

THEATER REVIEW

Naughty 'Cabaret' reinvents racy Berlin story

"Cabaret" runs through Sunday, May 14, Fisher Theatre, Detroit. Performances are 8 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and 7:30 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$33-\$65, call (248) 645-6666.

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There's something almost naughty about the Fisher Theatre these days. Take your seats before a stage shimmering in burgundy, smoky violets lights and silver curtain. Try not to stare at the scantily clad men and women traipsing about, smoking cigarettes and dangling from one of two spiral staircases, with horns and banjos at their side.

Temporarily transformed into the Kit Kat Klub, the Detroit theater invites audiences to forget their troubles and get lost in the lurid life of one Sally Bowles in Sam Mendes' production of the classic John Kander and Fred Ebb musical Cabaret.

Relying on voyeuristic audiences, the dancers stare through the crowd, dressed in tattered stockings, bras and suspenders long before the stirring drum roll.

This isn't the Cabaret that shot Lisa Minnelli to stardom in 1972. Gone are Director Bob Fosse's black derbies and carefully crafted innuendoes. This is

a bold, racy and modern view into the seedy club where "life is beautiful, the girls are beautiful, even the orchestra is beautiful."

Guide to the underworld

The charismatic, ever-present emcee lures the audience into this decadent underground hideaway, donning a leather trench-coat, red apple lips and a pale face. He flirts with men and women alike. Portrayed with charm, overt sexuality and a curious smile by Jon Peterson, the emcee is the thread holding the story together. He's a guide to the underworld of the Kit Kat Klub, which is fueled by money and desire in the early 1930s, and he is a constant reminder of the stern, Fascist eye following all activities in Berlin.

Cabaret is based on Joe Masteroff's book and adapted from Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Stories and John Van Druten's I Am a Camera. It reflects the paradox of the 1930s in Germany, a cosmopolitan time following World War I and foreshadowing the rise of Hitler and Fascism.

But Mendes (*American Beauty*) directed a Cabaret that obliterates the boundaries of previous interpretations. Surprise, Sally Bowles snorts cocaine, "doin' it." Her love interest Clifford shares an on screen kiss with a male cabaret dancer. And the tune "Two Ladies" is set to a stage show that includes the emcee, one female and one

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transvestite. No, this isn't your parent's Cabaret.

Newcomer Lea Thompson (*Caroline in the City*) wears the frilly undergarments well, but isn't a perfect fit for the role of Bowles - a fast-talking, British girl who wishes for a better life and acts as though she's "perfectly marvelous." True, the character calls for an over-the-top persona, thinly veiled in innocence and fear, but Thompson's past is too littered with sugary characters to transform her into the quintessential "Toast of Mayfair."

If it weren't for her powerful, commanding vocal performance, she might not have pulled it off. But when Miss Sally Bowles bids: "Put down the knitting, the book and the broom," one must do as told. Thompson truly shines in signature numbers like *Mein Herr*, and a soulful solo of Cabaret which ends with a crashing the mike stand on the ground.

Marvelous

Jay Goeds makes a marvelous "sensitive American writer." As Clifford Bradshaw, his breathy, dear-in-headlights performance suits the character who gets caught up with Bowles and a

fast-paced life. He's a Yankee, trying to write the great American novel. And when he takes out a notebook in the final scenes and truly begins, "There was a cabaret and a master of ceremonies. It was the end of the world and I was dancing with Sally Bowles and we were both fast asleep," the essence of the story rings true.

Cabaret hinges on escapism,

with Sally at the helm. It plays on heightening tension by showing the flip-side of a trouble-free life - the strict control exhibited by the Fascist party, whose members are as close as next-door neighbors.

Fraulein Schneider, played by Cass Morgan, makes this realization of her boarders. She and her Jewish fiancé, Herr Schultz, represent a Berlin quickly crumbling under Hitler's rise to power. Their love for one another and impending marriage is not only questioned, but threatened. Nothing exhibits the changes ahead more than the song *Tomorrow Belongs To Me*, a Fascist anthem heard first on a

scratchy record player and later sung at a jubilant gathering.

Shivering voice

When Peterson mews out a melancholy *I Don't Care Much*, the weight of the world order can be felt in his shivering voice. Rob Marshall choreographed scenes with fluid beauty and scandalous appeal.

The show ends with the same abrupt sentiment that marked the end of an era with the Nazi's torchlight parade in January 1933. Having an explosively and starkly surprising finish, Cabaret proves it's valuable enough to be brilliantly reinvented, even in the year 2000.



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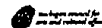
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Left Portrait, 1887, and Portrait of Joseph Beuys, 1985, The Detroit Institute of Arts; Head of a Peasant Woman, 1886-1885, and The Younger 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; Vincent Van Gogh Foundation.

