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Breakthroughs in the American Musical Theatre

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Cats: “Now and Forever” a Breakthrough on Broadway

“What’s a Jellicle Cat?” This iconic question, uttered by a group of singer-actor-dancers clad in full “cat beat,” rang through the Winter Garden Theatre in New York for a record breaking eighteen years. Originally produced in London in 1981, *Cats* quickly became a hit, prompting its producers to transfer it to Broadway the following year. While the show was not a critically-acclaimed musical when it opened on Broadway in 1982, it certainly became a success, drawing audiences for decades to come (McKinley, “‘Cats,’ Broadway’s”). Breakthrough productions in the American Musical Theatre are productions that broaden or redefine the content, style and influence of musical theatre in America, and the changes they affect must endure. Ultimately, the original Broadway production of *Cats* proved to be a breakthrough in the American Musical Theatre because it introduced the “Megamusical” era on Broadway, helping to revitalize the New York theatre scene. Additionally, the show broke financial records with its revolutionary marketing techniques, and it proved that visual storytelling can be just as powerful as a text-dependent musical.

Cats is a breakthrough in the American Musical Theatre because it launched a new era on Broadway known as the Megamusical. Megamusicals are musical theatre productions with three primary characteristics. First, they are generally British musicals that remain true to their original British staging; they are not re-envisioned or significantly altered to fit American interests. Each show bears a hefty price tag due to the massive nature of the production. Finally, most Megamusicals have lengthy runs in every venue they play (Sternfeld, 1-3).

Cats was a successful British musical before it opened on Broadway. It was originally developed by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh. The creative team consisted of all British, albeit inexperienced, theatrical artists, including Trevor Nunn as director, Gillian Lynne as choreographer and associate director, and John Napier as costume and set designer (“Cats - Broadway Musical - Original.”). The Broadway production was essentially identical to the West End version. Reflecting on the smashing success of the show in Britain, Cameron Mackintosh remarked, “To our surprise, people didn’t just want to rent the script, the music - they wanted us to actually put on our version of the show” (“BBC’s ‘The Story of Musicals’- CATS Segment”).

As the first Megamusical, *Cats* commanded extravagant and unprecedented production costs. The show was highly immersive and featured large-scale special effects, particularly Grizabella’s ascension to the Heaviside Layer at the end of Act II. The Winter Garden Theatre was extensively refurbished to accommodate these needs. Production costs totaled approximately \$4.5 million, making it the most expensive show on Broadway at the time (Bennetts; “Putting It Together (1980-2004)”). Previous Broadway shows cost only a fraction of the *Cats* budget. The original Broadway production of *Annie* in 1977 ran at \$800,000, while the original Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd* in 1979 cost \$1.5 million (Rothstein, “How ‘Annie 2’”; Riedel, “PIECE OF THE PIE”).

Finally, *Cats* had an exceptionally long run on Broadway, cementing its designation as a Megamusical. It became the longest running show in Broadway history on June 19, 1997 with 6,138 performances. The previous record holder, *A Chorus Line*, opened in 1975 and became the longest running musical in 1983 after 3,389 performances (Rothstein, “After 15 Years”). *Cats* continued to break its own record nightly for three more years, until its closure on September 10, 2000, after 7,485 performances (Lefkowitz; Nassour, “Cats Becomes”). Long

before any of these landmark performances, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* predicted that *Cats* would “lurk around Broadway for a long time” in his opening night review of the show in 1982 (Rich, “THEATER: LLOYD WEBBER'S 'CATS'”).

Its record-breaking longevity was attributed to certain features of the show, including its appeal to audiences of all ages and nationalities and its unique castability. Due to the visual nature of the storytelling onstage, *Cats* did not depend on any spoken text to convey its story, making it especially attractive to families and foreign tourists. “Families could go; tourists could go; non-English-speakers could get the point” (Birnbach). Jesse McKinley of the *New York Times* wrote, “*Cats*’ proved that tourist audiences could drive a show’s sales. Tourists filled the Winter Garden long after ‘*Cats*’ had become passe among New York theatergoers” (McKinley, “‘*Cats*,’ Broadway’s”). Late in the run, William Grimes cited a 1997 study that concluded “about 80 percent of the audience was from out of town, and 40 percent from foreign countries” (Grimes). This meant that many people, no matter their language or age, did not depend on the text, but rather the visual spectacle of *Cats* to understand and appreciate the story. As the theatre district in New York became gentrified in the 1990s, largely as a result of child-friendly branding by the Walt Disney Company, more families came to Broadway, and ultimately, *Cats* (Bagli). From a casting standpoint, *Cats* is an ensemble-based show, and the original production relied on no “star” actors to keep the musical popular. Because of this, individual actors were easily replaceable throughout the run, and the appeal of the show did not drop as cast members were replaced (Schoenfeld, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*).

