

Inside

CABARET

Background and Analysis by Scott Miller

The burgeoning political activism in the United States when Cabaret hit the stage in 1966 – and its growth by 1972 when the film hit theatres – as well as Hal Prince's desire to break through to a new kind of socially responsible musical theatre all conspired to make Cabaret one of the most fascinating stage pieces of the 1960s and a show that speaks to our world in a new millennium more now than at any time since it first opened, as evidenced by the smash hit Broadway revival. The singer Sally Bowles represents the people who kept their eyes shut to changes in the world around them, and the novelist Clifford Bradshaw represents the new (perhaps naïve) breed of American activist who could no longer sit by and watch the government ignore the will of the people. Today, as activism at both ends of the political spectrum has experienced a renaissance in America, Cabaret as a cautionary morality play has tremendous resonance.

Cabaret in its original form was a fascinating but flawed theatre piece. It was director Hal Prince's first experiment in making a concept musical (a show in which the story is secondary to a central message or metaphor), a form he would perfect later on with projects like *Company*, *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and other musicals. Early in the process of creating Cabaret, Prince had gone to Russia to see theatre and had witnessed a provocative, confrontational, rule-busting production at the Taganka Theatre. It was everything Prince had been looking for. He later said, "The Taganka Theatre was traumatizing (in a good sense)." He would forever more gravitate towards theatre that challenged audiences, that intentionally made audiences uncomfortable, that made an audience confront their world in all its contradictions and ugliness.

Walter Kerr said in the *New York Times* in 1966 that Cabaret "opens the door to a fresh notion of the bizarre, crackling, harsh and the beguiling uses that can be made of song and dance." Other writers and directors further developed the concept musical in the 1970s and 80s with shows like *A Chorus Line*, *Working*, *Chicago*, *Nine*, and others, but Cabaret paved the way. Cabaret's flaw lies in the fact that the concept musical was still in an embryo stage; Prince was traversing uncharted territory. The end product

was ground-breaking and often shocking, but it was only half a concept musical. Believing that Broadway audiences in 1966 still needed a central romantic couple and a secondary comic couple (as in *Oklahoma*, *Brigadoon*, *The Pajama Game*, and others), Prince and his collaborators essentially created two shows, a realistic book show with traditional musical comedy songs, and a concept musical with songs that commented on the action and the central message of the show.

When Bob Fosse made the film version of *Cabaret* in 1972, he jettisoned all the traditional book songs, and the piece became a full-fledged concept musical. In 1987, when Prince revived the stage version, the show's creators went back and revised the show again, putting back the homosexuality in the story, incorporating some improvements from the film version, trying things audiences had not been ready for in 1966. In 1993, Sam Mendes went even further with a production at London's Donmar Warehouse, trimming the show's fat, better focusing the show's central metaphor, and creating yet another version that better integrates the two separate styles Prince first created. In Mendes' version (London, 1993; Broadway, 1998), the entire show was placed in the Kit Kat Klub, on the club stage, and the dialogue scenes became "acts" in the club. This better integrated the two parts of the show and eliminated the wall between actors and audience, placing the audience on three sides of the stage, only a few feet from the action, rather than across an orchestra pit, involving them in the action.

Cabaret was based on several chapters from Christopher Isherwood's somewhat autobiographical novel *Goodbye to Berlin*, and it seems that new versions of this story have always appeared at times of crisis in America. The novel appeared at the close of World War II; the non-musical stage version debuted during the McCarthy era; the stage musical opened during the Vietnam era; and the movie musical opened in the midst of the Watergate era. Each of these times has also been a turning point in regard to the social standing of American women and gays. Each subsequent version of this story has been braver, edgier, more explicit, and only now can it be told completely truthfully. Only now can Cliff be fully gay as Christopher Isherwood – the real Cliff – was. Only now can the Kit Kat Klub be as sexual, as decadent, as it really was. Only now, after musicals like

Assassins and Kiss of the Spider Woman, are musical theatre audiences ready for the disturbing extremity that this story really demands.

