

THE ROSE BOWL AWARDS

FOR AMATEUR
DRAMA & MUSIC

<u>Name of Society</u>	Bristol Musical Youth and The Minis
<u>Name of Production</u>	Cats
<u>Date</u>	October 20 th 2012
<u>Venue</u>	Olympus Theatre, Filton
<u>Adjudicator</u>	June Rayner

The 'cat' poems upon which this musical is based, first appeared in letters written to T.S.Eliot's god-children during the 1930s. Unlike most of his poetry, the verses are notable for their strongly marked rhythms and, unusually for Eliot, rhyming couplets and lines. Lloyd Webber chose to write *Cats* using these poems, together with excerpts from other poems, in composing the lyrics for series of numbers based upon Eliot's most memorable cat characters – poems much loved by children for their mischievous humour. Whether Lloyd Webber's original intention was to write a dance musical, I do not know. But the scant plotting seems to suggest that.

We learn that, every now and then, Old Deuteronomy, a cat who has existed for at least ninety-nine years and probably more, is empowered to choose a cat who, on being assumed into *The Heavyside Layer*, some area of afterlife, is given everlasting life. That is the plot of a show that otherwise depends entirely upon stories woven around colourful, strongly defined feline characters, some of whom, like Macavity and Skimbleshanks have become very well known.

The composer has developed a score using varied styles of popular music from jazz to rock and lyrical ballads the most famous of which is *Memory*, a ballad that became a huge hit. Following Eliot's lead he has favoured strongly rhythmic numbers that are highly suitable for dance: modern, jazz, tap and even a little ballet.

Using Eliot's poems, Lloyd Webber has fashioned some good lyrics that show a desire to stick with Eliot's rhyming couplets. These work well in shaping the verse but song lyrics do not need such firm discipline. Greater freedom of form might have been better. However, each cat's story and character type is clearly communicated. The costume demand is simply huge, each cat costumed individually, as is the demand upon wigs and make up, all of which call for creativity and imaginative invention.

PRESENTATION

The musical is set in a yard full of junk – although it might just as easily have been a rooftop. Steps of various sizes were arranged in an arc around the performance area with the tallest U.St.C., where Old Deuteronomy was frequently placed. Scattered around were large coils, broken doors, timbers and metallic oddments forming piles of rubbish useful in sheltering all the cats. Darkness formed a sort of backcloth with intimations of night time when cats are on the prowl. The band was invisibly concealed on the balcony. This setting was highly suitable and extremely useful in accommodating an unusually large cast.

LIGHTING

Although some scenes were lit with a slightly golden glow over the entire performance area, others depended largely upon shafts of light imparting an elusive quality to the action. Some lamps were directed at the audience enhancing the shifty, fugitive habits of cats in the dark. A moonlit scene was achieved also. The technicians had responded imaginatively to the mood of the show and to Eliot's descriptions of cats.

SOUND AND EFFECTS

The challenges presented by dancers singing were substantial. But backstage was more than equal to some tricky situations. Nothing was lost while voices were enhanced where necessary just sufficiently. These technicians understood the primary importance of clarity rather than volume. Balance with the band was so good, too. Sound built to a big climax when asked but was otherwise sensitive to each voice and each effect. Splendid!

COSTUME AND MAKE UP

These are evaluated together since it is impossible to weigh one without the other. I was given to understand that parents played a large part in creating costumes and make up. Their invention was inexhaustible. Had there been nothing else to look at, noticing the variety and humour in each cat's appearance was an entertainment in itself. Impossible to praise sufficiently the devotion reflected in a show where, I imagine, around 100 costumes were created. Wearing the costume and looking in the mirror at the extraordinary variation of cats' faces and ears must have given a huge boost in confidence and concentration to each performer. Those responsible must have felt it and been rewarded by it. This contribution was of a very high standard – one might almost say: immeasurable.

THE BAND

Just eight instrumentalists coped extremely well with a demanding score. Radical changes in style bothered them not in the least. They were able to rock one number and romanticise the next. Tempi were intelligently selected while the need for a little 'elbow-room' for dance was never allowed to upset rhythm. With the assistance of S&E, a splendid balance with singers was achieved; support never overwhelmed. This was a group led with intelligent discrimination and a complete understanding: shrewd, sensitive and always controlled.

PRODUCTION

The first aspect of production to be mentioned must be the excellence and perception of the casting, crucial to a successful presentation of the show. Performers were selected for personality type but mainly for their skills in song, movement and dance. And, wonder of wonders, all the necessary talents seemed to be available in the groups. Impossible to over-estimate the importance of this aspect of a production which usually stands or falls by the quality of the casting.