The longevity of the run of *Cats* on Broadway had several notable effects on the business of the American Musical Theatre. *Cats*, and subsequently Mackintosh’s other Megamusicals, helped to revitalize the New York theatre industry in the early 1980s. At the start of the decade, very few musicals were enjoying lengthy successful runs, with many theatres

hosting no shows at all. With the arrival of *Cats* and other Megamusicals, more theatres began to host long-running, profitable musicals (Riedel, "MIGHTY 'CATS'"). When the show's closure was initially announced in February 2000, the show had generated \$380 million in sales (McKinley, "'Cats,' Broadway's"). These musicals also provided steady employment for many actors and crew members in an industry known for being entirely too unstable. Original cast member Marlene Danielle performed in *Cats* for all eighteen years of its run on Broadway, allowing her to live with more financial stability than most other actors (O'Haire).

With the success of *Cats* on Broadway also came an enormously successful league of *Cats* national tours, revitalizing the touring industry of musical theatre in America. According to Gerald Schoenfeld of the Shubert Organization, four major touring companies were mounted, each running simultaneously with the New York production (Schoenfeld, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*). In 1991 *Cats* became the longest running touring musical in America, and continued to tour with union and nonunion companies for thirty years (Hetrick, "Nine Lives"). As these tours ran longer and longer, *Cats* would return to the same cities, over and over again, an unprecedented feat for touring productions (Pogrebin, "Nine Lives, Nine Memories").

Cats, as the first Megamusical, left an enduring legacy on the American Musical Theatre. Jesse McKinley of the *New York Times* wrote, "'Cats' fundamentally reshaped the Broadway landscape by ushering in the era of the megamusicals" (McKinley, "'Cats,' Broadway's"). After the international success of *Cats*, Mackintosh began producing a string of other successful Megamusicals, including *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon* ("Putting It Together (1980-2004)"). Each of these Megamusicals featured similar spectacle "moments." For example, Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* flaunted a massive chandelier crashing over the heads of the audience and a gondola sliding across the stage on an underground lake (Rich, "Stage: 'Phantom'"). These, in turn, led to the introduction of American

Megamusicals on Broadway. *Wicked*, along with Disney-branded musicals like *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* featured similar gargantuan effects both on and offstage (Sternfeld, 319-325; Sternfeld, 349-351). Production costs also soared; in 2003, *Wicked* cost \$14 million to produce on Broadway (Hoyt). Future British and American Megamusicals also benefited from exceptionally long runs. *The Phantom of the Opera* took *Cats*' place as the longest running musical on Broadway in January 2006 (McKinley, "Phantom' Beats 'Cats'"). Six major Megamusicals, *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Wicked*, *Les Miserables*, and *Beauty and the Beast* each hold spots within the top-ten longest running Broadway shows, all north of at least 5,000 performances as of December 2017 ("Longest-Running Shows").

The Broadway production of *Cats* quickly became a financial success, largely due to innovative marketing techniques New York theatre had never experienced before. Success in London benefitted the Broadway production in several ways, which the show's promoters used to full advantage. First, *Cats* launched tickets sales a year in advance; the popularity of the show in London helped fuel the largest advance sale in Broadway history at the time. By the time the show opened in October 1982, "orders added up to \$6.2 million in advance ticket sales," (Bennetts; "Putting It Together (1980-2004)"). Next, beginning in May 1982, Mackintosh blitzed New York with *Cats* hype, and advertisements for *Cats* began to appear all over the city - in newspapers, in subway stations, on airplane banners, and on radio spots - until it opened in October (Bennetts). Jessica Sternfeld explains that no producer "had ever advertised a show so heavily or consistently" (Sternfeld, 124). The marketing campaign was intentionally ambiguous and enigmatic; ads did not include quotes from critics, featured actors, or mentions of awards. Promotions featured "only the idea of the show itself, and Lloyd Webber's name;" the only image was the iconic logo featuring glowing cat eyes with dancer silhouettes (Sternfeld, 124-125). Mackintosh arranged for pieces to run in both *Smithsonian* and *Penthouse*. Four

months before *Cats* opened - and three months before any actors moved into the theatre - the Winter Garden Theatre's marquee was plastered with the intriguing *Cats* logo (Sternfeld, 124-125; Hanan, 51).

