

Cats in Vogue

By: David Barbour



Kai Harada's sound design gives the classic musical a ballroom shimmer

The Andrew Lloyd Webber/T.S. Eliot musical *Cats* is newly earning its now-and-forever tagline thanks to *Cats: The Jellicle Ball*, a new staging at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre that reimagines it in terms of the Harlem ballroom scene immortalized in the documentary film *Paris is Burning*, the hit

Madonna tune "Vogue," and the Ryan Murphy series *Pose*. Premiering in the 2024-25 season at NYC PAC, the show quickly won a devoted fan club; in April, it made the risky leap to Broadway, where, if anything, the reviews were even more rapturous.

In Zhailon Levingston and Bill Rauch's radically redefined staging,

Cats, which imagines a gathering vying for admission to the "Heaviside Layer" (Eliot's vision of cat heaven), is now a competition among drag queens in an uptown warehouse. Judges recruited from the audience offer numerical grades as each character struts the catwalk, displaying their individual look and attitude. It's an



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unabashed celebration of queer culture that takes on the fervor of a revival meeting

Cats: The Jellicle Ball has won plaudits for Rachel Hauck's gritty industrial set; Adam Honoré's colorful, kinetic lighting; Brittany S. Bland's poignant projections of the historical ballroom scene, and Queen Jean's outrageous

costumes, which work feline patterns into every outfit. Key to the show's connection with the audience, however, is Kai Harada's sound design, which copes with many unusual conditions.

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"A lot of kudos goes to Rachel and Adam," Harada notes. "We had many iterations of the runway design in terms of audience sightlines. Based on that, the question became, okay,



Above and opposite: Working with the custom boom mics created by Jonny Messina for *Moulin Rouge!*, Harada, costume designer Qween Jean, and wig and hair designer Nikiya Mathis worked out any placement issues. The cast sports Sennheiser MKE 2s.

where can we put trusses and speakers? Even for a traditional musical, the Broadhurst is a pretty small theatre, and getting speakers on the proscenium was challenging. But Rachel had someone do a virtual rendering so we could fly through the room and imagine what it would look like." One helpful point, he notes: Given the ballroom atmosphere, "Everybody was on board with the idea of us seeing the speakers and lights, and there was only minimal zhuzhing to negotiate with rigging or lighting, which was amazing."

Although the space at PAC NYC was quite different, Harada says that the first production was helpful in getting a sense of its challenges: "We primarily used [PAC NYC's] house equipment, but it provided us with a roadmap of the show." He also identified room for improvement, including "more beefy surrounds to really envelop the audience." Fortunately, he adds, "I have the same operator that I had downtown: Marc Fisher. He nailed

it there, and he continues to nail it uptown."

A dedicated Meyer Sound user, Harada based his speaker system on the company's LINA and LEOPARD boxes. "I love them so much," he says. "They're my go-to for most versions of any show I do these days. Having the LEOPARDS really gives us the power to get loud while maintaining clarity. Masque Sound [the production's audio supplier] did us a huge favor, getting us almost everything we wanted."

The Meyer portion of the rig includes 20 LINA line arrays, 19 LEOPARD line arrays, 16 Ultra X-20s, 24 Ultra-X40s, eight UPA-1Ps, four UPA-2Ps, two UPQ-1Ps, 16 UPM-1Ps, 16 UPJuniors, 16 UP4slims, 12 UPX-4Ps, and two 1100-LFC low-frequency subs. (The UP4SLIM units are placed as front fills under the onstage runway, contributing to an effective sonic image.) Additionally, there is a surround system consisting of d&b

audiotechnik gear, including 12 E0s, 32 E6s, and four E8s; the main system subwoofers include three KSL-SUBs, two Y-SUBs, and six B4-SUBs. Speaker processing is handled by three Meyer GALAXY units and three d&b DS100s.

Speaking about the d&b gear, he says, "I really enjoy the subs, which I learned at PAC NYC. They feel a little more rock-and-roll than Meyer subs. They also have a useful directionality that Meyer subs don't always have."

Next door, the short-lived musical *Beaches*, also designed by Harada, was loading in, and "half-jokingly, our director asked me if we'd hear *Cats* coming through the back wall of the Majestic. The cardioid subwoofers helped mitigate that possibility!" The choice of subwoofers was also dictated by space, he adds; in some cases, the units got in just under the wire: "Three subs live under the runway. I had to document their height, figuring out which ones would fit. The KSL-



SUB, which is great sounding, fits within 1" of clearance underneath the runway."

