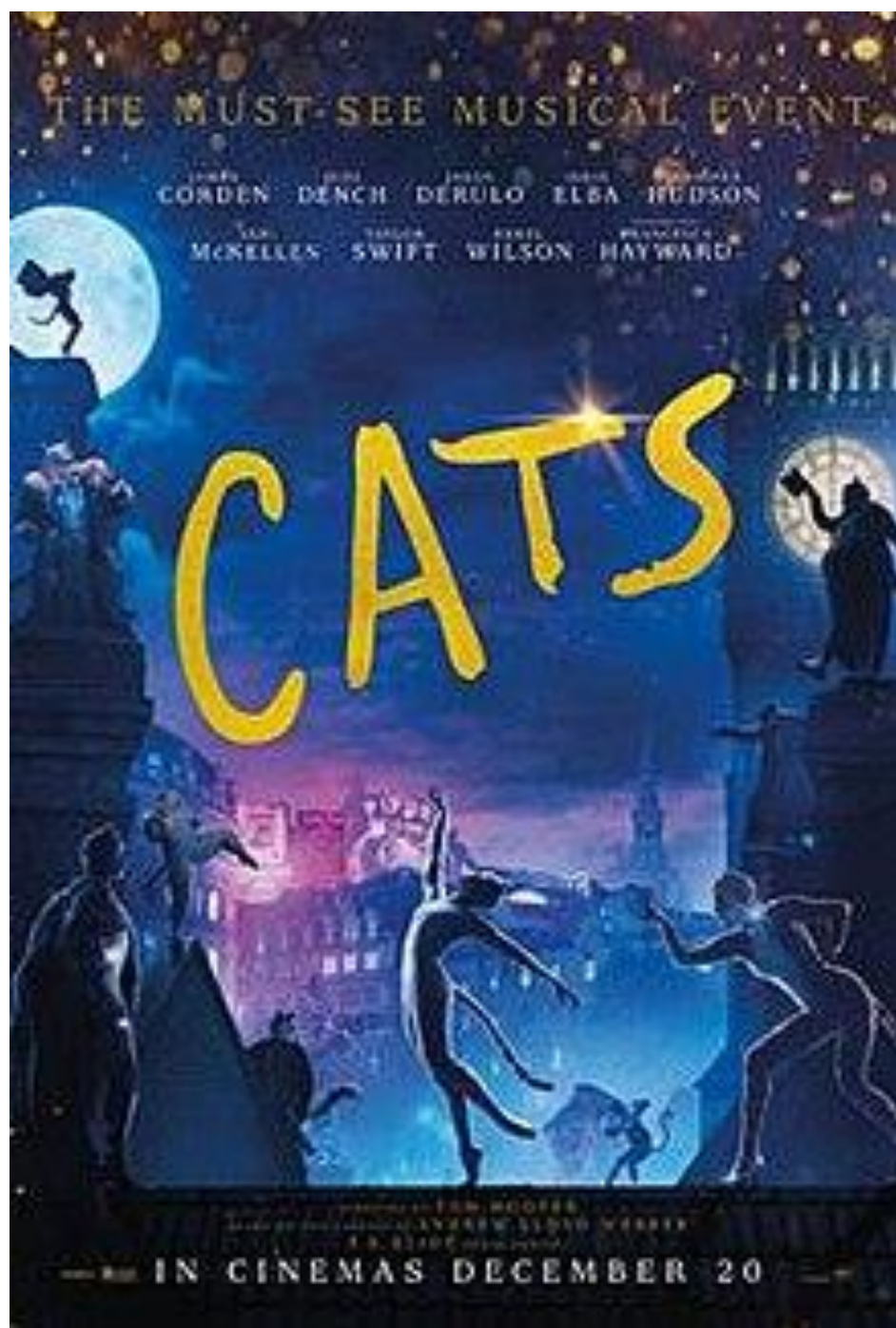


Cats



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Tom Hooper. Produced by Tom Hooper, Tim Bevan, Debra Hayward and Eric Fellner. Executive Producers: Andrew Lloyd Webber, Angela Morrison and Steven Spielberg. Screenplay by Tom Hooper, Developed from T.S. Elliot's collection of poems *Old Possum's Boook of Practical Cats*. (1939) and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1981 stage production *Cats*. Choreography by Andy Blankenbuehler (replacing Wayne MacGregor). Cinematography by Christopher Ross. Editing by Melanie Oliver. Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Production Design by Eve Stewart, A Universal Pictures Production. Original Release in the USA and Great Britain on December 20th 2019. No rating. Length: 110 minutes.

