

Class 10: The Jellicle Ball

A. An Unlikely Conversion

1. Class title 1 (still from CATS)
2. Section title A (TSE into ALW)

This class is devoted to one work: CATS, the 1991 musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1948–), which ran for 21 years in London’s West End and 18 years on Broadway. It has a claim to fame in several other respects: it was the first to be called a mega-musical, whatever that may mean; unlike most musicals, it does not alternate between singing and dialogue, but is **through-composed** like an opera; and the words were not by some theatre lyricist, and not even a narrative play, but a book of poems for children by the modernist poet **TS Eliot** (1888–1965). Hence my title for this section, **An Unlikely Conversion**. Here is Eliot himself reading one of the shorter poems, *The Naming of Cats*

3. Eliot: *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*
4. Eliot reads *The Naming of Cats*

Lloyd Webber’s original idea was to set these poems to music as a sort of cantata for concert performance rather than a stage musical. A little of this remains in the final show. After the highly theatrical opening which I’ll play you in a moment, the cast all settle on the front of the stage and essentially recite the poem with little hints of music in the background.

5. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, The Naming of Cats*

What did this have that Eliot’s reading didn’t? It had lighting and costumes and a diverse group of cats all coming together in the moonlight. As such, it was communal, rather than solo, so it had the quality of magical incantation. And it had that short dance by the white cat (Victoria) at the end, presumably a dance and musical equivalent to Eliot’s ineffable contemplation. But could you make an entire show out of such recitations? No!

6. CATS marquee

With 20/20 vision in our rearview mirror, we see *CATS* as the phenomenal blockbuster it became, and wonder that backers would not have flocked to have a stake in it. But despite his previous successes, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s latest project was way, way outside the box. So when he had the idea of turning the poems into a stage musical, he needed some power names to reassure potential angels.

7. Trevor Nunn, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Gillian Lynne

So he hired the well-known director **Trevor Nunn**, then head of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, to direct the show. Nunn brought along his RSC colleague **Gillian Lynne** as choreographer. Although I hate these Alamy photos with watermarks all over the place, I needed a shot of them talking together, rather than posing on the stage of the finished product, because the show as we know it is largely due to Nunn. When rehearsals began, it was just a collection of separate songs, much like we have already heard.

8. Trevor Nunn's suggestions

Nunn convinced Webber that a workable show would need, not just the individual numbers, which were already written, but also a powerful **opening**, a **narrative through-line**, and an **emotional arch**. Let's look at each of these in turn. For the **OPENING**, Nunn brought in the writer **Richard Stilgoe** to assemble a text out of scraps that Eliot's widow had made available—a job he completed virtually overnight during the first week of rehearsals. Here is the result:

9. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats*

10. Old Deuteronomy

Nunn himself provided the **THROUGH-LINE**, albeit a thin one: *this is the night of the Jellicle Ball where the Jellicle patriarch **Old Deuteronomy** makes his annual appearance to choose one of the cats to be reborn into a new life on the Heaviside Layer*; most of the separate numbers are bids by the other cats to be the one chosen. I'll follow this idea through from beginning to end. Here, just after the *Naming of Cats* dance, is where it is introduced.

11. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Invitation to the Jellicle Ball*

12. Grizabella design

To complete this narrative Nunn suggested introduction of a new character, **Grizabella, the Glamour Cat**. She was a character created by Eliot, but rejected from the published book as being too sad for children. To play it with appropriate star power, Nunn and Lloyd Webber cast **Judi Dench**, but when she tore an Achilles tendon a week before previews, Lloyd Webber brought in **Elaine Page**, who has created the role of Evita in his previous show. The role as we know it now was essentially created by the four of them during rehearsals. A worn-out prostitute at the end of her days, Grizabella is avoided by all the other cats, but she seeks redemption. *She* will be the one who gets to ascend to the Heaviside Layer at the end. Here is her first appearance:

13. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Grizabella, the Glamour Cat*

14. John Partridge as the Rum Tum Tugger

I'll have much more of Grizabella in a few minutes. But in emphasizing Nunn's through-line, I am omitting the various individual numbers with which the whole idea started. There are five such numbers in Act One, where Lloyd Webber sets one of Eliot's poems more or less straight, with a clear beginning and end. The titles themselves are fun: *The Old Gumbie Cat*; *The Rum Tum Tugger*; *Bustopher Jones, the Cat About Town*; *Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer*; and *The Awefull Battle of the Pekes and the Pollicies*. I have only time for one of them, so I have chosen the most upbeat, *The Rum Tum Tugger*. He is the tom-cat of tom-cats, the **Rum Tum Tugger**, played here with marvelous swagger by **John Partridge**.

15. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, the Rum Tum Tugger*

16. Trevor Nunn's suggestions (2)

So we have the numbers, we have the opening, we have a through-line. But the show still needed its **EMOTIONAL CORE**. Nunn provided it at the eleventh hour by writing the text of a new song, "Memory," writing his own words but plundering some other bits of Eliot in doing so. It became the hit of the show. The full song comes in Act Two, but Act One ends with a sort of preview of it. So here is the last part of the ten-minute dance section that is the biggest production number in the act, immediately followed by the return of Elaine Page as Grizabella. It takes a certain amount of courage to have the big production number *before* the end, and to send the audience out in such a bittersweet mood.

17. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, end of Act One*

18. Class title 2 (A Character to Feel For)

B. Up to the Heavside Layer

19. Section title B ("Up to the Heavside Layer")

I have been jumping around a bit in Act One; the order of the clips I showed was originally 2, 1, 3, 5, 4, and 6. But one of the strengths of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals is that he can sustain a mood over a long stretch of time, and also get a lot of variety when he needs to. For Act Two, therefore, I am going to play two longer sections, the opening and the closing. Both will be continuous, but I will take short breaks in the first sequence for comment, and depending on time, I may not get quite to the end of the second sequence.

20. Old Deuteronomy

The first twelve minutes of this act, in fact, are slow and reflective—but also very beautiful. It opens with **Old Deuteronomy (Ken Page)** telling the other cats to savor "The Moments of Happiness." As the young cat **Victoria (Phyllida Crowley Smith)** explains, he is thinking of Grizabella—there is a reference to *Memory*—but also to old age in general. The text here, incidentally, is in Eliot's more modernist mode, rather like his *Four Quartets*, and is more difficult to understand. The character of Old Deuteronomy feature in *Old Possum*, but his song doesn't.

21. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, opening of Act Two*

22. John Mills as Gus, the Theatre Cat

Grizabella is not the only old has-been among the Jellicles. We now meet **Gus, the Theatre Cat**, a former legend of the stage who now suffers from palsy, so that his hands shake. In a casting triumph, the 1998 film secured the veteran English actor **Sir John Mills** (1908–2005). But before playing his performance, I want to take a moment to comment on these solo numbers generally. Eliot wrote them all in the third person, describing the cats as an observer. But this won't work too long on the stage. Lloyd Webber

found three solutions: for some songs, like *The Rum Tum Tugger*, he basically changed the “he” to “I,” so that the character tells about himself in the first person. In at least one other, *Mr. Mistoffelees*, which is part of my ending sequence, he gives the role to a dancer, who embodies the character while the others describe him, using Eliot’s original third person. But for this song, and the one that follows it, *Skimbleshanks*, he compromises. Gus is introduced by his caretaker **Jellyorum (Susan Jane Tanner)**, but he does get to sing part of his song himself.

23. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Gus the Theatre Cat*

24. Geoffrey Garratt as *Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat*

Enough sentiment! The mood changes into something altogether more upbeat, a standalone number about *Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat*. It is a tribute to the old days of the London-to-Scotland sleeping car express trains, such as *The Flying Scotsman*, which were a source of great romance for me at that age, and clearly to generations before me. This is another hybrid song: **Skimbleshanks** is primarily a dancer (**Geoffrey Garratt**), but he gets to sing a bit; in the film, his singing is dubbed by somebody else. There actually often were cats on these trains, kept by the stewards as pets or to keep down mice.

25. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat*

26. Jacob Brent as the Magical Mr. Mistoffelees

I am making a cut in the middle of the act, but one thing I need to tell you. At the start of the section on *Macavity, the Mystery Cat*, two of his minions capture **Old Deuteronomy** in a net. And without him, nobody would get to go up to the Heaviside Layer. So one of the cats suggests calling *The Magical Mr. Mistoffelees*. It is the last really spectacular solo number in the show. **Mistoffelees** is a magician not only in the pyrotechnical effects he produces with such ease, but also in the balletic ones. This calls for dance prowess as great as you would find in any ballet, and **Jacob Brent** is well up to the challenge. His last act is to produce Old Deuteronomy, and from then on the two essential Trevor Nunn elements—the **through-line** and the **emotional arch**—take top priority. Grizabella returns, with a much fuller version of *Memory*. Now the other cats support her, and she ascends to the Heaviside Layer. If I am running short of time, I’ll stop there, but if not, we’ll go to the very last number, *The Ad-Dressing of Cats*. It is sung to very simple music, almost like a hymn, and there is almost no staging, but it seems the ideal way to end, nonetheless.

27. Lloyd Webber: *CATS, Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat*

28. Class title 3 (A Megamusical with Soul)