Since Cabaret first opened in 1966, people have described the show the same way: it shows how the Nazis used the decadence and moral decline of 1930 Berlin to come to power. But the accuracy of that description depends on how you define decadence. Berlin was like any big city in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Was it decadent for gay men and women to live openly? Was it decadent for women to live independently and to express their sexuality openly? Was sex outside of marriage decadent? Some people would say yes; others would disagree. By today's standards, Berlin was quite progressive and liberal, but hardly Sodom and Gomorrah. In 1929, a bill legalizing consensual gay sex was passed in committee and brought to the floor of the German Reichstag, but it was tabled indefinitely when the economic panic that followed America's Depression redirected the Reichstag's priorities. In fact, Isherwood wrote, in *Christopher and His Kind*, that Berlin's decadence was "merely a commercial 'line' which the Berliners had instinctively developed in their competition with Paris." Little did they know Hitler would later use their 'line' against them.

What's most disturbing about the show today is that Cabaret shows how politicians in 1930s Germany used the same tactics as politicians in America in 2001. The Germans saw their country in economic and political trouble, due to crippling war debts from World War I and a deadlocked parliament. The Nazis decided that, like Harold Hill and the pool table in *The Music Man*, they had to find a scapegoat on which to pin Germany's troubles. Their plan was to scare ordinary Germans with descriptions of rampant immorality and decadence so that the people would vote for the Nazis in hopes that the Nazis would return Germany to the 'Good Ol' Days'. The Nazis found their scapegoat in the sexual freedom of the cosmopolitan big city Berlin. Throughout the history of the world, people in power have always sexualized their enemies, portraying the minority as sexually dangerous and destructive, convincing the masses that the "rampant" sexuality must be contained, and the Nazis had learned well from history. The truth is neither homosexuals nor women were responsible for Germany's war debts or the deadlock in the parliament, but the truth is often less important than emotion and fear. What's truly disturbing is to realize that right wing politicians in America use the same tactics today,

blaming homosexuals (the only American minority it's still acceptable to demonize) and sexual freedom in general for all America's troubles. The only difference is that there's no Adolf Hitler waiting to seize power.

At least not right now.

The More Things Change...

Though we'd like to believe otherwise, political rhetoric hasn't really changed all that much since Nazi Germany. On the subject of Christianity, Hitler said in a 1933 speech, "The Government of the Reich . . . regards Christianity as the unshakable foundation of the morals and moral code of the nation." Similarly, in 1981, on The 700 Club, Pat Robertson said, "The Constitution of the United States, for instance, is a marvelous document for self-government by the Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian people and atheistic people they can use it to destroy the very foundation of our society. And that's what's been happening." President George Bush (Sr.) said, "I don't know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God." In 1993, Randall Terry, Founder of Operation Rescue, said in The News-Sentinel (in Fort Wayne, Indiana), "I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good. . . Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism."

On the subject of the Jews, a 1943 editorial by Ernst Hiemer, describing the (fictional) Jewish agenda, said, "Every Jew has the obligation to see that Christian churches are burned down and wiped out. The faithful must be insulted and the clergy killed." In 1990, on The McLaughlin Group, Pat Buchanan echoed the same fear of Jews when he said, "Capitol Hill is Israeli occupied territory." In 1991, Pat Robertson tried to scare us more when he said, "Communism was the brain-child of German-Jewish intellectuals."

The Aryan Law, an early piece of Nazi legislation, said, "The Jewish people, once only tolerated, knew how to raise a hue and cry about discrimination and persecution, winning the sympathy of the world for the 'poor Jews.'

They increasingly infiltrated deep within our national organism, growing to have power over every single area of our national life.” More recently, Pat Robertson said, "I've heard all this stuff about little Jewish kids being marred by having to say a prayer in Jesus' name. That's all you hear when you're with the liberals, the ACLU. But listen, we don't hear the liberals talking about what happened to Christian little children."

On the subject of race, the Nazi's Aryan Law said, "In the long run, no idea is better suited to guarantee peace between nations than National Socialist racial thinking, which calls for the furtherance and maintenance of one's own race and one's own people, and supports similar efforts on the part of other nations." In his 1990 book, *Right from the Beginning*, Pat Buchanan wrote, "In the late 1940s and 1950s . . . race was never a preoccupation with us, we rarely thought about it . . . There were no politics to polarize us then, to magnify every slight. The 'Negroes' of Washington had their public schools, restaurants, bars, movie houses, playgrounds and churches; and we had ours."