Cast

- Francesca Hayward as Victoria the White Cat
 - James Corden as Bustopher
 - Jennifer Hudson as Grizabella the Glamour Cat
 - Idris Elba as Macavity the Mystery Cat
 - Jason Derulo as Rum Tum Tugger
 - Ian McKellen as Gus the Theatre Cat
 - Taylor Swift as Bombalurina
 - Rebel Wilson as Jenny the Gumbie Cat
 - Laurie Davidson as Mr. Mistoffelees
 - Robbie Fairchild as Munkustrap
 - Mette Towley as Cassandra
 - Steven McRae as Skimbleshanks
 - Danny Collins as Mungojerrie
 - Naoimh Morgan as Rumpleteazer
 - Ray Winstone as Growltiger
 - Les Twins as Plato and Socrates
 - Jaih Betote as Coricopat
 - Jonadette Carpio as Jemima
 - Daniela Norman as Demeter
 - Bluey Robinson as Alonzo
 - Freya Rowley as Jellylorum
 - Ida Saki as Electra
 - Zizi Strallen as Tantomile
 - Eric Underwood as Admetus
- and Judi Dench as Deuteronomy

Setting: Central London, sometime between the world wars.

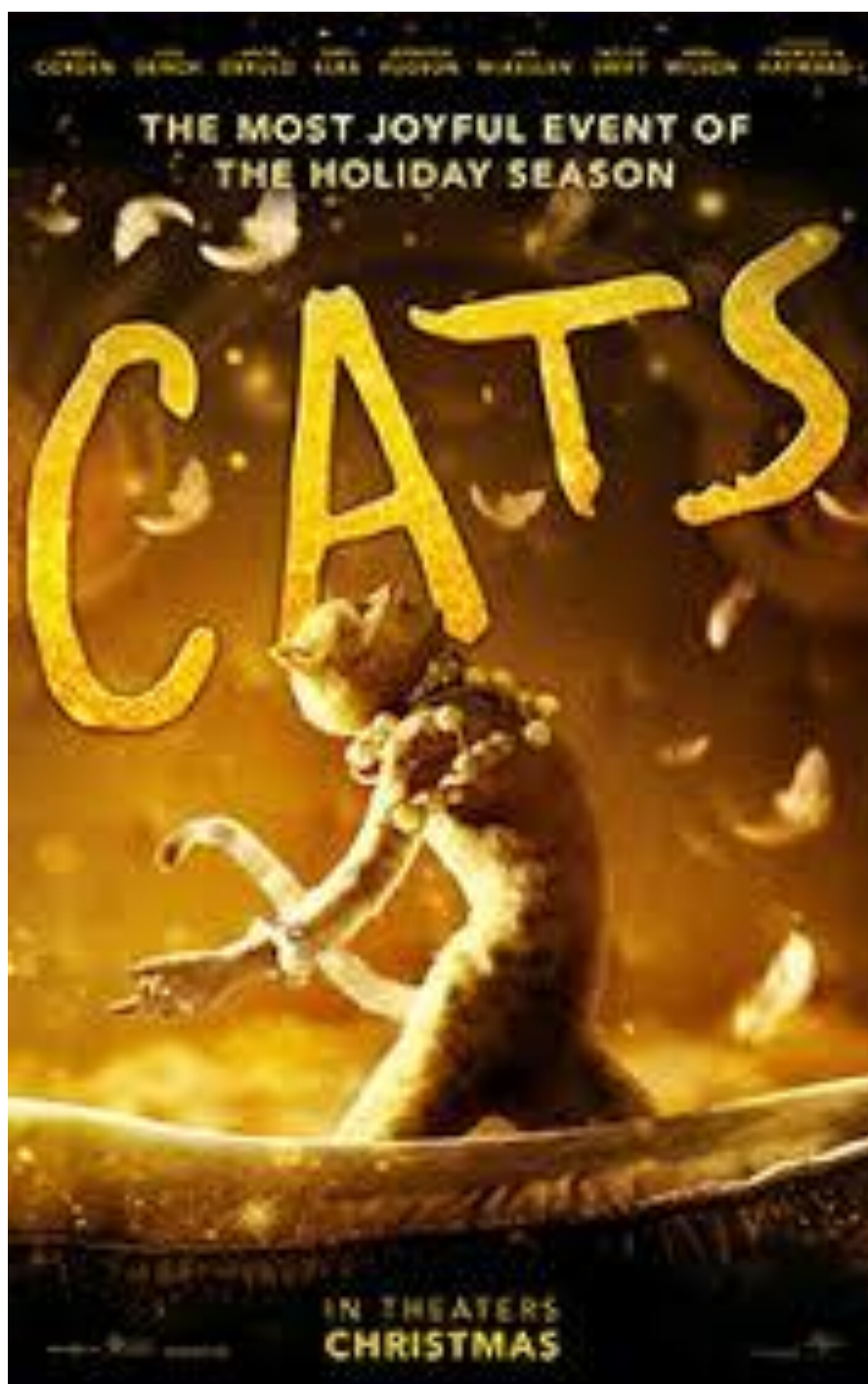
Plot: Victoria the White Cat (Francesca Hayward) finds herself dumped in an alley by a rich woman, the only human to appear, albeit only from the elbows and knees down. Obviously a young and pampered housecat, she meets up with the alley's feline denizens, a motley crew known as the Jellicles. They introduce her to their world, where she has some adventures in a human's house, gets lost and then is found again, being protected by several amongst the Jellicles, most consistently by the kindly young magician Mr. Mistoffelees (Laurie Davidson).

