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Cats Purrs Softly; Oslo Overwhelms

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 10th, 2016

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Meow and forever, *Cats* is back. After a smash London premiere, the original NYC production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's feline phenomenon became the fourth-longest running show in Broadway history, inspiring devoted loyalty among fans and disdain among naysayers. The rambling catalogue of frisky vignettes ushered in an era of Eurospectacles which were long on flash and glitter and short on substance (*Starlight Express*, *Miss Saigon*, etc. The latter is returning to Broadway next spring, God help us.)

I confess I never saw that original *Cats* staging live—but I did catch a PBS filmed version. The new production is largely the same with a few tweaks here and there. Trevor Nunn's staging remains as sleek and taut as an alley kitty skulking after a tasty mouse and *Hamilton*'s Andy Blankenbuehler has been brought in to spice up Gillian Lynne's original choreography.



Leona Lewis in *Cats*

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Derived from a book of poems by T.S. Eliot in a rare whimsical mood and chock-a-block with Lloyd Webber's pastiche ditties, *Cats* is the theatrical equivalent of sitting by the fire with Tabby and stroking her fur—for over two hours. Like Sondheim wrote in *Gypsy*, “Some people can get a thrill/Knitting sweaters and sitting still....But some people ain't me.” The whisker-thin plot—if you can call it that—consists of a group of pussycats competing for the right to take a ride on a huge tire to the “heavyside layer,” whatever that is, and start a new life, apparently after the customary nine have been used up. In between specialty numbers, the shaggy leader Old Deuteronomy goes missing for a few minutes, Grizabella the ex-glamor cat wanders around looking sad, and, after a big build-up about how nasty he is, the menacing Macavity scratches a few of his fellow felines. That's it for the storyline. Anybody for a warm saucer of milk?

I did enjoy a few individual numbers, particularly in the second act. Jeremy Davis exuberantly leads a merry, bouncy tour of sleeper cars as Shimbleshanks the railway cat and Ricky Ubeda dazzles like a furry Liberace as the magical Mr. Mistoffelees. Christopher Gurr is adorably pompous as the rotund gourmand Bustopher Jones and the sweet doddering Gus, the theatre cat. British pop star Leona Lewis takes on Grizabella's showpiece aria “Memory.” She has vocal power but no nuance, rendering what could have been a soaring epiphany anticlimactic. John Napier's oversized junkyard setting and anthropomorphic costumes still enchant while Natasha Katz's dynamic lighting creates more drama and conflict than the wispy script.



Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays in *Oslo*

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

Meanwhile, not all is shallow caterwauling in NY theater. As we enter into a new phase of the seemingly endless 2016 Presidential campaign, Lincoln Center Theater presents a powerful theatrical reminder that political plays can be just as spectacular as high-budget musicals. J.T. Rogers' *Oslo* portrays the heroic and unheralded efforts of a Norwegian couple to bring Palestinians and Israelis to the negotiating table when U.S. attempts resulted in stalemate. Derived from real events in 1992-3, this three-hour epic is as gripping as a spy thriller and as absorbing as a Ken Burn documentary.

Currently playing at the Off-Broadway Mitzi Newhouse, *Oslo* will transfer to LCT's Broadway venue the Vivian Beaumont next spring just in time for the 2017 Tony Awards, offering an adult alternative to juvenile fare such as *Cats*. It's indicative of the Broadway theater scene that not only is this a rare instance of a nonmusical dealing with a serious political topic, it's one of only two new American plays announced for the current Main Stem season.

Bartlett Sher provides his usual exemplary direction, making clear a potentially confusing story with dozens of characters and story threads woven into a tapestry of international intrigue. Donald Holder's ghostly lighting, the eerie projections of 59 Productions, and Catherine Zuber's monochromatic costumes give *Oslo* the feel of a half-remembered black-and-white dream.

Jefferson Mays and Jennifer Ehle balance steely command with patient deference as the Norwegian facilitators. They are so restrained for most of the play that Michael Aronov and Joseph Singer, as fiery Israeli officials, nearly steal the show, but in a final devastating montage where the cast recounts the violent history of the region after the Oslo accords, Mays and Ehle deliver a shattering conclusion, equal parts despair and optimism. The rest of the large cast is uniformly excellent as well.

Ideally there should be room on Broadway for both *Cats* and *Oslo* but it will be interesting to see which will draw the bigger crowds.

Cats: Opened July 31 for an open run. Neil Simon Theatre, 250 W. 52nd St., NYC. Mon, Tue 7 pm; Wed 2 and 7:30 pm; Thu, Fri, 7 pm; Sat 2 and 8 pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. \$79—\$149. (800) 653-8000. www.ticketmaster.com.

Oslo. July 11—Aug. 28. Transferring to the Vivian Beaumont Theater beginning March 23, 2017 with an April 13 opening. Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue, Thu 7 pm, Wed, Fri—Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Running time: three hours including two intermissions. \$107. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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