

The Awefull Afterlife of *Cats*: From the Illustrated Book to the Stage

La terrible inmortalidad de *Cats*: Del libro ilustrado al escenario

ESTER DÍAZ MORILLO

Institution address: Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas, Facultad de Filología, Paseo Senda del Rey. 28040 Madrid

E-mail: ediaz@flog.uned.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-5505-2463

Received: 29/11/2021. Accepted: 13/12/2022.

How to cite this article: Díaz Morillo, Ester. "The Awefull Afterlife of *Cats*: From the Illustrated Book to the Stage." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 44, 2023, pp. 133–53.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.44.2023.133-153>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939) gained popularity due to its adaptation as an acclaimed musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1981). For Eliot, the popular entertainment was a great source of inspiration, which makes examining the opposite process especially interesting—to see how his poetry inspired other arts and how its adaptation has interpreted or transferred *Practical Cats'* strong rhythm and sense of humour. The focus of this paper will be on how Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats* is in tune with Eliot's theories regarding drama, music, and dance, especially influenced by music hall.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot; *Cats*; musical; adaptation; poetry; music hall.

Summary: Introduction. How to Ad-Dress Eliot's *Practical Cats*. The Dramatic Monologue and Characterisation in *Practical Cats*. The Dramatic Monologue and the Musical. Eliot's Verse Drama and its Popular Roots. *Cats* as Embodiment of Eliot's Aspirations for Verse Drama. Conclusions.

Resumen: *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939) de T. S. Eliot adquirió mayor popularidad tras ser adaptado a musical por Andrew Lloyd Webber (1981). El entretenimiento popular fue para Eliot una fuente de inspiración, lo que hace especialmente interesante examinar el proceso contrario: ver cómo su poesía ha inspirado otras artes y cómo esta adaptación ha interpretado o transferido el ritmo y sentido del humor de *Practical Cats*. Este artículo se centra en cómo el musical *Cats* de Lloyd Webber está en continuidad con las teorías de Eliot sobre drama, música y baile, especialmente influenciadas por el *music hall*.

Palabras clave: T. S. Eliot; *Cats*; musical; adaptación; poesía; music hall.

Sumario: Introducción. Cómo enfrentarse a *Practical Cats* de Eliot. Monólogo dramático y caracterización en *Practical Cats*. El monólogo dramático y el musical. El drama en verso de Eliot

y sus raíces populares. *Cats* como encarnación de las aspiraciones de Eliot para el drama en verso. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot's celebrated collection of poems *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was first published in 1939 but since then it has witnessed a continuing presence on stage and in illustrated editions by different artists. This whimsical poetry collection has gained more popularity due to its adaptation as an acclaimed and award-winning musical written by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1981). The record-breaking megamusical *Cats*, directed by Trevor Nunn and choreographed by Gillian Lynne, was launched in London's West End and New York's Broadway in 1981 and 1982 respectively. From the moment of its initial opening, *Cats* became an immediate sensation and set new records in musical productions: to this day it remains the fourth-longest-running show on Broadway and the seventh-longest-running in the West End. The musical has been seen by millions of people worldwide, staged in numerous countries and translated into fifteen languages.

Eliot's widow, Valerie, demanded that "the poet's own words—not some paraphrase or script" (Sutherland) were used in the musical, including an unpublished draft of "Grizabella," a poem which was discarded as too depressing, but which helped create the plot for the show. As a result, most of the lyrics are taken from *Practical Cats* with barely any modifications, except for the acclaimed song "Memory" (adapted from Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night"), and a brief song called "The Moments of Happiness" (adapted from a passage in Eliot's *Four Quartets*). The musical is characterised by its being told through music, which ranges from diverse styles, with no dialogue in between songs, and by the importance of dance.

In the following sections, it will be established how Lloyd Webber's musical is in continuity with Eliot's dramatic monologue and his ideal of contemporary drama influenced by the music hall tradition. An analysis of how *Cats* draws on Eliot's theories regarding verse drama, which take their cue from the popular entertainment admired by Eliot will also be carried out. Lloyd Webber's musical translates several of Eliot's theories into practice, engendering an embodiment of the poet's ideas on contemporary drama as it brings together his poetic practice and his aspirations towards

verse drama. The present article will contribute to further current scholarship in adaptation studies regarding Lloyd Webber's *Cats*.

Thus far these studies have been few and far between, though we can find previous scholarship such as Bay-Cheng's examination of Eliot's poetic playfulness and Lloyd Webber's adaptation, or Siropoulos' study on the blockbuster aesthetics of *Cats*. Yet a cohesive comparative analysis was long overdue, i.e., an analysis which considers not only Eliot's *Practical Cats*, but also his theories and ideas concerning drama, music, and dance, since *Cats*, as a musical, is a combination of these three aspects. Hence, engaging with previous work on Eliot and *Cats*, this article seeks to begin a more active conversation about the connections between Eliot as a poet and essayist and Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation, a line of study which remains mainly underexplored. The sections which follow explore Eliot's own works and theories, showing how they can be connected to *Cats* in ways thus far neglected, since Eliot's main aspirations and influences for his own verse drama inform the making of *Cats*. This article aims to offer a new perspective on Lloyd Webber's *Cats* by examining the production without placing its limit on regarding it as a mere adaptation based on Eliot's *Practical Cats*, but rather by drawing parallels with the poet's postulates in a broader sense.

