

Musically, the production relied on a "virtual orchestra," which actually sounded surprisingly good. Unfortunately, there were times when it was evident that the cast couldn't hear the music well and were off the tempo. Some experimenting with the speaker system would probably help.

Most productions of *Cats* are set in a junkyard. However, the Temple Theatre production was set in an old theater, with discarded marquee signs and set pieces placed here and there about the stage. I think the idea worked well, and set designer Steven Harrington did an excellent job of bringing the old theater to life. David Castaneda's lighting lent an appropriately mystical, magical mood to the production.

EVENT INFORMATION

Sanford -- (Thu., Apr. 24, 2014 - Sun., May. 11, 2014)

[Temple Theatre: Cats](#)

\$23 (Call for special rates) -- Temple

Theatre , Administrative Office:

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<http://www.templeshows.com/>

Ms. Taphorn designed the costumes for the production, a huge undertaking even if you aren't directing and choreographing the show. The makeup and wigs were very well done. However, while the costumes aspired to the level of those in the original Broadway and London productions, they never quite got there.

The production as a whole never quite got there, either. Rather than achieving the level of a good regional theatre production, it came off instead as a very good community theatre production. That being said, the opening night audience was enthusiastic and gave the performance a rousing ovation.

Cats continues through Sunday, May 11. For more details on this production, please view the sidebar.



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