The night of Victoria's arrival is also the night of the special arrival of the venerated magician/high priestess/virtual goddess Deuteronomy (Judy Dench). She has the power to give one of the Jellicles a second chance at life (cats have nine lives, right?) but which one? Deuteronomy will decide that by what they can do with their life stories in song. These will be performed in a deserted theatre where Gus (Ian McKellen) recalls his glorious past decades there. Each cat puts his case forward. We hear songs from railway cats, river barge cats, domesticated gourmets and most memorably by Grizabella, the once famed singer Glamour Cat (Jennifer Hudson) who is now broken and piteous. She has the most memorable song from the show, 'Memory' the only song in this show to make it into popular culture. Macavity the Mystery Cat (Idris Elba) a villainous magician, turns up to perform his eponymous song and if that does not work, to win the show through kidnapping and threats against his rivals. As always musical villains are defeated and justice wins. Deuteronomy concludes the performances with her song reminding the audience of the ways of cats and an appeal to us to treat them well.

Assessment:

On release in December 2019 critics were frequently either savage or dismissive towards this film. Even those with some good things to say praised only parts or complimented individual performers. The general public also disliked it, *Cats* was a box office disaster from its opening onwards, despite premiering just before Christmas, which usually ensures at least a big initial success for family films. This was also

unexpected, as *Cats* was one of the most popular stage musicals of the late twentieth century.



Cinematic poster Wikipedia

What happened?

To begin at the beginning...

Cats is based on a collection of poems by T.S. Elliot (1888-1965) *Old Possum's Boook of Practical Cats*. Most of his other literary output wearies, being dreary, enervated, portentous and pretentious in its presentation and pessimistic or tragic in its outlook. The topic matter usually concerns muddled neurotics tangled up in problems of their own making. Difficulties arise in believing *Old Possum's Boook of Practical Cats* was written by the same man. This collection humms along with vitality as the lines almost tumble over each other in imitation of tussling, hurtling felines. Affectionate humour, whimsicality and zestful energy permeate Elliot's collection; if only these qualities had done the same for the film.

These poems inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1981 stage production *Cats*. This rapidly became more than being an initial hit on Broadway and London's West End; it was a perennial global hit. Professional stage performances could be watched in the Australian outback, China's inland city of Xian, Charleston South Carolina and on many stages in between these three points. In 1998 a filmed version of the London stage production appeared on television and then on video. In 2019 a tour of the stage production went ahead, just before the film's premiere. Another was to start in 2020.



The original stage poster. Courtesy Wikipedia



From left to Right: Idris Elba, Francesca Hayward and Laurie Davidson. Universal Pictures. Used following requested permission steps.

All this initially sounds like benefits for the film's popularity, but consider the cliché 'too much of a good thing.' The cinematic market for a popular play can already be glutted by successful stage versions and *Cats* has had nearly forty years of successful global versions. This also sets expectations amongst those who wish to see a cinematic version of what they have already seen on stage or those who know of the musical by reputation; between them these two groups comprise most of the potential global audience.

The film version would disappoint those in either group. The filmmakers did seem to be aware of these problems and apparently worked to prevent them. Weber and Swift added their composition 'Beautiful Ghosts.' This new song, fitted in well with the earlier repertoire. The filmmakers wisely put together a dream cast, mixing seasoned veterans such as Judy Dench and Ian Mckellen with well known, but not aged performers Jennifer Hudson, Rebel Wilson and Idris Elba. Wisest of all was casting experienced young stage performers who were new to cinematic audiences in plum roles. The lead role of Victoria the White cat went to a ballerina, Victoria Hayward.

Critics complained about tacky and ineffectual special effects, particularly the make up and fur. These complaints were so frequent that after a few days *Cats* was withdrawn from circulation and

resubmitted. This reviewer must have seen that second version because these initial flaws was not obvious.

What seemed obvious was the frequent lack of fun, vitality and exuberance which are all crucial for success in every musical comedy. There were segments that were right, but segments are not enough. The film does not lack energy, far from it, but energy is not vitality. To use another apt cliché that deserves thought, the cast were going through their paces. They frequently show the type of wearied, dutiful energy common in the last performances of a long running stage play. Thinking that this was the problem, I looked up the casting and few were stage veterans from this play, but my suspicions were on the right trail. The film had a long, too long gestation, from early 2016 until literally hours before its premiere. Rehearsals and filming took six months. *Wikipedia* quoted Taylor Swift concerning the cast's preparation at cat school where they would crawl around the floor for endless hours, hissing at each other. Trying to ininterminably be a cat would wear away at anybody's enthusiasm.

Somebody should have told somebody powerful that even the best cast cannot really become humanoid cats and it would have been better to let the actors be humans with stored up energy so they could share the fun with the audience.

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