1. HOW TO AD-DRESS ELIOT'S *PRACTICAL CATS*

When Eliot writes for children, he fills his verses with plenty of action. In *Practical Cats* there is a plethora of felines *doing* things: dancing, performing, conducting, stealing, etc. Here Eliot is extremely playful in the way he portrays his characters and in the way he writes about them. Still, it is not only *what* he writes about the cats, also *how* he does it, for language is playful as well. According to Sutherland, Eliot relies on two traditions of children's verse; both the nursery rhyme and nonsense poetry have great potential for its musical adaptation. These qualities will be capitalised by Andrew Lloyd Webber in his musical production, as Eliot's musicality and use of nonsense poetry prove to be extremely attractive assets for a musical adaptation. Eliot had already shown his interest in children's rhyme in *The Waste Land* ("London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Eliot, *Poems* 71). In *Practical Cats*, the strong rhythm and the use of rhyme recall this type of traditional verse for children: the repetitive structure, heavy and witty rhymes, and repetitions of words or catch phrases make these lines easy to remember. This

redundancy favours musical adaptation, for it gives a singsong quality to the poems, which will be exploited by Lloyd Webber in his show. The use of recurring motifs and reprises play an important role in the music and provide a parallel for Eliot's verses, for, as the poet himself pointed out, "[t]he use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music" ("Music of Poetry" 321).

The musicality of Eliot's verses is obvious when hearing the poems read aloud—a good example of that is the recording of Eliot himself reading the whole collection of *Practical Cats*.¹ Lloyd Webber claimed to have been surprised at how much these poems sounded like song lyrics, which reminded him of the popular songs of Eliot's time (Riedel 281). He was not the first one to recognise the musical potential of these poems: British composer Alan Rawsthorne set six of the poems for speaker and orchestra, which was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1954 and later recorded with actor Robert Donat as the speaker.

Besides that, nonsense poetry is by definition playful, and Eliot invents nonsense words that play with the sound patterns of language: "effanineffable," "huffery-snuffery," "Firefrefiddle," or cat names such as "Bombalurina," "Jennyanydots," "Rumpelteazer," etc. These words mostly rely on sound effects, on the way in which they are pronounced, instead of on meaning. Eliot noted about musical poems in "The Music of Poetry" (1942) that nonsense is closer to music than other modes of expression (qtd. in Rother 187), where the "musical pattern of sound" and the "musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words" are two patterns which are "indissoluble and one" ("Music of Poetry" 316). Interestingly, Eliot said about poetic drama that "[t]o work out a play in verse is to be working like a musician ... it is to see the whole thing as a musical pattern," (qtd. in Fuller 141) as music cannot exist without pattern—though words can—and poetry can be moulded after musical devices. In brief, Eliot's use of nonsense poetry and the singsong qualities of his lively verses tinge his poetry with a musicality which will be easily exploited by Lloyd Webber.

¹ This reading is fully available on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9v06L_NIYE&list=OLAK5uy_l0u-5LtL9NEAr7mzJ5M-AzgoWqK4Iv4nc.

2. THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND CHARACTERISATION IN *PRACTICAL CATS*

Before discussing the techniques of characterisation through the use of the dramatic monologue and how this is transformed in the musical production, which will be addressed in the following section, it is noteworthy to observe first how Eliot characterises the different feline voices in his verses. In his poems cats are endowed with names, descriptions, and strong and eccentric personalities, which render them quite apt to be adapted into a stage production. Most of them perform human actions as in a giant game of role-play. Felines are psychologically characterised, as they are usually presented in a dramatic situation (battles, thefts, performance, theatre). Growltiger is, for instance, “the roughest cat that ever roamed at large. / From Gravesend up to Oxford he pursued his evil aims” (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 14), while Rum Tum Tugger “is a Curious Cat” whose “disobliging ways are a matter of habit” (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 26), just to give a couple of examples. The poem of “The Song of the Jellicles” presents this world inhabited by cats with human traits and attitudes.

Changes of speaker are, moreover, indicated by a metrical variation in the poems. More precisely, poems begin with a specific metre to introduce the cat through the poet’s voice, which is narrative. Eliot calls this the second voice of poetry in his essay “The Three Voices of Poetry,” for it is “the voice of the poet addressing an audience” (817). The metre is then varied when someone else, other than the narrator, speaks within the poem, especially humans. These other dramatic voices are the third voice of poetry, when “the voice of the poet . . . attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse” (Eliot, “Three Voices” 817). Voices are represented with different metres and position of lines. An illustrative example can be seen at the end in “Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer” when it is the family who speaks, where we can observe a shifting of the final lines to the left as compared with the lines of the narrator’s voice:

And when you heard a dining-room smash
Or up from the pantry there came a loud crash
Or down from the library came a loud *ping*
From a vase which was commonly said to be
Ming—
Then the family would say: ‘Now which was which cat?’

