

lack Mewow! to be Cats

THEATRE

Diana Theodores looks on as the phenomenal Cats musical takes over the Point Depot for Tuesday's Gala opening

I NEVER thought the Point Theatre could look intimate but the 'Cats' enterprise has so magnificently cluttered it into a phantasmagorical junk-heap that the scale of the place is firmly under the thumb, or should I say paw, of every one of the performing felines in the cast.

It is Wednesday night, dress rehearsal for the first and longest running British dance-musical in history. The vibes are cheerful and busy. Backstage, furry dancers are doing impossible, I mean impossible stretches. The booth singers are roaring into their headphones and in the separate studio linked to the stage via video monitors, the orchestra is pitching and tuning. Battalions of black tee-shirt-clad crew members are pouncing around the place, green eyes staring out from their backs. Telephone wires of lights criss-cross the theatre and encompassing me is a kitsch graveyard of larger-than-life broken cars, brass beds, fences, pipes, Bovril jars, bicycles, cookers, bottles and garbage. Cats peep out of unexpected places waiting for their cues to start.

The cast for the Point Theatre has been together for one year, having been specifically contracted for the Blackpool and Dublin productions. Artistic Director, Christine Cartwright claims "It's the best cast I've ever worked with." Two Irish singers and several Irish musicians are part of the cast but no Irish

dancers were able to pass the auditions held at the Dublin Dance Centre. "In general their singing was much stronger than their dancing," says Cartwright, "and by their own admission the dancers here simply do not have strong enough classical and jazz techniques for the demands of this show. But there were many very gifted dancers who definitely have a lot of potential."

The 'Cats' phenomenon is as much a permanent industry as it is a musical. The original production opened at the New London Theatre in the West End in 1981 and there it remains, nine years on, with no sign of fatigue and no let-up on audience demand. And so it has been across the continents. It took me five years to get a ticket in New York.... As with MacDonald's one could say "Oh a 'Cats' has just gone up in Toronto," or wherever and it will be a fixture in the place.

The production, based on TS Eliot's 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats' was the brainchild of composer, Andrew Lloyd Webber, choreographer, Gillian Lynne and director, Trevor Nunn. The musical rhythms of Eliot's child-in-the-adult poetry and the human characterisations gleaned from cat behaviour were an inspiration and immense challenge in the conception of the work. And it is both the infectious nature of the show and the challenges it poses that have hooked cast

after cast of performers in 'Cats'. Christine Cartwright says "I would guess that I would get maybe six months out of the performers but they would often stay for two years! This is because they want to get it right, to keep improving all the time and take on the demands of the roles."

The biggest feature of 'Cats' is the *dancer-as-actor*. American precedents would surely be Jerome Robbins' 'West Side Story' in 1957 where every step dictated the music and enhanced the plot and Michael Bennett's 'A Chorus Line' almost twenty years later where dancers told their life stories to us. But 'Cats' enters new frontiers in its deeply concentrated imagery based on animal behaviour. "The performers must observe in an animal what the general public does not ordinarily observe," explains Cartwright. "They are asked to bring to rehearsals one little detail a cat does and to work on *living* a cat rather than *miming* one. It's like re-orienting the human body." Choreographer, Gillian Lynne studied the movements of cats at great length but by her own admission to Cartwright says "I'm not very good with steps, darling. I just *feel* it." But she insists that "If you can't think of a reason for the step it's not right."

If there have been any particular challenges or problems staging 'Cats' at the Point it has been the sheer size of the place. "The original production in London is really very intimate and performed in the round with audiences on three sides," explains Christine Cartwright. "But for Blackpool and Dublin the whole show had to be re-staged for proscenium, with audience on only one side. To remain true to the choreography and direction has certainly been an interesting task! But the Point is such an exciting building and the set looks fantastic in it."

The sound, under the musical supervision of Roger Ward, and the lighting reproduced by Howard Eaton after David Hersey's original design and Raymond Hussey's design work from John Napier's original all fill the space amply and are guaranteed to make you a part of the action no matter where you sit.

open
again

ART

Aidan Dunne sees
Soviet and Irish art
at Mansion House

IN Russia in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution it seemed only logical that the momentous political events should be mirrored in the artistic sphere, and, accordingly, the Bolsheviks actively encouraged the ambitions of the avant garde painters and sculptors to effect a revolution in the art of their time. The result was a spectacular flowering of artistic invention.

The flowering was, however, brief. The avant garde quickly fell prey to internal disputes, the disapproval of artists of less radical inclination and the changing political situation. Art eventually became subject to rigid state control.

If you visit the remarkable Russian section of the Soviet and Irish Exhibition at the Mansion House, it is quickly apparent that Russian artists have never lost the desire to engage in formal experimentation and free expression. It is true that many of the exhibits look like academicised versions of various aspects of Western art from the last half century, a bit like the work in the Royal Academy's summer show in London, but there is a directness and spontaneity about most of the painting and sculpture that is quite disarming of criticism and that forestalls any inclination towards condescension.

Addressing the Polish Sejm and Senate earlier this year, Czech President Václav Havel noted that the Central European states should work towards approaching the West not as mere victims, but as people with real 'spiritual and moral incentives' and 'untapped creative potential'. Perhaps the political upheavals currently sweeping the Soviet Union itself will, as in 1917, now generate a similar creative, cultural momentum.

The Irish section of the exhibition — which is organised in support of Dublin City Ballet — consists of a lively cross-section of current and recent work. There is a huge range of artists included, partly because the show incorporates a selection from the Carroll Contemporary Art Collection. So you'll find Louis le Brocquy, Robert Ballagh, Patrick Graham and umpteen others side by side. The mixture ensures that it's universally accessible.

