

From left to right (centre): director Trevor Nunn, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and Gillian Lynne with members of the cast during the launch for *Cats* at the London Palladium, on July 6 this year



TOP CAT

Renowned choreographer Gillian Lynne talks to **Marianka Swain** about her work on *Cats*, ahead of its return to the West End

"Everyone thought we were mad, right up until we opened," says Gillian Lynne, recalling the initial hostility in 1981 to what has become a record-breaking sensation. "On the first night, the whole creative team went down to the bar for a stiff drink, thinking we might need it, but then we heard these cheers erupting. We crept back up and found the audience on their feet. They'd never seen anything like it."

Gillian always believed in the show's potential. "I

was approached very early on, because Andrew [Lloyd Webber] was absolutely longing to make a dance musical, so it made sense to speak to me. I'd longed to work with him as well, and I thought what a splendid idea to have a show about cats. It's an animal everyone loves."

Nevertheless, the general lack of faith meant a limited budget and thus only five weeks' rehearsal. "I knew if I didn't prepare in advance, there wouldn't be enough time. So I did a month's

intensive prep work with just one girl, one boy, my wonderful assistant Lindsay Dolan and later on the dance captain, giving us a chance to explore thoroughly. When cast rehearsals started, I had something very definite to teach them straightaway."

Workshopping was, admits Gillian, "a killer time. I was a strong dancer, so I created it all on my own body initially, which is why I now have two metal hips and a metal foot! I observed cats to find the base, and I wanted to fuse classical ballet, jazz and modern – there wasn't much decent jazz here at the time, but I'd been to America to work on my technique and brought that back with me."

Gillian is inspired by dance greats like Fred Astaire, ➤

Fosse, Ninette de Valois and Frederick Ashton, "but there had never been an animalistic musical like *Cats*, so really I didn't look to anyone else. It needed absolutely original thought."

It was also groundbreaking for a musical to have such a high standard of dancing. "There were lots of singers who could hoof a bit, but the 'triple threat' really hadn't been invented. It took us months to find performers at that level. The entire cast has to sing flat out and dance flat out, which is terribly unusual, and rather a tall order.

"Now, there are far more performers trained for that, which is lovely to see. I really put my original cast through the wringer! We had a very difficult class every single day, getting them fit. They absolutely had to be – it's the most physically demanding show out there."

Fortunately, Gillian was blessed with strong performers like Wayne Sleep and Elaine Paige, plus "lots



of true all-rounders, who really responded to the idea that it's storytelling through dance. I had the luck to work with Robert Helpmann, who wouldn't let you do one movement without knowing what it's saying. *Cats* asks a lot of performers because you can't do it without that acting intention, but it's also very tough dancing."

Cats has been seen by more than 50 million people worldwide since its premiere, with Gillian herself helming several productions and the first US tour. She's handed the baton over to Christine Cartwright, but will often spend a few days working on a new version: "It's very much my heart – no choreographer could ask for a show to be more 'them'."

For the new London Palladium production, opening this month, Gillian reunited with her original creative team: Andrew, Trevor Nunn and John Napier. "Andrew's created some new material, and I've tightened

things up a bit, but it's held up terribly well. I always look at it carefully and ask the kids if they want to change anything, but they never do. Dancers have such affection for it – they feel it's their show. They seldom get this chance to be centre stage."

Gillian can see the influence of *Cats* in other choreographers' work and particularly in the level of dance on stage: "It's changed the face of musical theatre. But there's still nothing quite like it – it's not pure classical or jazz, it's sensual, dangerous, fast-moving. That's why it's never stopped running, and has given work to more dancers the world over than any show ever has. I'm most proud of that legacy." ●

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Cats is at the London Palladium until February 28. www.london.catsthemusical.com