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Jellicle *Cats* in character

The qualities of *Cats*

interview by Rosa Jackson

Cats... the show that has everything: exciting and innovative dance, songs which inspire laughter and tears in turn, and special effects

leave you open-mouthed in amazement. It seems that T.S. Eliot's whimsical felines will never lose their appeal, as audiences flock throughout the world to watch them leap, prowl, and entertain.

The *Cats* characters have magical, mystical qualities as "ineffable... deep, and inscrutable" as their names. It takes a special kind of performer to play a cat — one who can portray the qualities which make these animals so distinctive, and so fascinating.

The ability to play a cat is apparently something which people either do or do not possess. And those who do, know it. Kerri Lyn Wasylik and Vance Avery, both dancers from the Edmonton region, speak of the frustration of knowing you're good enough for *Cats*, but auditioning without success time and time again. "I auditioned for them five times," says Wasylik. "When you don't hear from them, all it means is that at that moment in time you don't fit what they're looking for."

Avery has a similar story to tell. "The first time I auditioned for *Cats*, they didn't have a part for me, but they really liked me," he says. His resilience paid off, as did Wasylik's. Now, both are understudies in the Toronto *Cats* production which recently visited Edmonton to rousing ovations. Avery plays four parts, and Wasylik three. The most difficult aspect of their roles, they say, is "being ready to go on at any moment" should the regular performers become sick or injured. Besides this, they have scheduled appearances on stage twice a week to relieve the other performers.

In Edmonton, Wasylik and Avery find themselves suddenly in the spotlight. However, they seem to be taking it in stride. "We're lucky because we have our families here," says Wasylik. "When we're on the road, the cast is our support system. It's like a big family." Avery agrees. "All the cats are constantly interacting with each other," he says, "so there's a bonding process."

Wasylik has been living in Toronto since she was 18, while Avery moved there a year and a half ago out of a desire to "see what was going on out East." Since moving there, ironically, he has been back

in Edmonton twice: first to perform in the Northern Light Theatre's *Jacques Brel*, and then for an industrial show. Wasylik has never looked back; she attended Ryerson's theatre school for three years, and has been performing ever since — "even making a living at it!" she laughs.

Considering his success, it's hard to believe that dancing is relatively new to Avery. He started dancing at 18, and moved swiftly upwards. He won "Most Promising Dancer" at the Alberta Dance Festival in 1985 and in 1986, studied in Los Angeles, and made numerous appearances with the Edmonton Musical Theatre. In contrast, Wasylik studied "every kind of dance" from the age of five, limiting herself to only tap, jazz, ballet, and competitive gymnastics at age twelve. She grew up in Vermilion and Lloydminster, and names teachers Dominique Gauvin and Alison Lamont as two of her greatest influences in dance.

It's tempting to say that something catlike in both Wasylik and Avery gained them parts in *Cats*. Both are as slim, graceful, and poised as cats. In the auditions for *Cats*, they say, appearance is a prime concern. "There were 200 to 300 people there. I mean females only," says Wasylik. "It was incredible there were so many people!" So how do they choose? "First we all had to do a double pirouette," she says. "Then, if you made it through that, they divided you into groups of eight to ten and they just looked at you."

However, looks and movement ability are not all that's important in *Cats*. The performers have to be able to sing and act, too. "They (singing, dancing, and acting) are all definitely equally important," says Avery. Also essential is the ability to learn quickly. This year's new cast members had three weeks to learn the entire show, working from ten a.m. to six p.m., six days a week. But Avery describes the rehearsal period as a "slow, easy process." "We were keeners," Avery and Wasylik laugh. The new cast members knew the show inside out within two weeks, "a record" according to Avery.

What makes *Cats* so infectious, above all, is the enthusiasm of the performers. The poetry, song and dance, even the \$3.5 million set, would not remain with us were it not for the individuality and charm of each cat. We have Wasylik and Avery, and people like them, to thank for making *Cats* a lasting memory.