

# How sweet the sound of Kat and the Kings

 By Eugene Yiga

16 May 2012

Kat and the Kings, the hit musical by David Kramer and the late Taliep Petersen, has come home to District Six. Produced by Eric Abraham, the show began previewing at Cape Town's Fugard Theatre earlier this month. Judging by the sold-out performances and nightly standing ovations, you'd better act fast if you want to see it too.

Kramer first got the inspiration for Kat and the Kings back in 1986 while he and Petersen were working on the musical District Six. "One of the actors in our musical was singer Salie Daniels," Kramer recalled. "[He] told me how he had grown up on the Streets of District Six, how he and his friends had formed a vocal harmony group called The Rockets, and how they were befriended by a woman called Eugenie Bleuler, who wrote their songs and managed to secure them a recording contract."

It was almost a decade before the musical was actually written, mostly to provide work for a few actors (including Daniels) who had performed in another Kramer/Petersen production and were unemployed at the time. The show had a successful run in Cape Town, toured other cities, and won the FNB Vita Award for Best Musical Production in 1996.





## Appearance by Mandela

More success followed as the show moved to London's Tricycle Theatre for six weeks before transferring to the Vaudeville Theatre in the West End. (One performance even included Nelson Mandela addressing the cast and the audience from the stage!) This production won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Musical and the entire cast (all male at the time) won the award for Best Actor in a Musical. The show then moved to Broadway in New York where it was nominated for a Tony, a Drama League, and three Drama Desk Awards.

The latest production has come a long way from the original, which was described as a "modest musical that could be packed into the back of a van". Saul Radomsky, who designed the set for the London and New York runs (and won a Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for *The Bird Watchers* earlier this year), does wonders with an intimate space while Ilka Louw creates a range of stunning blast-from-the-past costumes. Even before anyone says a word, you know you're in for a smashing time.

## Hard not to tap along

And then there's the cast. Dean Balie (Kat), Carlo Daniels (Ballie), Grant Peres (Bingo), and Zak Toerien (Magoo), and Amy Trout (Lucy) sing and dance their hearts out. Credit should definitely go to vocal coach Alistair Izobel and choreographer Loukmaan Adams (he performed in the original production for its full 10-year run) for bringing out such energy and enthusiasm in this young group. Even those who might not be fond of "doo wop" music will find it hard not to tap along to sounds that come a-rockin' and a-rollin' from the live six-piece band.

Last, but definitely not least, special mention should go to Danny Butler. He plays Kat in the future (i.e. present), reminiscing about his life while making a living shining shoes. ("I thought it would be interesting to explore the idea of a has-been entertainer being confronted by his younger overconfident self," Kramer said.) Butler, who was cast in this role for the production that toured Europe in 1999 and 2000, has some serious moves and a powerful voice to match. It's such a joy to watch him perform (and proof that getting older doesn't have to mean slowing down).

## A timeless message

Will the apartheid setting appeal to the younger generation of today the way it did when the musical first debuted almost 20 years ago? It's hard to say. Fortunately, the show (mostly) avoids moralising moments by wisely focusing on the strength to persevere and the joy beneath the pain. "[Kat and the Kings] is an attempt to capture the magical quality of being young and bursting with energy and talent, of being full of hope and dreaming big dreams, and of believing that anything is possible despite your situation," Kramer said. That's the kind of message we all need to hear simply because it's the kind of message that will never go out of style.

*Kat and the Kings is showing at the Fugard Theatre in Cape Town until 2 September 2012 and will be showing at Pieter Toerien's Montecasino from 20 September 2012. Tickets start at R100 and can be purchased from [Computicket](#) or by calling the Fugard Theatre box office on +27 (0)21 461 4554. Generous discounts are available for Friends of the Fugard, which you can sign up for by calling the box office or by going to [www.thefugard.com](http://www.thefugard.com).*

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow [@eugeneyiga](#) on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello. View my profile and articles...