That the two companies were so suitably and comfortably integrated says a lot about the skill of the production team. The enormous cast was not just a chorus but a large group of individuals, each with a role to play. Discipline and self-control was evident although never allowed to become obvious and concentration was excellent. Entrances and exits were achieved with complete discretion, swift and organised. Advantage of this large stage was taken in that every inch of the performance area was exploited as the focus of the action swiftly changed. As one number succeeded another with a complete change in mood and tone, and a different style of song and dance, the show was sustained by its smoothly achieved variety and contrast. Awed by virtuosity one moment,

the audience was chuckling with amusement the next. Nor was it ever confused by a loss of clarity. Articulation of lyrics and narration was uniformly distinct. Singing was melodic while movement and dance was of a very high standard for young amateurs. Vitality seldom flagged while presentation skills, particularly of main characters, were confidently assured.

THE COMPANY

Integrated well. Character and personality was sustained even by the youngest performers. The opening number, which started quietly, was well timed, clearly delivered and set up a mood of anticipation. The disposition of the cats over the acting area changed frequently, smoothly, without fussiness. *The Naming of Cats* needed an air of spontaneity and sparky relish of the humour.

A few more characters were successfully introduced in *RumTumTugger* expressive of Cat's contrary nature. We met Grizabella whose warm toned, wide-ranging voice was able to encompass bass and soprano. Why her appearance was that of an old Grannie, rather than a faded, elderly diva, is, to me, a mystery.

The style change to 30s music and dance was ~~more~~ gently achieved in *Bustopher Jones* capably and confidently introduced by Jennyanydots. The stoutly inflated young Bustopher showed off, bragging and blustering and bursting with self importance in a fully sustained droll performance. *Mungojerrie & Rumpleteaser* proved to be a splendidly fruitful partnership delivering an amazingly agile and attacking number. They formed a most successful clownish duo that was topped by acrobatic movement. One might have hesitated to partner two performers with such differences in style and build, but here, the contrasts merely served to heighten the fun.

Joined by several cats, notably Munkustrap, Old Deuteronomy weightily established his authority.

The Battle of the Pekes and Pollicles was staged with the help of some amusing costume additions. The air rang with squeaks and barks much to the amusement of the audience. Day changed into night as the cats prepared for the Jellicle ball. This was a beautifully lit, atmospheric scene where some great dance from the males was enjoyed leading to the dramatic climax of "Come to Dust". Grizabella's *Silence* followed. That word 'silence' should have been the key to her performance of this number - a listening number where she should appear to be reacting to what she *hears and sees*. She must use her eyes to communicate here. She

sang the number melodically without really making it *live*. Having heard it delivered so often as a mere pop song, she naturally took the same approach. But the song *is* the scene and this young performer needed directoral help to arrive at the right interpretation.

At the opening of Act II, after an entertaining 'bump and grind' number, Old Deuteronomy reminded us that our memories are not only our experiences but those of the many who went before us. *Memories* was then delicately reprised in a higher key by Jemima. Gus, the Theatre Cat recalled anecdotes from his theatrical past. He remained seated for most of the number when one would have liked to see him adopt postures and use gestures suggestive of an older, even Victorian, style of acting. Gus's delivery was outstandingly clear, however. The idea of the Growltiger number as Japanese produced an interesting contrast while the action involved in the 'Last Stand' was played with bravura Up St.L. With *Billy M'Caw*, a rousing production number evolved that included almost every cat in the house. All were remarkably attentive especially some of the kittens.

Tap was a good choice of dance for, *Skimbeshanks*, the rhythms neatly echoing the rhythm of a train. Skimbleshanks himself played his authority with plenty of flourish something well supported by the chorus who offered due respect. A train was briefly created with props, movement and dance. Then we heard about the elusive *Macavity* where an atmosphere of stealth and tension led up to the catfight.

We were then treated to the most beautifully prepared and 'finished' performance of the evening from *Magical Mr Mistoffelees*. He is, of course a trained dancer. What he has also learned is that detail matters. It counts. There was never a moment when dancing or performing his magic tricks when he wasn't behaving like a cat. The head twitched and the hands and arms pawed. He helped us to suspend disbelief and to see here a *cat* dancing! Magic it certainly became, fully living up to Tugger's description of "surprising illusions and eccentric confusion". Marvellous indeed, building the excitement that the finale required.

And so we experienced the dramatic journey to *The Heavyside Layer* with the full company. Old Deuteronomy emphasises the rule that cats, (and humans) must be treated with respect. *Jemima* began with a verse of *Memory* before *Grizabella* recalls 'the burnt out ends of smokey days' that must be put aside when 'a new day begins' and she is assumed past the moon into the heavenly layer. The number sounded fresher and more

positive, as it should. Arousing and stimulating came the finale in a last farewell from an enthusiastic company.

EFFORT ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT

A remarkable and astonishing production of so daring a choice.

Thank you for your most kind and considerate hospitality.