It was Mungojerrie! AND Rumpelteazer!’—And there’s
 Nothing at all to be done about that! (Eliot, *Practical Cats*
 42).

A comparison could as well be drawn between the first two lines and the actual words of the human speaker in the last lines, which can be found in “Old Deuteronomy,” where Eliot plays with the metre, but also with placement of lines so as to create movement and tension:

At the sight of that placid and bland physiognomy,
 When he sits in the sun on the vicarage wall,
 The Oldest Inhabitant croaks: ‘Well, of all...
 Things... Can it be... really!... No!... Yes!...
 Ho! hi!
 Oh, my eye!
 My sight may be failing, but yet I confess
 I believe it is Old Deuteronomy!’ (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 44).

We see here that verses waltz in rhythm, metre, and placement: there is a variation when Eliot uses exclamatory and staccato refrains for the human speaker, which then return to the tetrameter of the beginning of the poem with the voice of the narrator. In Bay-Cheng’s words, “[r]ecalling Charles Dickens’s line ‘He do the police in different voices’—Eliot’s working title for *The Waste Land* (1922)—these rhythmic devices effectively pull the reader into the experience of the poem . . . Eliot do the cats in different voices” (232).

The characters have a different “kind of poetry” which identify them, according to their particularities, in conformity with Eliot’s concept of verse drama (“Three Voices” 820). As a matter of fact, while working on *Practical Cats*, Eliot was also writing his verse drama *The Family Reunion* (1939), where he employs the same technique for the members of the chorus: every individual speaker has different verse patterns and rhythms so as to represent their personalities (Smith 119–20).

This leads us to the notion of the dramatic monologue, for each feline has its own personal voice and the poetry employed whenever one of them speaks characterises them. Douglass (117–18) has pointed out how “Old Deuteronomy” and “Gus, The Theatre Cat” use dactylic tetrameter, whilst “The Old Gumbie Cat” is in octameter and “Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer” uses octameter stanzas and tetrameter refrains, to name a

few examples. But even in these poems, as observed before, Eliot plays with metre and rhythm, especially when there is a transition from the narrator to the feline character or the human speakers within the poem.

3. THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND THE MUSICAL

Delving into the techniques of characterisation, as already briefly mentioned, each poem in *Practical Cats* introduces a feline in a manner which recalls dramatic monologues, which Eliot employed in some of his famous early poems, as in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915). In that sense, Eliot is said to have “contributed more to the development of the form [dramatic monologue] than any poet since Browning” (Langbaum 77). These monologues express an interest in character and the mind of the speaker. In *Practical Cats* it is the author/narrator who mainly speaks about each cat, their lives, and characters, but the constant references to the first-person narrator, the characterisation of different voices within the poem, and how the speaker addresses his audience are reminiscent of dramatic monologues. It is noteworthy that the initial title for this collection was *Mr. Eliot’s Book of Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats as Recited to Him by the Man in White Spats*, which strengthens the idea of the dramatic monologue to a certain extent—as a monologue to be heard by a listener or an audience. Exceptions to this are the last poem, “Cat Morgan Introduces Himself,” which is a dramatic monologue by the feline character himself, and “Gus, the Theatre Cat,” who gives a monologue about his life as a music hall star within the poem.

Characterisation in the musical production is achieved through costumes and make-up, for its purpose is to establish the cats’ personality at first sight, as conceived by stage designer John Napier. They are presented in a lively manner and many of them have mischievous personalities. Music—and even dance—also contributes to the characterisation of the felines, as there is a different type of music for each of them. Asparagus, or “Gus, the Theatre Cat,” has a nostalgic song reminiscent of the music hall atmosphere, as an indication of the cat’s age and classical training. “Mr Mistoffeeles” and “The Rum Tum Tugger” are rock numbers, whilst “Old Deuteronomy” presents a lullaby-styled song, which almost turns into an anthem, as a hint to the relevance of the character within the musical (Snelson 31). “The Old Gumbie Cat” includes a tap-dancing routine, a style reminiscent of the 1930s, and “Macavity, The

Mystery Cat” is a sensual number the choreography of which reminds us of Bob Fosse, just to give a few examples.