On the subject of communism, Hitler said in a 1933 speech, "Communism with its method of madness is making a powerful and insidious attack upon our dismayed and shattered nation. It seeks to poison and disrupt in order to hurl us into an epoch of chaos. . . Beginning with the family, it has undermined the very foundations of morality and faith and scoffs at culture and business, nation and Fatherland, justice and honor." In March 2000, on The 700 Club, Pat Robertson said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the ACLU, you must remember, was founded by a group of people, three of which were key members of the Communist International. The key mover of the ACLU said he wanted to make America into a workers' state – read that communist. And they have had communists on their board until they voted them out and then they changed their rule and let them back on again."

On the subject of the role of women, Hitler said, at a 1936 women's rally at Nuremberg, "For us the woman has always been the loyal companion of the man in work and life. People often tell me: You want to drive women out of the professions. No, I only want to make it possible for her to found her own family and to have children, for that is how she can best serve our people!" He went on to say, "Do not deceive yourselves! There are two separate arenas in the life of a nation: that of men and that of women."

Nature has rightly ordained that men head the family and are burdened with the task of protecting their people, the community. The world of the woman, when she is fortunate, is her family, her husband, her children, her home." In 1992, televangelist Pat Robertson said, "[The] feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians." Also in 1992, Robertson said, "I know this is painful for the ladies to hear, but if you get married, you have accepted the headship of a man, your husband. Christ is the head of the household and the husband is the head of the wife, and that's the way it is, period."

On the subject of homosexuality, the Nazi Party called homosexuality "a deviation from normal sexual behavior . . . to the detriment of the natural increase in population." The Nazis said that sexual relations must "serve the reproductive process." In 1983, Pat Buchanan wrote in *The New York Post*, "The poor homosexuals – they have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution." In 1992, Joseph Gudel wrote, in the *Christian Research Journal*, "I believe that homosexuality is anatomically aberrant, psychologically deviant, and morally bankrupt." In 2000, right wing radio talk show host "Dr." Laura said, "I call homosexual practices deviant. If you're gay or a lesbian, it's a biological error that inhibits you from relating normally to the opposite sex." In October 2000, the Pope said, "anything other than a heterosexual union is a step backwards for civilization." Just as all Jewish teachers in Germany were fired in 1933, the Religious Right in contemporary America is fighting to have gay men and women prohibited from teaching in public schools as well.

In August 2000, Pat Buchanan unwittingly made his own connection between his ideas and those of the Nazis. He said, "Rampant homosexuality [has been] a sign of cultural decadence and moral decline from Rome to Weimar Germany." Buchanan agreed with the Nazis that gay Germans in the period preceding the Third Reich were a problem that had to be "corrected."

The "culture wars" are not new to contemporary America. They were fought just as hard, and with the same rhetoric, in Nazi Germany. In 1935 in Germany, the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question published a

report on popular entertainment, which said, “The sexualization of reality is an expression of the Jewish spirit. The Jew Freud traces all mental processes back to sexual stimulation.” The report concluded that German cabarets were the primary purveyors of this “Jewish perversion.” Similarly, in a September 1993 speech to the Christian Coalition, Pat Buchanan declared, “Our culture is superior because our religion is Christianity and that is the truth that makes men free.” Bill Bennett wrote in the *Weekly Standard* in August 1999, “Now is the time for identifying and ostracizing the country's cultural polluters.”

With hundreds of thousands of Americans watching Pat Robertson’s TV show *The 700 Club*, listening to religious radio stations, receiving mailings from the Christian Coalition, and attending fundamentalist churches, the influence of religious extremists cannot be underestimated. Though many Americans today would argue that the rhetoric of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and their cohorts is benign, it’s important to note that the anti-Semitism in Germany started in small, seemingly innocuous ways, and grew over time into the Holocaust. In the early 1930s, many average Germans, believing the claims that German Jews were responsible for many of Germany’s problems, began to avoid their Jewish friends. Signs appeared in grocery stores declaring that Jews were not welcome. Most non-Jews stopped patronizing Jewish-owned businesses. By 1938, sixty percent of businesses owned by Jews in 1933 had gone out of business. Anti-Jewish legislation was labeled with positive, patriotic sounding names, like the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor,” presaging the recent anti-gay legislation passed in the U.S. Congress, the “Defense of Marriage Act.” Like American politicians today, the Nazis created fictional “attacks” on German culture and dressed up their own attacks as “defenses.”

