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NY CULTURE

'Cats,' in Yet Another Life, Gets Both Purrs and Hisses

She loved the feline musical in the '80s. He hated it. Two WSJ editors weigh in on the new production.



Leona Lewis and fellow cast members took a bow Sunday night at the opening of 'Cats' at the Neil Simon Theatre. PHOTO: JENNY ANDERSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

By V.L. Hendrickson and Michael Howard Saul

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The revival of "Cats" inspires wildly divergent emotions. And inside The Wall Street Journal newsroom, it is no different. Two editors who grew up with the show, and had opposing viewpoints, attended the new production together to see whether their opinions held. Their report:

Starting Points

MORE ON 'CATS'

- 'Cats' People Who Love Their Dogs
- Too Soon? 'Cats' Is Back on Broadway
- Claws Bared as 'Cats' Plans a Return to Broadway

V.L. Hendrickson: I came to love "Cats" through its original soundtrack and the book on which it is based, T.S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." I would read the poems aloud and lip-sync to "Jellicle Songs

for Jellicle Cats"—with choreography—for the real feline in our house, a tomcat named Rufus.

In many ways, the show lives more in my imagination than in my recollection of that two-hour tour performance I saw in Boston in the late 1980s. Still, I was rather giddy this time as the lights dimmed and green eyes started appearing in the junkyard.

Michael Howard Saul: I have been going to Broadway since I was a child and after all the hype surrounding "Cats" in the 1980s, expectations ran high when my parents took my sister and me to see it.

Hated it.

There was barely a plot, making it impossible to have any attachment to the characters. The show was purely a spectacle, fueled by some catchy songs and spirited dancing, but in the end it was a clawing miscalculation. So I needed another trip to "Cats" like your neighbor's Burmese needs a nasty, knotty hairball wedged in her little kitty throat.



The cast of 'Cats.' PHOTO: MATTHEW MURPHY

Performances

VLH: The energy of this show is undeniable. Even the hatingest hater can appreciate the athleticism and grace of the performers, who tumble, twirl and shake their tails in every number while belting out poetic lyrics. I particularly appreciated the group recitation of "The Naming of Cats," which seemed a more pointed homage to Eliot.

But some of the quiet moments, particularly "Memory," didn't have the same resonance for me this time. Leona Lewis was in good voice as Grizabella, though her cat moves were a little awkward.

MHS: When the overture began, the mood in the audience was electric. Summoning my best Statler and Waldorf [cantankerous Muppets] impression, I actually yelled, "Get over it!" My colleague told me I was outnumbered.



Kim Fauré as Demeter and Christine Cornish Smith as Bombalurina PHOTO: MATTHEW MURPHY

As the familiar music swelled, I was filled with sweet nostalgia and momentary optimism. Could I have been wrong? Was this actually sensational?

Um, no. My heart goes out to Leona Lewis,

who plays Grizabella and has to tackle "Memory," an achingly beautiful song that comes with the audience expectation of perfection. As it did decades ago, the show showcases top-drawer dancing, and Ricky Ubeda as Mister Mistoffelees is particularly memorable this time around with his LED jacket.

Costumes

VLH: Unitards are in full effect! The original skintight "Cats" costumes were much maligned, but the show has as much dance as it does poetry and song; these are dancers' costumes. Plus, need I remind anyone, we're still in the midst of a leggings craze. The costumes seemed almost hip, like something a 23-year-old might wear to a Bushwick bar.

Smart accessorizing changed the look of cats throughout—Jennyanydots's sparkly tap shoes, for instance—and advances in LED lighting made for those bright cat eyes in the junkyard and Mister Mistoffelees's magical jacket, which flashed a rainbow of colors.



An acrobatic cat looks set to land on his feet. PHOTO: NOAM GALAI/GETTY IMAGES

MHS: From the whiskers to the fur trimmings, the costumes just feel gimmicky. As those who have seen "Cats" know, the performers prance around the audience during the show. I had an aisle seat, enabling me to come face-to-face with one female feline. She looked exquisitely catlike. We locked eyes. And for a moment, I felt I

might be able to suspend disbelief and allow myself to be transported to a magical, mystical kitty kingdom.

Then, I thought: Lady friend, you're a grown woman, dressed like a cat, standing in the aisle of a theater filled with grown-ups. We both should be a little embarrassed.

The Upshot

VLH: This is definitely a remake, not a reinvention. The mind does wander a bit during "Cats," but there's so much going on it's hard to be bored. And so what if there's no plot? I don't need a reason to watch cat videos online, and I don't need a reason to watch two hours of poetry, music and dance performed by cats.

Still, in the haze of the fog machine, it felt like part of my past—a memory, if you will.

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MHS: Yes, some of the music will stick with you until the end of time. Thank you, Andrew Lloyd Webber. And the dancing still delights. But that's not enough. Without a compelling story, without any emotional or intellectual resonance, the show leaves the soul unnourished and discontented.

Perhaps it was best left all alone in the moonlight in the Broadway junk heap.

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