As pointed out by Siropoulos, “[t]he use of pastiche in the musicalization of the poems creates some sort of quickly grasped musical characterization for each cat type, a musical image that communicates directly to the audience each character’s defining features” (*Ideology* 178). Everything is, in fact, very physical in this musical production, as the attitudes of the feline characters are expressed mainly through body movement and dance, which is what further characterises these cats, which are portrayed accordingly as sensual, playful, mysterious, shabby, etc. Napier offers us, then, a fantastic anthropomorphic feline world where cats

move in a combination of animal movement, acrobatics and various dancing styles, sing a vast array of musical pastiches and speak in a distinctively Victorian and Edwardian language, which contrasts in a playfully dissonant way with their ghetto-fabulous corporeal stylization (leg-warmers, arm-warmers, punk haircuts, new-wave make-up). (Siropoulos, “*Evita*” 174)

Collage, the most favoured technique in *Cats*, enables the combination and blending of these dissonant styles. Moreover, the musical will further reinforce the concept of the dramatic monologue by transforming many of these character portraits into first-person lyrics, making them true dramatic monologues in which the felines introduce themselves in order to explain the reason why they are worthy of going to the Heaviside Layer. That is to say, though some of the songs in *Cats* have a chorus or a character singing and introducing another cat—as is the case of “The Old Gumbie Cat”—, several of them adapt the poem so as to allow the cats to speak for themselves. Some of these modifications can be seen in “The Rum Tum Tugger,” where a chorus of cats still sing the parts of “The Rum Tum Tugger is a Curious Cat,” while the following lines describing his habits are transformed to the first-person singular. Therefore, it is Rum Tum Tugger who introduces himself to the audience in a—dramatic—monologue, as there is no dialogue between the characters on stage and they only interact with one another through gestures and dance. Another example is “Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer,” whose modifications can be observed here:

Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer were a very notorious
couple of cats

...

They had an extensive reputation. They made their
home in Victoria Grove—
That was merely their centre of operation, for they were
incurably given to rove. (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 36–37)

And the song of the musical, which changes the pronouns and tenses to allow the cats to present themselves for the audience in the present and in the first-person plural, as a couple of indivisible cats:

Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer
We're a notorious couple of cats

...

We have an extensive reputation
We make our home in Victoria Grove
This is merely *our* centre of operation
For *we are* incurably given to rove. (“Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer,”
emphasis added)

Yet perhaps the clearest example in the musical is offered through the song “Memory,” the lyrics of which were taken from Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” This dramatic monologue lets Grizabella reminisce on stage about her past and voice her hopelessness in a ballad, or rather a pop aria. In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” a monologist and flâneur wanders the city streets and, while observing the nocturnal scene, recalls past memories. The speaker is presented as isolated and hopeless, highlighting the bleakness of mundane life and futile existence. Both speakers in the poem and in the song are portrayed as lonely and weary of their sterile life.

4. ELIOT’S VERSE DRAMA AND ITS POPULAR ROOTS

The previous section has shown to which extent *Practical Cats* and the musical tally with Eliot’s concept of contemporary drama as regards dramatic monologues and the characterisation of voices, made evident via the metrical variations and rhythms. Speaking of drama, Eliot disapproved of the prose realism and absence of rhythm in the plays of authors such as Ibsen, adopting new verse forms himself. An illustrative example is his drama *Sweeney Agonistes*, with musical rhythms that find their roots in the music hall, which Eliot would continue to explore in his essays and in later works—such as *Practical Cats*. Plays had to be poetic for Eliot, since his

purpose was to revive verse drama. He would even argue that “the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature” (Eliot, “Dialogue” 407), and, in order to be popular, it should be written with verses transparent enough for everyone to understand, as poetry, in Eliot’s own words, “is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all” (Eliot, “Poetry and Drama” 591).

Concerning verse drama, Eliot was notably inspired by the popular entertainment of his day, most especially the music hall. As Faulk argues, Eliot “envisioned a new verse drama . . . with the rhythms and idioms of modern life” which would “attract a wide audience by artfully combining sophisticated ideas with contemporary amusements” (189). Eliot praised music hall comedians as performers who were able to adapt themselves and their performance to the required ends (“Possibility” 283) and saw the music hall as a type of performance which thrived on the involvement of its audience, an aspect to be ideally emulated by contemporary drama. This music hall tradition, which combined popular songs, tricks, stunts, and comedy with no thematic connection, can be found in *Practical Cats* and in the musical as a key element, as the next section will demonstrate.

As his broader criticism reveals, Eliot’s sources of inspiration for his concept of verse drama were much wider, for his drama theory and practice were also rooted in the popular entertainment and artistic revolution initiated by the Ballets Russes which so deeply influenced his writings. Rhythm is an important aspect for Eliot, both in his poetry and in his drama. He wrote about the origins of drama, whose roots he saw in ritualistic dance (Eliot, “Beating” 473). Eliot was indeed a connoisseur of dance, and he greatly admired the Russian Ballet, which, for him, tapped into the ritual expressing “something intangible, or spiritual, which speaks to the entire human community” (Richardson 163).