Massive theatre renovations drew further attention to the show. To accommodate the primary theatrical spectacle, Grizabella's ascent to the Heaviside Layer, a sizeable hole was cut into the roof of the Winter Garden Theatre. This stunt earned for *Cats* "more publicity...which inured to the benefit of the show" (Schoenfeld, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*). Not-so-coincidentally, Barbra Streisand released her recording of "Memory," the standout song from *Cats*, five months before the show's opening on Broadway. The single peaked at No. 52 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart, and spent seven weeks on the chart ("Barbra Streisand Memory Chart History."). The popularity of Streisand's recording helped deliver *Cats* to a larger audience.

In addition to advertising the show publicly, the producers of *Cats* began to market the show to individual people. Before *Cats*, theatre souvenirs were extremely uncommon. But after the London production began selling leftover T-shirts originally made for the cast, they recognized the power of merchandise. "The person buying the T-shirt...[became] a walking advertisement for us. It started a whole new form of brand marketing," said Anthony Pye-Jeary of Dewynter, whose company designed the *Cats* logo (Riedel, "Thanks to Cats"; "BBC's 'The Story of Musicals'- CATS Segment."). Theatre merchandise was transformed into a fundamental marketing tool.

Cats' marketing strategies continued to evolve, embedding itself as a Broadway fixture. Over the course of its New York run, *Cats* maintained its ambiguous marketing strategies. The show's tagline "Now and Forever" became popular partway into the run. While the line itself is considered extravagant, it was "repeatedly used by the media...[and] became a part of the theatrical language" of the show (Schoenfeld, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*). *Cats* is also the precursor

for a current Broadway controversy, extravagant ticket prices. According to Jessica Sternfeld, patrons paid “a whopping \$45, then a record high” for tickets to a show when it first opened (Sternfeld, 125). Adjusted for inflation this amounts to about \$113 in 2017.

If it were up to the critics, *Cats* would have closed on Broadway before it even opened. Although it received generally positive reviews in London, Broadway critics were less enthusiastic (Sternfeld, 121-122). According to Sternfeld, “the bulk of the opening night reviews fell into the mixed category” (Sternfeld, 167). Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, notoriously nick-named “The Butcher of Broadway,” praised *Cats* for its inventive stagecraft and “theatrical magic,” while finding fault with the score, book, and choreography (Jones; Rich, “THEATER: LLOYD WEBBER'S 'CATS'”). Richard Hummler of *Variety* praised the score and choreography, while still finding faults with the “skimpy story” (Hummler). Walter Kerr, in his review for the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, outright condemned the show for the “oversaturation” of spectacle throughout the entire production, with too little of a connection to the original T.S. Eliot poetry (qtd. in Sternfeld, 165-166). *Cats* was, however, essentially ‘critic proof.’ The positive response to the London run led to “favorable word of mouth across the Atlantic” (Bennetts). This, combined with an intense marketing campaign and publicity, generated massive advance ticket sales and allowed audiences to determine the value of the show, without relying on American critics. *Cats* recouped its investment in about ten months (Sternfeld, 169).

Cats initiated a marketing strategy that has had a lasting influence on Broadway. Massive pre-opening media coverage was successful in promoting Mackintosh’s other Megamusicals, even if this so-called “hype” was unintentional. As *The Phantom of the Opera* was preparing to transfer from London to Broadway, a major casting conflict regarding the role of “Christine” became a popular news story in 1987. *Phantom* even followed suit in proving to be “critic-proof” as the show received positive reviews in London, while garnering less than

desirable reviews in New York (Sternfeld, 231-233). Mackintosh's *Miss Saigon* created even more casting controversy when Jonathan Pryce, a white actor playing a half-Asian character, was signed to give his performance on Broadway after a successful run in London.

