

THE HAMPSON INTERVIEW: ALEXANDRE BEAULIEU AND LYNE TREMBLAY

They prowled the stage

In town for a *Cats* reunion fundraiser, two original cast members look back on the pioneering, all-Canadian production that put Toronto on the mega-musical map

By SARAH HAMPSON
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"I still have nightmares about *Cats*," laughs Lyne Tremblay, 46. She played Cassandra in the popular musical whose all-Canadian cast celebrated its 20th reunion earlier this week with a benefit concert for the outreach program of Toronto's Metropolitan United Church at the city's Winter Garden Theatre.

"You do?" says her friend and fellow cast member Alexandre Beaulieu, 42, who was Mr. Mistoffelees. "I thought I was the only one! I dream I'm lost and I'm on the subway without my makeup."

Both erupt with laughter over their Starbucks coffees. This is the morning after the night before, which included a postshow party that lasted well into the early hours. "Sometimes, I dream that I have only half my tail," Tremblay trembles. "That show went so deep," she says, clutching dramatically at her midsection. "It's so inside your bones."

Cats not only had a lasting impact on the people who performed in it. The show was also a great leap forward in Canadian theatre, ushering in the era of highly commercial musicals.

The 1985 production had a budget of nearly \$1.5-million, and tickets cost between \$40 and \$50. In Toronto, the musical played in

the Elgin Theatre, then only partly renovated (it was long used as a movie house), and located in the midst of a derelict stretch of Yonge Street. Today, of course, the city is a theatre mecca, albeit one that has suffered some fallout from SARS and a strong dollar. As some measure, consider that this week, Mirvish Productions announced the arrival (in February, 2006) of the much-anticipated musical of *The Lord of the Rings*. Budget? \$27-million. Top ticket price? \$125.

In the early eighties, Toronto was suffering from stage fright. Ed Mirvish had bought the Royal Alexandra Theatre on King Street in 1962, where he had since put on a variety of run-of-the-mill theatre productions. Only a few of them featured Canadian casts. *Hair*, in 1970, had Canadian performers; and *Godspell*, later the same decade, gave a start to many others, including Martin Short. Most shows, however, were touring productions from the United States. Mirvish, in fact, had initially passed on the opportunity to stage *Cats*, although it would have been natural for him to be its Canadian impresario: He knew Cameron Mackintosh, the London-based producer of *Cats*, and later, *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*, among other blockbuster shows. But Mirvish's Royal Alex was booked up with a popular subscription series, and he didn't

want to interrupt his scheduled season, according to John Karastamatis, communications director at Mirvish Productions.

Cats was a stray animal. Unlike other shows that dispatched touring productions after a successful run in New York or London, *Cats* was offering licensing deals to local producers. It was a couple of ambitious Toronto women, Marlene Smith and Tina VanderHeyden, who dared to bring *Cats* in from the cold.

VanderHeyden, currently director of development at the Canadian Film Centre, was a publicist at the O'Keefe Centre (later renamed the Hummingbird), a venue then, as it is now, for many touring productions. Through her New York contacts, she heard of the *Cats* licensing deal and approached Smith, who had been a publicist at the Royal Alex for *Godspell*, and was involved as a producer of cabaret nights at small local theatres such as The Ports on Yonge Street. With investments from local businessmen, *Cats* opened with much trepidation.

"I remember people talking about how much of a risk it was," says Beaulieu, who took part in the cross-Canada auditions in Montreal. "How long will it last?' people would ask. It was a very brave thing to do."

It quickly became a success, remaining in Toronto for a year and a half, beating the previous record-breaking run of 52 weeks for *Godspell*. *Cats* then toured Canada for the next three and a half years. "We really had something to prove," recalls Tremblay, who manages to look provocatively nimble and feline in jeans, a woolly sweater and bomber jacket. "The ensemble cast worked very well together. There was no jealousy or competition."

"We had a huge desire to please," puts in Beaulieu, adding that for many performers, the show was their first big accomplishment. Beaulieu, who is from Val d'Or, Que., had previously worked in small TV series and commercials. Tremblay, who was born in Lac-St-Jean, Que., describes herself, at that time, as a "gypsy," having danced and trained with a number of companies, including Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal. They were both looking for a break. "We proved that Canada had the talent," says Beaulieu.

The training schedule was rigorous, they remember. And they were given homework: Observe cats and emulate their behaviour. For most of the show, they were crawling on a slanted stage, which was physically challenging. Beaulieu and Tremblay stayed for only the first year of the show's life. "You couldn't do more than that, I don't think," Tremblay says. "Eight shows a week of that show?" She rolls her eyes. "I ended up with housewife's knees," she laughs. The success of the show had several repercussions, including a major cat fight between VanderHeyden and Smith over the sharing of profits. (It was Smith who was the force behind the reunion concert.) More importantly, *Cats* opened people's eyes to the potential for similar musicals.

In 1989, Garth Drabinsky was on the scene with Livent. He restored the Pantages Theatre, now the Canon, and staged the long-running *The Phantom of the Opera*. That same year, Ed Mirvish did interrupt his subscription series to mount *Les Misérables* at the Royal Alex. And, encouraged by the success of *Cats*, the Ontario government, owners of the Elgin Theatre, decided to fully restore the venue, which now houses two theatres.

The one promise the surprise success of *Cats* never quite delivered on, however, was lasting stardom for its cast members. But that may have more to do with the vagaries of the business than anything else. "People would always say I was going to make it big now that I was in *Cats*," says Tremblay with a look of calm forbearance worthy of the haughtiest neighbourhood feline. She did go on to some good gigs, she points out.

Shortly after *Cats*, there was a production of *Cabaret*, in which she played Sally Bowles, in Paris for six months. She has also recorded a jazz CD, *Break and Enter*. Beaulieu had similar success with the "beautiful passport" of *Cats*. Performances in a Paris production of *Cats*, in *The Phantom* in Toronto and in *Les Miz* in Montreal are just some of his noteworthy appearances.

"You can't think of a show like *Cats* as making your career for you. That's a vanity way of thinking," says Tremblay, clearly a seasoned performer who has weathered good and bad years in the business. "It's a process. You have to live in the moment, and enjoy where you are and the people you are collaborating with." The theatre scene in Toronto, for singers and dancers at least, is

not as rich as it was, they say. Livent is long gone. Touring productions still fill theatres, shutting out local talent.

"There's some good in the lack of opportunity out there, in that you have to create opportunity for yourself," observes Beaulieu.

"We live a life where one telephone call can change everything," says Tremblay with a shrug of her shoulders.

For the original Canadian cast members of *Cats*, spread as far as New Zealand, England, South Africa, California and across Canada, that happened about a month ago, when Smith called to ask if they'd come on their own dime to donate their time for a reunion show. More than 95 per cent of the cast said yes.

They looked like penguins, not cats, in their tuxedos, singing stiffly at microphones, but that didn't seem to dampen their enthusiasm or that of the crowd, who applauded loudly at the end of almost every song.

Cats without its claws was still scratching at memory's door.