

'Cats' Finds Good Home at Youth Theatre Northwest - ParentMap

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Beloved musical is a perfect vehicle to showcase emerging talent



'Cats' at Youth Theatre Northwest

Beloved by audiences and panned by critics, *Cats* has always held a strange place in the Broadway pantheon. Its faultless pedigree — composed by Andrew Lloyd Weber on T.S. Eliot's collection, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* — doesn't quite make up for the ludicrous premise or the fact that the story meanders more than a real-life stray. The problem, I think, is that the play never really belonged on Broadway.

Mimi Katano, director and choreographer at Mercer Island's [Youth Theatre Northwest](#), has helped the eccentric musical find its [proper home](#) in youth theater, where **its weaknesses become strengths**. The familiarity of the music is a plus, as the entire production has to come together in only three weeks of five-hour rehearsal days. Decentralized and unfocused, the play provides an opportunity for the greatest number of performers to show their stuff.

It's also perfectly adaptable to the varying talents of developing artists, so dancers get to dance, singers get more challenging songs and actors play multiple characters; everyone is doing what they love best. For YTN's summer stock production that includes children ranging from ages 9 to 17. Some of them are making their theater debut while others have over a dozen productions under their belt. There is not necessarily any correlation between age and experience, so audiences may be surprised at the quality of performance from some of the younger actors.

Since it's summer stock and the subject is alley cats, YTN has moved the production outside, performing in a courtyard under a spreading Japanese maple. The show begins (hopefully) in sunshine, and by the time it gets to "Memories" everyone really is in the moonlight.

Another genius move? Recognizing that stray cats are universal, and shifting the action from New York City to an anime-inspired Tokyo alleyway littered with the sweet mama cat logo on Yamato shipping boxes.



Parents should know: Age recommendation

YTN recommends *Cats* for ages 4 and older, but I would not hesitate to bring a younger child who can sit (mostly) still for an hour. The production runs one hour and 15 minutes with no intermission; it is followed by a short Q&A with the performers.

The all-singing and dancing format keeps things moving along briskly. The cats move through the audience, climb and dance on scaffolding, and even use some light pyrotechnics, keeping the attention of even the youngest audience members.

On opening night, one very young viewer could not resist dancing along throughout the first act. She wore herself out and didn't make it to the end of the show, though. My own kids were challenged by the late hour as well. If your children are used to an early bedtime, consider attending on a weeknight when the show starts one hour earlier.

Parent tips

- The audience sits on a flat lawn, so be prepared with a blanket or low lawn chairs.
- Mosquitos do come out at dusk, so be sure to apply bug spray before the show starts.
- It's OK to bring snacks as long as you clean up after yourself.
- If your child (like my 12-year-old) was inspired by the performance to try acting, auditions for all YTN school-year performances take place in early September. The time to [register for an audition is now](#).

If you go...

Where: Outdoor stage at [Emmanuel Episcopal Church](#), 4400 86th Ave. S.E., Mercer Island

When: Aug. 12–Aug. 27, Wednesdays and Thursdays 7 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays, 8 p.m.

Tickets: Adults \$15. youth/seniors \$13. Available [online](#) or at the door.

Parking: Free on site