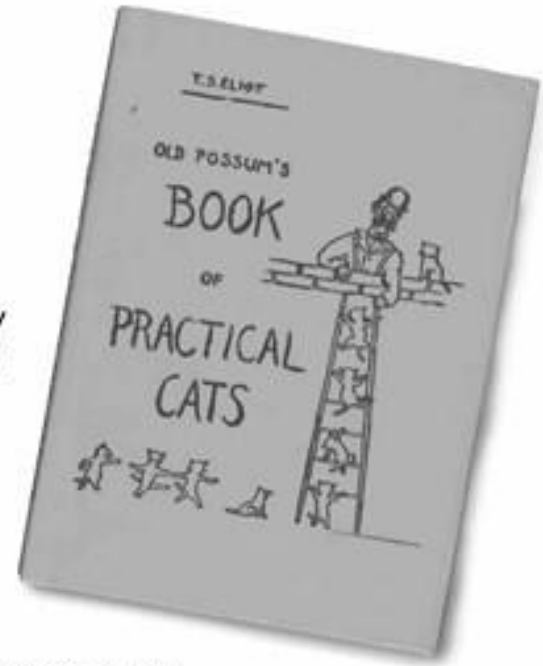


INTRODUCTION

My first memory of TS Eliot's 'Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats' is of my mother reading the poems at bedtime when I was six. In the 1930s Eliot had written the poems for his godchildren and so I joined a long line of kids put to bed with these brilliant verses written for children but with a firm nod to their parents. I loved those poems and I often would read them again. They invariably made me happy.



It was in 1978 that I first thought about setting the poems to music, partly because I wanted to discover if I could write melodies to existing words. Up to that time I had principally worked with Tim Rice. Although we collaborated on the structure of our shows, the music came first and Tim's words came later. So I tried my settings of four of the poems at my Sydmonton Festival. They went down well enough for me to think of developing the whole of 'Old Possum' as a concert piece rather on the lines of 'Peter and the Wolf'.

Because my instincts are those of a musical dramatist, I began playing around with a more theatrical order of the poems, but at no time did I think of turning them into a full blown musical.

All this changed when my complete draft was performed at Sydmonton in 1980. I had invited T.S. Eliot's widow and she brought with her an unpublished poem, 'Grizabella The Glamour Cat'. She told me that her husband thought it was too sad to publish in a children's book. I well remember reading the short poem in front of her. My heart raced. Something in me was already saying that I wasn't dealing with a concert piece anymore. For the story of Grizabella brought a different and emotional heart to the anthology and that to me spelled theatre. I asked Valerie if there was anything else.

What Valerie unearthed next was the clincher. She produced a poem about dogs and cats and a letter from Tom that suggested this was to be the opening of some sort of entertainment that ended with the animals getting into a big balloon that took them 'Up, up, up past the Russell Hotel, up, up, up, to the Heaviside Layer'. Also along the way there was to be some sort of Jellicle event. The poem spoke of a 'Jellicle Ball'. The concert piece was no more.

In the late 1970s dance was exploding in Britain. Out of the ether came Arlene Phillips' ground-breaking sexy and witty dance troupe Hot Gossip and the newly opened Pineapple Studios in Covent Garden was heaving with young wannabe dancers. I had wanted to be a part of this for some time. I wondered if the cat poems could give me that opportunity. Could this be my first chance to compose dance music for the theatre?

Then there was the unpublished poem. It was pure fun, 'off duty' Eliot, featuring a character called 'The Man In White Spats' who was to guide us through Eliot's fantasy world of poor little (Pollicle) dogs and dear little (Jellicle) cats. After he wrote the letter, Eliot decided to make the anthology about cats alone. The only one of his dog poems to be featured was 'The Battle Of The Pekes and the Pollicles', presumably because the tense, dog-induced situation Eliot described was sorted out by 'The Great Rumpuscat'.

My first serious discussion about a stage musical was with Cameron Mackintosh. Cameron had produced several shows in the West End and some successful touring productions for the Arts Council. He was unique among West End producers then in being, like me,