So Cabaret continues to have great resonance. Perhaps political propaganda never really changes. It always demonizes the minority, paints a picture of imminent destruction, then promises a return to the normalcy of a time (that never really existed) when things were simpler and less scary. Director Hal Prince said about the original production, “It was only after we’d come by a reason for telling that story parallel to contemporary problems in our country that the project interested me.” And that philosophy

still stands. It's only compelling, only shocking, only powerful because we can see today at least some of what Cliff could see back then.

Deutschland

1930. Weimar Germany was in trouble. Due to the war debts, rampant inflation, and a bickering, multi-party parliament, the country was in economic and political ruin. There was political dissension everywhere. The people, particularly the conservative middle class, were unhappy. Adolph Hitler finally figured out that the way to take power was through propaganda – telling the people what they wanted to hear. (And is that any different today?) Hitler's ultra-conservative Nazi party began a war of propaganda against the standing government. He promised an end to the depression, to political corruption and incompetence, to moral decay. He declared war on popular culture, which he portrayed as decadent, obscene, and anti-German. He attacked Jews, homosexuals, feminists, and artists for ruining the country.

Though cabarets in Berlin had been somewhat regulated before the Nazis, the new régime held up cabaret performances as a perfect example of the decadence and moral decay of Berlin. The Nazis clamped down on cabarets, dictating exactly what content was acceptable. Though some cabarets were respectable enterprises, the 1930 German film *The Blue Angel*, with Marlene Dietrich, offers a unique glimpse into what the lower form of German cabaret (like *Cabaret's* Kit Kat Klub) was really like, with tiny stages, unattractive women in revealing clothing, social and political parody numbers, sexual innuendo, clowns, drag numbers, animal acts (echoed in *Cabaret* with "If You Could See Her"), and rowdy, drunken audiences. In fact *The Blue Angel* captures exactly the Nazi view of cabarets; in the film, a school professor gets involved with a cabaret performer and, as a result, he loses his job, his respectability, and his dignity, and he ends up touring with the cabaret, selling dirty pictures of the woman who is now his wife.

Hitler and the Nazis championed the family unit, traditional roles for men and women, children, and traditional "Christian" values. (Ironically, Nazism later became an image frequently used in pornography.) Hitler promised to "save" Germany from the terrible predicament it found itself in. In *Cabaret*,

Ernst echoes the Nazi's promises when he tells Cliff that the Nazis will be the builders of a new Germany, just as today's religious leaders talk about building a new "Christian America."

With hindsight, it's now possible to see that Hitler promised and attacked almost all the same things that many political candidates in America have promised and attacked in recent U.S. elections, things that many politicians and religious leaders still promise and still attack. In the 1930s, the Nazis told middle class, hard-working German that the Jews were only one percent of the population and yet controlled the government and had all the money. In the 1980s and 1990s, religious right leaders in America began telling Americans the exact same things about gay men and women. The Nazis claimed Jews were spreading disease throughout Germany, just as today's religious extremists claim gays are spreading AIDS (even though the vast majority of people with AIDS worldwide are heterosexuals). German Jews were portrayed as abnormal, depraved, and immoral, the same stereotypes used today against American gays. Both German Jews in the 1930s and American gays at the end of the twentieth century have been called anti-Christian, anti-family, criminal, and immoral. Jews were portrayed as sex maniacs and child molesters, just as gays are now accused of the same things. The Nazis had learned well that the best way to attack the minority was to sexualize them to the mainstream, as was done to the Jews in 1930s Germany, to blacks in 1950s America, and to gays in contemporary America.

Politicians and religious leaders across America still echo the themes of Nazi propaganda, declaring that our country is in a state of moral decay and political disarray, that our culture is disintegrating, that movies, TV, and pop music are full of gratuitous sex and violence, that mainstream religion is under attack. These parallels make the world of 1930 Berlin that much scarier, and they make it that much easier to see why normal, upstanding German citizens could support the Nazi party. People were desperate for change, for a quick fix, for salvation from the things they perceived as deadly to their nation and to their way of life. It's doubtful that anyone like Hitler could take over America today, but the fact that there are clear parallels to the current political climate in our country make *Cabaret* more frightening and important today than it was even when it was written. If we ignore history, we are doomed to repeat it.