Keeping these statements in mind, it is no wonder that his *Practical Cats* also features amazing dancers who “know to dance a gavotte and a jig” (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 32). In fact, as Douglass points out, “The Song of the Jellicles” is “a ritual poem about ritual; and the Ball is a ritual dance of life” (122). Eliot’s critical responses to the Russian Ballet allow us to see his literary aesthetic goals: the relationship between performer and the work of art, and the integration of popular art into high art. Koritz notes that “[m]ajor tenets of literary modernism, as expressed in Eliot’s criticism of the late teens and early twenties, are cut from the same conceptual cloth as many of the aesthetic values informing the dance modernism of the Russian Ballet during the same period” (137–38).

Eliot praised the impersonal performance of dancers such as Vaslav Nijinsky and Léonide Massine, for they adhered to a tradition, to “an askesis” in Eliot’s own words (“Dialogue” 410). Dancers sacrificed themselves to this tradition (Mester 116), as their performances were subjected to the text they were enacting. This is a recurring idea in Eliot, for he talked about it too in “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” (1920), where he lamented the “triumph of the actor over the play,” as performers are “interested not in form but in opportunities for virtuosity or in the communication of [their] ‘personality’” (283).

While discussing a representation of Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1920, Eliot emphasises again that “the ideal actor for a poetic drama is the actor *with no personal vanity*,” since “poetry is something which the actor cannot improve or ‘interpret’ . . . poetry can only be transmitted” (“*Duchess*” 173). It is important to note that Eliot said the same thing about poetry when he wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (111).

Poetry, thus, should be “impersonal,” separated from the character of the writer. The artist must accordingly suppress their own personality in favour of tradition, be that literary tradition or ballet, for there is a complete separation between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot, “Tradition” 109). Along the lines of John Keats’s understanding of the “*camelion* Poet” who “is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character. . . . A poet . . . has no identity” (Keats 500–1), for Eliot “a poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium” (“Tradition” 110), and “[t]he progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (“Tradition” 108).

All in all, impersonality, tradition, and self-sacrifice are key concepts in Eliot’s essays. He also admired the way in which ballet dancers made use of the popular while transforming it into fine art, which is something he praised too in music hall artist Marie Lloyd. In this regard, he observed that “our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art” (Eliot, “Marie Lloyd” 283). For all these reasons, ballet became for Eliot a model for his verse drama, as an art which expertly integrated tradition and innovation, the popular and the elitist, rhythm and ritual; an art that conveys an immediate and direct effect to the audience (Eliot, “*Duchess*” 173) and which is universal.

5. CATS AS EMBODIMENT OF ELIOT'S ASPIRATIONS FOR VERSE DRAMA

Keeping these statements in mind, in *Cats* we can see how dancers on stage must be “impersonal” in the sense that they assume the personality of a cat; they are not even “human” anymore. Curiously enough—and quite appropriately—the movement of the actors on stage has been referred to as “neo-primitive” by Siropoulos (*Ideology* 210, 227). During rehearsals, performers in the musical had to take part in “Cat School,” where they learnt how to portray the movements and physicality of a cat. Through improvisation and mimics, they learnt to behave like felines, so as to be able to perform on stage incorporating all these cat-like manners.

At the same time, in Lynne’s daunting choreography they mix popular dances on stage (rock, jazz, tap dancing, modern dancing, acrobatics, etc.) with more classical ballet, as Lynne herself was a trained and successful ballerina. Unsurprisingly, for some of the numbers, actors had to be trained ballet dancers. Such is the case of Mr. Mistoffelees, whose solo has some of the most difficult choreography, including twenty-four consecutive *fouettés en tournant*. Regarded as an extremely challenging production to dance, most especially the “Jellicle Ball” number (a 10-minute unbroken dance), the show pushed their performers to their limits with the dancing, acrobatic, and cat-style behaviour. As has been recognised, *Cats* is mainly “a piece of physical theatre: a corporeal spectacle, in which . . . [the character’s] essence is communicated basically through movement” (Siropoulos, *Ideology* 184). That is why *Cats* has been labelled as a “dance musical.”

Interestingly, Eliot’s cats are heavily influenced by the popular entertainment the poet was seeking to incorporate in his drama, since many of his felines are performers, dancers, actors, or magicians. In addition to that, though writing in the 1930s, Eliot employs an English reminiscent of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, in its structure and lexicon. This fact proves to be even more significant when we think that it was precisely in the early Victorian era that the music hall came into vogue. Furthermore, while Eliot struggled to reconcile high art and popular culture, as Chinitz explores in his work *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, *Cats* succeeded at this by having Eliot’s verses as a libretto and presenting it in the form of a musical, highly accessible for every kind of audience. Yet, as a musical production, *Cats* naturally had to transform Eliot’s poems in order to achieve a narrative structure around the Jellicles, a tribe of cats, so that the production is not just based on solo performances on each individual poem.