Nonetheless, the story made news all throughout the summer of 1990, keeping publicity for *Miss Saigon* alive as it made its way to Broadway (Sternfeld, 296-298). Mackintosh imitated *Cats*' "Now and Forever" tagline to promote *The Phantom of the Opera*, with the slogan, "Remember Your First Time" (Segal). Further, although the prosperous production of merchandise began with the London production of *Cats*, an abundance of merchandise can now be purchased for nearly any show on Broadway (Riedel, "Thanks to Cats"). Ticket prices have continued to skyrocket. *New York Times* analyst James Stewart notes that a single top-price seat for either *Hello, Dolly!* or *Hamilton*, neither of which are even considered to be Megamusicals, would cost more than \$700 at face value (Stewart). *Cats* introduced a new form of marketing to the American Musical Theatre industry, and the show also reimagined how musical theatre productions can be performed.

Cats was an artistic breakthrough in the American Musical Theatre. The show is an almost entirely visual-based production, and its immersive nature was a first on the Great White Way. *Cats* does depend on its textual source material in order to set up the world of the musical, but the show places more emphasis on visual reception than on textual competence in order to tell the story. In fact, Jessica Sternfeld argues that "a large number of English-speaking audience members...seem to miss a great deal of the text" (Sternfeld, 126). This perpetuates the idea that *Cats* does not necessarily rely on any text to get the story across. Instead, any person who watches the production will understand what is happening onstage.

Because the plot of *Cats* is told primarily through movement, yet still depends on text to provide a basis for the story, the genesis behind the original London production is especially

relevant. The musical had begun as an experiment by Lloyd Webber to set an existing volume of poetry, T.S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" to music as a possible concert piece. He presented his musical settings to friends, and eventually to Eliot's widow, Valerie Eliot (Nunn and Eliot, 7). Soon after, Valerie began to donate snippets of unpublished poetry, including the story of "Grizabella the Glamour Cat," "Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats," and the "The Heaviside Layer." Director Trevor Nunn was then able to paste together the premise of *Cats* using "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," the fresh unpublished poetry, as well as a few other pieces of published Eliot poetry (Mackintosh, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*). The central conceit of *Cats* follows a tribe of cats called the "Jellicle Cats" who gather once a year to choose one cat to ascend to the Heaviside Layer and be reborn into "a new Jellicle life;" this honor is ultimately given to the outcast Grizabella (Hanan, xvi). Designer John Napier set the musical in an abandoned junkyard, inspired by Eliot's poem, "The Wasteland" (Wolf, 136). Choreographer Gillian Lynne developed a basis for how her human cast would interact and behave as cats onstage (Gillian Lynn, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*).

As rehearsals progressed, Nunn also began to develop individual characters with his company of singer-actor-dancers. By combining improvisational exercises and different names from "The Naming of Cats," a poem from "Old Possums Book of Practical Cats," Nunn devised sixteen different, unique characters. He then gave each actor different words to apply to the character, which led to each cat finding their own arc through the evening of the "Jellicle Ball." With the story of Grizabella specifically, Nunn recognized the painfully humane nature of the character. The unpublished poem references Tottenham Court, a popular beat for prostitutes in London during Eliot's life. This hinted to Nunn the tragedy of Grizabella, a woman who has lost everything in her life, in need of forgiveness (Trevor Nunn, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*).

Nunn also began to develop through-line story arcs for each character. This is where the true visual nature of the story of *Cats* comes into play. Gus and Jellylorum sing “Gus: The Theatre Cat,” and although both characters come from different Eliot poems, a clear “care-taker” relationship is established in the way these characters sing with each other. Many of the female cats in the tribe fawn over The Rum Tum Tugger, who gives off a “rock-and-roll star vibe” when he dances. The “Grizabella” fragment is flushed out to represent a jaded woman who wants forgiveness from the tribe, but is rejected every time she comes onstage, amid hissing and hateful glances. Eventually, Grizabella ascends to the Heaviside Layer on a flying car tire and a cherry picker-type lift. Mungojerrie & Rumpelteazer and Coricopat & Tantomile each seem to have a sibling-type relationship because they always dance and interact with each other and wear matching costumes. Even in Act II of *Cats*, the leader Old Deuteronomy is kidnapped by the evil Macavity, and is restored by the Magical Mr. Mistoffelees (*Cats: Ultimate Edition; Cats [videorecording]*). Gillian Lynne describes Victoria’s “White Cat Dance” as “a young girl in puberty...discovering her own body” (Gillian Lynne, *Cats: Ultimate Edition*). Underlining the importance of each character’s individual arc, *Cats* was the first Broadway musical to assign an individual microphone pack to every actor onstage (Grant, 195).

