

Broadway Bound Extends Community-Building Mission With Traditional Take on Webber Classic

Practical Cats

- By August Krickel
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Broadway Bound Vista Theatre Project's production of *Cats* runs Aug. 1-4.

Even if you weren't a Twitter user, it was hard to miss the online explosion last week. Fans reacted to the freshly unleashed trailer for the upcoming film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Cats* with a mix of joy, confusion and horror, debating the effectiveness of CGI-enhanced feline fur and facial features on celebrities such as Taylor Swift, Jennifer Hudson and Rebel Wilson.

Director/choreographer Dedra Daniels Mount promises a more traditional take on Andrew Lloyd Webber's long-running, multiple Tony Award winner, as the Broadway Bound Vista Theatre Project brings *Cats* to the Cardinal Newman School Performing Arts Center this week.

Mount, who has taught dance and theater arts in the Midlands since the 1980s, began the Vista Theatre Project with husband Jimmy in 2014 as an outgrowth of their Gadsden Street performing arts school, Broadway Bound. Established as a not-for-

profit, the offshoot component is therefore better able to attract donations and sponsorships for shows, as well as qualifying for reduced rates on royalties.

While she knew a movie was in the works, Dedra says selecting *Cats* was organic, stemming from a meeting in which veteran performer and Vista Theatre Project board member Tracy Steele, who will portray Munkustrap, jokingly said “Let’s just do *Cats*,” clawing the air with a feline-esque snarl.

But as the discussion turned to other agenda items, Dedra continued to contemplate how the elaborate story might be done effectively in a community setting. Specifically, she counted the number of roles that might be done by a performer of any apparent gender — which was most of them, since the characters aren’t men and women, but androgynous cats. She points out that the youth of Mr. Mistoffelees is more significant than the character’s gender, allowing her to cast the 12-year-old Merritt Horan as the enchanting kitten.

Webber based his musical on *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, a playful series of poems by T. S. Eliot published in 1939, and created a fantastical story of junkyard cats who gather annually to select one from their group to ascend to a higher plane of existence.

Those left with a bad aftertaste after the eerie visuals from the movie trailer need not worry. Dedra says the Vista Theatre Project’s version features the stage version’s familiar face paint combined with furry analogs of glam and disco attire to create anthropomorphic feline characters, whose catlike dance moves will complete the illusion.

Jimmy Mount says the enduring popularity of *Cats* can be attributed to Webber’s score, which he describes as “haunting, clever and memorable.”

The original London production of *Cats* ran for 21 years, and its Broadway incarnation ran for another 18, both setting new records. A Broadway revival in 2016 ran for another 593 performances, with Broadway Bound alum Mackenzie Warren appearing in the final cast as Bombalurina. Other former students who have gone on to successful professional careers include Jordan Samuels (national tours of *Newsies* and *The Lion King*), Anna-Lee Wright (Broadway and national tour of *Miss Saigon*), and Kelsey Asbille (one of the stars of the cable television series *Yellowstone*).

Open auditions were held in early spring, attracting a mix of current Broadway Bound participants and dancers — such as former Columbia Classical Ballet principal dancer Brianna Taylor, who will portray Bombalurina — community performers and new faces. USC voice major Stephanie Villamizar will play Grizabella and sing the iconic song “Memory,” which has been covered more than 600 times by artists ranging from Barbra Streisand to Barry Manilow.

Jimmy Mount explains that this number was not part of the original book, but rather an unfinished poem given to Webber by Eliot’s widow, who “found it touching. And Webber realized that he needed a power ballad,” inserting the song only a few weeks before opening. Ironically, Judi Dench was set to play Grizabella in the original London production, but an injury forced her to drop out. In the upcoming film, Dench will play a traditionally male role, Old Deuteronomy, portrayed in the Vista Theatre Project’s version by veteran Columbia song and dance man Bobby Craft.

The director laughs as she recounts contacting colleague Lanny Spires, who played Mistoffelees twice in summer stock productions in New York, and had no desire to play young again. Yet when she instead offered him the role of the preening, rock star-like tomcat Rum Tum Tugger, Spires instantly and emphatically accepted.

By producing at least one full-length, name-brand musical annually, Dedra ensures that students are able to perform alongside adult actors, singers and dancers, gaining

invaluable experience. Invariably, she says, young performers grow beyond being satisfied by appearing in recitals for their family and friends.

“They want to be in ‘real’ shows,” she offers.

What: *Cats*

Where: **Cardinal Newman School’s Anna Tronco Williams Performing Arts Center, 2945 Alpine Rd.**

When: **Aug. 1-2 (8 p.m.) and 3-4 (3 p.m.)**

Price: **\$20 (\$15 students, seniors and military)**

More: broadwayboundmtc.com