This is what happened in the initial stages of the production, for it began as a cycle of character songs at Sydmonton Festival in 1980 (Snelson 31). The musical, therefore, tells the story of the Jellicles in the night in which it is decided which cat will ascend to the Heaviside Layer to be reborn and embark on a new life. That is the linking motive for the slim plot. Hence, music plays an essential role in the characterization of the felines and confers cohesion to the show. Poetry, music, and dance blend here over traditional narrative, since the show draws closer to the music hall, a kind of entertainment close to Eliot's heart, as previously argued. The influence of popular music is, indeed, traceable in all of Eliot's works. For instance, Katherine Mullin ("Sounds in *The Waste Land*") has written about the influence of music hall in *The Waste Land*, a poem with a quick succession of scenes, registers, and voices, in addition to the significance of other popular arts such as ragtime or jazz in the rhythms of the poem. Mullin observes that *The Waste Land* is "a noisy poem" where music, especially the music hall tradition, plays a vital role in its structure and idiom: just like in a music hall, *The Waste Land* rapidly changes registers and scenes, offering different sequences of disconnected acts.

Parallels between music hall acts and the musical can be traced in the characters and their musical numbers. First, the character of Bustopher Jones reminds us of the *lion comique*, typical of music hall entertainments, who appeared elegantly dressed as a parody of the "swells"—rich and fashionable people from the upper classes. Bustopher Jones is indeed an "aristocratic" cat, for "he's the St. James's Street Cat!" (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 88) and leads an idle life from club to club; that is why he is called the "Brummell of Cats" (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 90), a reference to Beau Brummell, a very popular man of fashion in Regency England.

Nevertheless, if there is a character within the book reminiscent of the music hall that is "Gus, The Theatre Cat," whose acting career epitomises Victorian theatrical entertainment, with its many references to Queen Victoria, actors Sir Henry Irving and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and the Victorian pantomime. He was a theatre star who now complains that "the Theatre's certainly not what it was," and that "kittens . . . do not get trained / As we did in the days when Victoria reigned" (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 87). This reminds us of essays written by Eliot in the 1920s, as this seems to be a reference to the decadence of music hall entertainment, which Eliot decried when he wrote about the demised of music hall artist Marie Lloyd ("Marie Lloyd" 419). This might also be a reference to the decadence represented by prose realism and absence of rhythm, as previously

observed. In the stage production, the melody of this number evokes in its style the music hall with its nostalgic undertones, and so does too the musical number of “The Old Gumbie Cat,” which features a tap-dancing routine, part of music hall and vaudeville entertainments.

Moreover, *Practical Cats* and, ergo, the musical, is full of specialty acts. For instance, Mr. Mistoffelees is the “Original Conjuring Cat” (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 60) with amazing magical powers who performs great tricks of illusion and prestidigitation. In the musical, his number is awash with artifices characteristic of theatrical entertainment such as the music hall: he makes his grand entrance by sliding down a rope in the middle of the stage and combines his spectacular dance moves with magic tricks through special effects. Simply put, in the musical production this character becomes a true showman. Macavity also reminds us of magic acts of the music hall tradition due to his mystical powers: he can perform hypnosis, appear and disappear at will, and teleport. He is a master of disguises too. In addition, Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer are two cats which are described as “knockabout clowns, quick-change comedians, / tight-rope walkers and acrobats” (Eliot, *Practical Cats* 35), that is, they are proper music hall performers. In the musical, their performance has a dance number full of acrobatic feats, ending the act with a series of their signature cartwheels. Quite appropriately, the music of this number begins in a circus/vaudeville-style.

Yet not only are characters reminiscent of the music hall tradition, but there are also musical numbers, such as “The Awefull Battle of the Pokes and the Pollicles,” which is performed as a play within the musical, sung by Munkustrap, who narrates while the other cats act the story out. This can be seen as a metatheatrical reference—a play within a play—which can also remind us of the—comedy—acts so popular in the music hall. Interestingly, as Bay-Cheng observes, metatheatrical references and role-play are some of the thematic connections which can be drawn between Eliot’s *Practical Cats* and the three plays (*The Rock: A Pageant Play*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *The Family Reunion*) he was working on at the same time (229). Lastly, we also have the example of “Gus, The Theatre Cat,” which is sung nearly verbatim, the only alteration being “He once played a Tiger—could do it again” to “I once played Growltiger.” This small modification in the lyrics leads Gus to recreate his role as a pirate cat singing the song “Growltiger’s Last Stand.” This number, not always present in the different productions, is usually a pastiche of jazz and a parody of Italian opera and is full of metatheatrical references.

The musical features elements of the revue as well, as it brings together music and dance over a narrative line. The origin of *Cats* as a song cycle already points to its resemblance to the revue and concept musical, as each song focused on introducing the feline characters and the world they inhabit without any storyline at first. In Jubin's words, "[f]rom a dramaturgical point of view, it is perfectly legitimate to call *Cats* a revue" (158), as it mostly presents different numbers for the felines themselves where the visual presentation has great significance, and its foremost aim is to offer an experience for spectators. With a general loose theme as background, the revue usually presented acts which fluctuated between dance ensembles and solo performances with a single—and mostly large—cast and splendid sets.