Each of these moments and relationships give a clear storyline and a true sense of community to the world of *Cats*. Never are these plot points spoken or sung about, but this “subtext” surrounding each character is still explicitly presented onstage. The audience learns about every cat and their personalities through dance and subtext (Sternfeld 130-132).

Additionally, this character subtext is assisted by the musicality of Lloyd Webber’s score. In his essay “Musical Styles and Song Conventions,” Paul Laird writes of “the rock sound of ‘The Rum Tum Tugger’ [and] bump-and-grind music from ‘Macavity: The Mystery Cat’ [existing]

alongside music reminiscent of Puccini in ‘Growltiger’s Last Stand’” (Laird, 39). Sternfeld writes of Grizabella’s “dirge-like cello ground bass” whenever she enters (Sternfeld, 158).

Some may argue that using dance, visual storytelling and subtext to tell a story onstage had already been achieved in the American Musical Theatre, before *Cats* in 1982. Agnes de Mille had revised the use of dance in the American Musical with the dream ballet “Laurie Makes Up Her Mind” in *Oklahoma!* in 1943. In this ballet, de Mille used dance, which is by nature a non-verbal performance artform, to further complicate the essential conflict of *Oklahoma!* and to flesh out the characterization of the leading lady, Laurie. Agnes de Mille’s work “expanded the parameters of the libretto,” and “in a little over a year, de Mille caused an ideological shift in the function of dance on Broadway” (Gennaro, 50-51; “Oklahoma! - Broadway Musical - Original.”).

However, *Cats* is a musical that is heavily grounded in dance. De Mille’s *Oklahoma!* ballet takes place near the end of Act I and is an example of elevated storytelling by virtue of its status as a “Dream Ballet.” *Cats* uses dance and visual subtext for the duration of the entire evening, without resorting to the elevated level of a “dream sequence.” *Cats’* breakthrough on this front is its use of dance and visual storytelling for an entire evening in “real-time,” not exclusively for a “dream sequence.”

A major part of what elevated the visual story of *Cats* was the immersive quality of the original production in New York. Set in an oversized junkyard, built to the scale of a human-sized cat, the set design for *Cats* at the Winter Garden Theatre fully transformed the auditorium into the world of the show. Equipped to the unique shape of the Winter Garden, the apron of the stage protruded far out into the house, cutting a deep semi-circle into the orchestra seats. Ramps ran from the apron into the house, allowing the cast to roam freely into the auditorium, which drew the audience closer to the action onstage (Sternfeld, 126-127). A handful of seats were relocated to the stage right wing, placing a few audience members

onstage (*Cats* [videorecording]). As for the actual set itself, the oversized junk pieces poured out from the stage and into the auditorium, completely encasing the audience in the universe of *Cats* (Sternfeld, 127). Original cast member Stephen Mo Hanan reflected on experiencing the set for the first time: “The Winter Garden [is] almost unrecognizable with our apron jutting way past the proscenium, and the ceiling covered over with the already magical starry sky panels” (Hanan, 26). Hanan also reflected on seeing the model set for the Winter Garden on the first day of rehearsals: “Everyone gasps. A collage of the detritus of commercial civilization: discarded auto parts, bottle caps, broken phonographs... and everything spilling off the stage and into the house in so many directions that the proscenium is totally invisible” (Hanan, 3).

This immersive quality has become established in current Broadway productions, further supporting the breakthrough influence of *Cats*. The Imperial Theatre in New York was entirely transformed for the 2016 production of *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, complete with ramps and fully-encasing scenery, reminiscent of the Winter Garden’s *Cats* (Isherwood). The 2014 Broadway production of *Rocky*, which also played at the Winter Garden Theatre, moved the audience seated in the orchestra at intermission “to accommodate” scenes in Act II (Brunner).

The 1982 Broadway production of *Cats* represented a breakthrough in the American Musical Theatre. It introduced the era of “Megamusicals,” initiating spectacle-based productions bearing hefty price tags and lengthy runs. It redefined how marketing and finances could give a musical cultural power, reinvigorating and redefining the method of Broadway. Ambiguous but powerful publicity combined with popularity in London to promote massive advance ticket sales; despite high ticket prices and mixed critical reception, the show proved to be critic-proof and its longevity was largely fueled by tourists. Finally, it demonstrated the value of visual storytelling,

justifying it as a style equally powerful and complex to textual storytelling. With *Cats*, a new day began on Broadway.

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