With audience speakers in the house and onstage, was coordinating the systems difficult? "It wasn't as bad as I originally thought it would be," Harada says. "Because we were able to hang the onstage-seating-section speakers reasonably close to the audience members, and because there are so many speakers, none of them has to be screamingly loud. We achieve good, even coverage, so the bounce-back coming off the stage is negligible in relation to the main PA. If you're sitting onstage, you can hear the main PA resonating in the room, but the effect isn't bad; it brings everyone into the same room."

He adds that this is one of the biggest rigs he has ever designed. The reason, he notes, "is 70% the environment and 30% because of the music. We wanted it to be 'good' loud, and not to push it too much, but we needed absolute clarity and consistent coverage. We don't want to overwhelm

the audience right out of the gate."

He adds, "One thing we learned from PAC NYC was the audience's energy, which I hadn't really experienced before on a musical theatre show." This is a remarkable statement for a designer whose recent credits include the currently running revival of *Ragtime* and the 2024 stagings of *Spamalot* and *Merrily We Roll Along*. But the snapping fans and audience callouts generate plenty of noise and must be dealt with. "We knew we'd have to overcome that noise to a point—but I didn't want to make the show loud all the time. Andrew [Lloyd Webber's] people were with me during the tech process, and they didn't want it to be blisteringly loud either. The great thing about the way the show is written is that there are points where we can pull back and use dynamics to give your ears a break."

For performer foldback, Harada says, 12 UPJuniors "point straight down from the truss over the runway." In this configuration, with actors on the catwalk, simultaneously in front of and

behind the audience, "there was a concern about them hearing things late. We were strategic about placing video monitors so the cast could see the conductor. The foldback system definitely helps them. But a fair bit of action is off the runway, and in that case, they are hearing what the audience hears from the main PA, because we are all in the same room. I did have a moment of panic during load-in about coverage, but once we had our first night of quiet time, I realized it was all going to be okay."

The 12-member band is located in "a purpose-built space in the trap room," Harada says. "We went through several revisions before we nailed it in conjunction with the music department, led by music director and supervisor William Waldrop. We wanted to preserve the idea that they could play almost like an acoustic orchestra. The only acoustic instruments in the main room are the drumkit and brass. Keyboards, bass, and guitar all have small loudspeakers to provide the sound from those instruments; a sec-



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ondary room contains two reed players and a cellist, which helps with isolation. But with acoustic treatment and good layout and a fantastic music team, it works wonderfully." Every musician has an Aviom personal monitor mixer to hear the click track, but as much as possible, they are encouraged to follow the conductor.

The trap room also accommodates three pit singers in a smaller booth.

Given the flamboyant parade of costumes, Harada notes that he had many conversations with Qween Jean. Working with the custom boom mics created by Jonny Messina for *Moulin Rouge!*, Harada, Qween Jean, and wig and hair designer Nikiya Mathis worked out any placement issues. "We have [Sennheiser] MKE2s on the cast," Harada says. "In terms of where the transmitters go, I don't have much of an opinion, and, in 2026, we have robust wireless systems, so I don't feel precious about that. It becomes about performer comfort and aesthetic."

Shure Axient is the wireless system.

Harada remains devoted to the Studer Vista 5 console, which now qualifies as legacy gear. "It's the Infinity Core version, the console that Masque commissioned last year for *Dead Outlaw* [the short-lived musical which Harada also designed]. "It gives me much more DSP power: more busses, and more IO, which are necessary for how we do things at *Cats*. It also gives me a bit of built-in dynamic EQ, which, actually, we don't use as much as I thought we would, but it's wonderful to have the option."

Vocal processing is limited to a few TC Electronic reverbs. As for the rest, the designer says, "I'm using my standard collection of orchestra mics [mostly Sennheiser, Neumann, and Shure]. Stuart Andrews, who has worked with Andrew Lloyd-Webber for a long time, is our keyboard programmer. Each keyboard has eight outputs; multiplied by three keyboards, that's 24 outputs. Some patches go to the

main system; some go to the main system and the surrounds, and some go to the surrounds; at that point, it's just about massaging it. The ballroom beats, created by Trevor Holder and Doug Schadt and programmed by Dana Haynes, are run from Ableton by the conductor; we take different stems that route to different speaker systems to give the most flexibility in how those beats sound and where some of the extra effects come from."

Other key personnel include Owen Meadows and Josh Blaisdell (associate designers), Marc Fisher (A1/mixer), Michelle Reiss (A2), and Jake Scudder and Mike Wojchik (production sound).

The biggest issue, Harada notes, was negotiating the move between venues. Before the load-in, I kept wondering if I had made the right choices. And we were working in a compressed time frame." He can relax: The trip to the Heavyside Layer is being made triumphantly, eight times a week. 📶