Naturally, this connects back to the music hall, for it could be argued that there is a continuum from the music hall to the revue, and then to the concept musical. It has been noted that *Cats* lacks a traditional narrative structure and cohesiveness, and, consequently, the musical is rather strange in its conception, combining "elements of the revue and concept musical" (Everett and Laird xliv). The concept musical could be considered an evolution from the revue, as it develops around a general theme, instead of a plot, and the emphasis lies on style and staging.

Just as Schuchard describes that Eliot must have been "electrified to see the artistic fusion" in Cocteau's ballet *Parade* (qtd. in Mester 120), he might also have been by the blending of contemporary elements in *Cats*. These coincide to a certain extent with those features enumerated by Russian ballet dancer Massine about *Parade*: "ragtime music, jazz, the cinema, billboard advertising, circus and music-hall techniques" always "adapting them to [their] own ends" (105). Though Jones advises against drawing "too close an analogy between any Diaghilev production . . . and the relatively spare aesthetic of an Eliot poem" (225), it would not be such a preposterous idea to conclude that the influence of the Ballets Russes on Eliot is to be traced in his *Practical Cats* and, consequently, in the musical, where body movement, dance, and visual aesthetics are highlighted, for all of them thrive on the hybridity Eliot admired and employed throughout his work.

Cats would end up becoming a "megamusical," an absolute commercial success and a popular cultural reference up to the present day. And for all these reasons, according to Lentricchia, Eliot "would have loved *Cats*" (280), for he aspired to be like the music hall artist Marie Lloyd, expertly achieving both artistry and popularity, "able to control . . .

audiences by maintaining ‘sympathy’ with them while still retaining a ‘moral superiority’” (Badenhausen 126). Chinitz is, in this regard, more sceptical: Eliot would have been happy to take part in the most popular Broadway production, although he would have wished that the musical “had been rather better than it was” (Chinitz 18). Curiously, this musical production would posthumously award Eliot his second—and third—Tony Award, which he had already won for Best Play for the Broadway production of his verse drama *The Cocktail Party* in 1950, his greatest success in the theatre.

However, many have pointed out the irony of “the fact that one of the most austere poets of the 20th century . . . should have provided the pretext for such a gigantic extravaganza” (Kissel qtd. in Chinitz 18). The musical *Cats* became, in truth, a mass phenomenon and blockbuster, loved by the audience, but with mixed reviews by critics. The book *Practical Cats* shares in this disregard by critics, neglected initially perhaps for not being serious enough. Yet this collection of poetry “is the only one of his works in which Eliot succeeded in being a poet for the whole community,” as Stephen Medcalf has noted (qtd. in Chinitz 228n53). Thanks to *Practical Cats* and its multiple adaptations, Eliot’s “desire to reach out to a broader audience” (Badenhausen 126) has been fulfilled. Eliot praised the “collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art” (“Marie Lloyd” 420), as drama was for him “the ideal form in which an artist could interact with his audience” (Badenhausen 126). Following that line, *Cats* once again embodies Eliot’s aspirations by providing an immersive experience and interacting with its spectators.

CONCLUSIONS

As Eliot suggested about Marie Lloyd, *Cats*, with its roots in the English music hall and the revue, epitomises the popular itself, representative of a contemporary mass cultural phenomenon where the highbrow and the lowbrow, the old and new go hand in hand and overflow old boundaries. Overall, *Cats*, for all its faults, was successful in rendering new life to the initially misjudged playfulness of Eliot’s *Practical Cats*. It created a pleasurable experience where the original creator is present, and, at the same time, hidden, for his verse, his aspirations and inspirations for his verse drama, his spirit is at the core of the production, though many spectators may ignore it.

As an adaptation on *Practical Cats*, the musical production succeeds in giving these playful and strongly characterised felines the opportunity to introduce themselves in a technique which recalls Eliot's use of dramatic monologues. Furthermore, as already noted, characterisation is mostly achieved through music, employing different genres throughout the show just as Eliot portrays different voices with the variation of metres, placement of lines, and rhythm in his verses. It is precisely rhythm that is at the core of the production, in a microcosm which takes over from the performances of Marie Lloyd and the Russian Ballet, so admired by Eliot. In fact, Eliot's verses for children, by heavily relying on sound and rhythm, have a strong musicality, which, together with the poet's use of nonsense poetry and nursery rhymes, gives *Practical Cats* a great potential to be adapted into music, a quality exploited by Lloyd Webber in his production.

