

Comedy in Song



10. The Jellicle Ball

November 19, 2025

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ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER (1948–) originally conceived of CATS as an unstaged setting of TS Eliot's whimsical poems for children, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939)—pure fantasy. But director TREVOR NUNN (1940–) convinced him that it could work as a stage musical if the separate numbers were connected by a story, and proceeded to provide one, plus the text of the most famous number, "Memory." The resultant show (1981), in which cats of all sorts and sizes gather for the annual Jellicle Ball, is often cited as the first mega-musical. Nunn's original production ran for 21 years in London's West End and 18 years on Broadway.

In the first hour, we will look at the process of this unlikely conversion from page to stage, much of which took place only once rehearsals had already started. It will be illustrated by a variety of numbers from Act I. The second hour will be devoted to two extended sequences from Act II. *rb.*

A. An Unlikely Conversion

All the examples in this class will be taken from the 1998 film below, made from a stage performance, and thus true to the original. The synopsis that follows is adapted from Wikipedia; Eliot's number titles are in *italics*; sections that we do *not* get to see are listed in grey.

Lloyd Webber: CATS, film 1998. (Trevor Nunn, *original director*; Gillian Lynne, *choreographer*; David Mallett, *film director*). Cast includes: Elaine Page (*Grizabella*), John Mills (*Gus*), Jacob Brent (*Mr. Mistoffelees*), Michael Gruber (*Munkustrap*), Ken Page (*Old Deuteronomy*), John Partridge (*Rum Tum Tugger*), Geoffrey Garratt (*Skimbleshanks*), Phyllida Crowley Smith (*Victoria*).

A tribe of cats known as the Jellicles gather on stage and describe themselves and their purpose (*Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats*). They explain how the different cats of the tribe are named (*The Naming of Cats*). Munkustrap, the show's main narrator, explains that tonight the Jellicle patriarch Old Deuteronomy will make an appearance and choose one of the cats to be reborn into a new life on the Heaviside Layer (*Invitation to the Jellicle Ball*). Munkustrap introduces the first contender, Jennyanydots. Then suddenly Rum Tum Tugger makes his entrance (*The Rum Tum Tugger*). He is very fickle and unappeasable, "for he will do as he do do, and there's no doing anything about it". Next, a shabby old grey cat stumbles out wanting to be reconciled; it is Grizabella. All the cats back away from her in fear and disgust and explain her unfortunate state (*Grizabella: The Glamour Cat*).

After Grizabella leaves, we get two standalone numbers: *Bustopher Jones: The Cat About Town* and *Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer*. Next, the Jellicle patriarch, Old Deuteronomy, arrives (*Old Deuteronomy*). He is a wise old cat who has lived many lives and is tasked with choosing which Jellicle will go to the Heaviside Layer every year. The cats tell a story (*The Awefull Battle of the Pekes and the Pollicles*) about two dog tribes clashing in the street and subsequently being scared away by the Great Rumpus Cat. After this, the main celebration begins (*The Jellicle Ball*); we will see the end of it.

During the Ball, Grizabella reappears and tries to dance along, but her age and decrepit condition prevent her from doing so. As a result, she is once again shunned by the other cats, but that does not stop her from vowing to return for another chance (*Memory*).

B. Up to the Heaviside Layer

Old Deuteronomy gathers his tribe to contemplate the nature of happiness (*The Moments of Happiness*). Gus shuffles forward as the next cat to be introduced (*Gus: The Theatre Cat*). He was once a famous actor but is now old and suffers from palsy; he is accompanied

by Jellylorum, his caretaker, who tells of his exploits. After Gus leaves, Skimbleshanks is seen sleeping in the corner (*Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat*). He is the cat who is unofficially in charge of the nightly train from London to Glasgow, and it will not depart unless he is aboard. Within his song, a whole steam locomotive is assembled out of objects in the junkyard.

With a crash and an evil laugh, the "most wanted" cat Macavity appears (*Macavity, the Mystery Cat*). He is the so-called "Napoleon of Crime" who always manages to evade the authorities. Macavity's henchmen capture Old Deuteronomy and take off with the patriarch in tow. The other cats gradually combine to challenge him, but he shorts out the stage lights and escapes in the resulting confusion.

Rum Tum Tugger calls upon the magician Mr. Mistoffelees for help (*Magical Mr. Mistoffelees*). Known as the "original conjuring cat", Mr. Mistoffelees can perform feats of magic that no other cat can do. He displays his magical powers in a spectacular dance solo and uses them to restore the lights and bring back Old Deuteronomy. Now, the Jellicle Choice can be made.

Before Old Deuteronomy can make his decision, Grizabella returns to the junkyard and he allows her to address the gathering (*Memory, extended reprise*). With acceptance and encouragement from Jemima and Victoria, her appeal succeeds and she is chosen to be the one to go to the Heaviside Layer and be reborn into a new Jellicle life (*The Journey to the Heaviside Layer*). A tire rises from the piles of junk, carrying Grizabella and Old Deuteronomy partway towards the sky; Grizabella then completes the journey on her own. Finally, Old Deuteronomy closes the show by giving his final speech to the audience (*The Ad-dressing of Cats*).

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