In brief, Lloyd Webber's *Cats* remains faithful to Eliot by focusing on the characters and by embodying Eliot's poetic practice and theory. And it does so by reconciling the poet's techniques, musicality, rhythm, and inspirations, delivering an extremely challenging show where hybridity, impersonality, innovation, and tradition combine in new and spectacular ways. Bringing Eliot's Victorian and Edwardian feline world to life, *Cats* would become a show for family entertainment, with great live energy which involved the audience with enormous popular appeal, expertly combing the high-cultural and the popular. Its many revivals, translations, and adaptations account for its long-lasting popularity, including two films—the 1998 direct-to-video and the 2019 feature film. This, coupled with the multiple illustrated editions of the poetry collection, lead us to conclude that these *Practical Cats* have definitely withstood their nine lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research resulting in this article relates to the project “T. S. Eliot's Drama from Spain: Translation, Critical Study, Performance (TEATREL-SP),” funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades and by the European Regional Development Fund (PGC2018-097143-A-I00). This publication has been supported by a PhD fellowship (FPI-UNED 2021).

REFERENCES

- Badenhausen, Richard. "Drama." *T. S. Eliot in Context*, edited by Jason Harding, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 125–33.
- Bay-Cheng, Sarah. "'Away we go': Poetry and Play in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*." *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, edited by David E. Chinitz, Blackwell, 2014, pp. 228–38.
- Chinitz, David E. *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Douglass, Paul. "Eliot's Cats: Serious Play Behind the Playful Seriousness." *Children's Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1983, pp. 109–24.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Beating of a Drum." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, John Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 471–75.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, edited by Ronald Schuchard, John Hopkins UP, 2014. 8 Vols.
- Eliot, T. S. "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry. With the Original Preface." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*, edited by Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 3, John Hopkins UP, 2015, pp. 396–412.
- Eliot, T. S. "*The Duchess of Malfi* at the Lyric: and Poetic Drama." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, John Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 170–75.
- Eliot, T. S. "Marie Lloyd." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, John Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 418–23.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Music of Poetry." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The War Years, 1940–1946*, edited by David E.

- Chinitz, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 6, John Hopkins UP, 2017, pp. 310–25.
- Eliot, T. S. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Faber & Faber, 2014.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Poems of T. S. Eliot: Vol. 1 of Collected and Uncollected Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks, and Jim McCue, Johns Hopkins UP, 2015.
- Eliot, T. S. "Poetry and Drama." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: A European Society, 1947–1953*, edited by Iman Javadi, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 7, John Hopkins UP, 2018, pp. 589–610.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, John Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 278–85.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Three Voices of Poetry." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: A European Society, 1947–1953*, edited by Iman Javadi, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 7, John Hopkins UP, 2018, pp. 817–34.
- Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda, and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2, John Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 105–14.
- Everett, William A., and Paul R. Laird. *The A to Z of the Broadway Musical*. Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2009.
- Faulk, Barry J. "Eliot and the Music-Hall Comedian." *The Edinburgh Companion to T. S. Eliot and the Arts*, edited by Frances Dickey, and John D. Morgenstern, Edinburgh UP, 2016, pp. 189–201.
- Fuller, David. "Music." *T. S. Eliot in Context*, edited by Jason Harding, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 134–44.

- Jones, Susan. *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*. Oxford UP, 2013.
- Jubin, Olaf. "Sung-Through Shows: When the Spoken Word is Shunned." *British Musical Theatre Since 1950*, edited by Robert Gordon, Olaf Jubin, and Millie Taylor, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 157–59.
- Keats, John. "To Richard Woodhouse." 27 Oct. 1818. *Bright Star: The Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, Vintage Books, 2009, pp. 500–2.
- Koritz, Amy. *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art*. U of Michigan P, 1995.
- Langbaum, Robert Woodrow. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. Random House, 1957.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Modernist Quartet*. Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Massine, Léonide. *My Life in Ballet*. Macmillan, 1968.
- Mester, Terri. "Dance". *T. S. Eliot in Context*, edited by Jason Harding, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 114–24.
- Mullin, Katherine. "Sounds in *The Waste Land*: voices, rhythms, music." *British Library*, 25 May 2016, www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-waste-land-voices-sound-and-music/.
- "Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer." *Genius*, www.genius.com/Original-london-cast-of-cats-mungojerrie-and-rumpelteazer-lyrics/.
- Richardson, Ben J. "'A Conversation with Spectres': Russian Ballet and the Politics of Voice in T. S. Eliot." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2013, pp. 158–77, doi:10.2979/jmodelite.37.1.158.
- Riedel, Michael. *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.
- Rother, James. "Modernism and the Nonsense Style." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1974, pp. 187–202, doi:10.2307/1207427.

Siropoulos, Vagelis. “*Evita*, the Society of the Spectacle and the Advent of the Megamusical.” *Image & Narrative*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2010, pp. 165–76, doi:10.1017/S0954586714000093.

Siropoulos, Vagelis. *The Ideology and Aesthetics of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Musicals: From the Broadway Musical to the British Megamusical*. 2008. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, PhD dissertation. *IKEE*. ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/110429/files/GRI-2009-2136.pdf/.

Smith, Carol H. *T. S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice: from Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman*. Princeton UP, 1963.

Snelson, John. *Andrew Lloyd Webber*. Yale UP, 2009.

Sutherland, John. “An Introduction to *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*.” *British Library*, 25 May 2016, www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-old-possums-book-of-practical-cats/.