It Could Happen Here

One of the show's central messages is that It Could Happen Here. At the beginning of the show, in the original 1966 production, there was a giant mirror onstage facing the audience. The implication was that the people of Germany, who allowed the Nazis to take power, were very much like us, just ordinary people who found their country in trouble and looked for someone to fix things, to offer easy solutions. If we had lived in 1930 Berlin, the mirror suggests, we too would have been cajoled into believing the Nazis could save the country. It also says that we – the populace – are as much to blame for such horrors as corrupt politicians. Whatever happens in our country, we allow to happen.

Most of the leading characters in Cabaret represent an archetype. The Emcee is the personification of unfettered sexual freedom. He is the movie industry in contemporary America, as well as the recording industry, television, and tabloid journalism. He makes extreme sexuality appealing, entertaining, inviting. Sally Bowles is the self-involved, head-in-the-sand young person, looking only for the next party, constant gratification, and complete freedom from responsibility. She refuses to think about politics and social issues because it gets in the way of a good time. She uses sex and alcohol to hide from the real world. She represents both the “decadence” that the Nazis fashioned into successful propaganda, as well as the passivity that allowed their meteoric rise to power. Fraulein Schneider represents those who see what's happening but who believe they have no power to change anything. She doesn't like it, but resigns herself to the fact that she is powerless. She is about survival. Herr Schultz is foolishly optimistic; he believes so completely in the intrinsic goodness of humanity that he cannot believe that Jews will be expelled or persecuted in their own country. Cliff represents morality and social conscience. He sees what happening (though not until pretty late in the game) and he refuses to accept it. He says to Sally, “If you're not against all this [the Nazis], you're for it – or you might as well be.” The audience wants to see themselves in Cliff, but in reality, most of us are either Fraulein Schneider or Sally.

America's political climate in 1966, when Cabaret opened on Broadway, was just as explosive as 1930 Berlin. Despite the civil rights bill that the

U.S. Congress had passed in 1964, race riots were happening all over the country – in Harlem in July 1964, in Watts (Los Angeles) in August 1965, in Cleveland and Chicago in July 1966, as well as in Atlanta and other cities. Malcolm X was assassinated in February 1965. Martin Luther King Jr.'s first march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama took place in March 1965. Anti-war demonstrations began on the campus of the University of California-Berkeley in 1964, and continued throughout the 60s across the country. The first anti-war march on Washington was held in May 1965. U.S. troops launched their first full-scale combat in Vietnam in July 1965. Hogan's Heroes, a television sitcom about a German P.O.W. camp, debuted in 1965. The University of Mississippi's first black student was shot in June 1966, the same month that students marched on Washington again, this time for voting rights. The heavily political Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour debuted on NBC in September 1966, and went on to become the only television show canceled because of its subversive political content. Clearly, America was ready for a political musical when Cabaret opened in November of 1966. While the show was running, the anti-war, concept musical Hair opened in 1967, and TV's Laugh-In debuted in 1968, with its outrageous brand of social and political satire.

Another example of the parallels between 1930s Germany and 1960s America was articulated by Jean Ross, Isherwood's real world model for Sally Bowles, who said in an 1975 interview, "We were all utterly against the bourgeois standards of our parents' generation. That's what took us to Berlin. The climate was freer there. I suppose nowadays you'd call us hippies."

Also, though it may seem hard to believe now, details of the Holocaust were only just beginning to come out to the public at the time of the original production of Cabaret. Throughout the 1950s, very few people had talked about the concentration camps, perhaps partly out of trauma, partly out of needing time for healing, and partly out of survivor's guilt. It wasn't until the early 1960s that people started writing about what had happened in Germany. Some historians and psychologists believed that guilt over the Holocaust is a big part of what fueled the political activism of the 1960s. It gave Holocaust survivors and their children a mechanism to act against injustice in a way they couldn't during World War II. One Jewish American said, "We were going to be active where our parents' generation had been

passive. Then we could tell our parents: We learned when we were children that massacres really happen and the private life is not enough.”

Both Sides Now

Cabaret the musical looks at two cultural phenomena in pre-war Germany. First, the sexual freedom celebrated in cabarets, open homosexuality, a new feminism, and other trends, gave a certain segment of the population (like Cliff and Sally in Cabaret) a kind of independence they had not experienced before; and they were so enraptured with this new world, that many were happily distracted and unaware of what was happening politically. Self-delusion was rampant. Christopher Isherwood wrote, in *Christopher and His Kind*, that he “knew only one pair of homosexual lovers who declared proudly that they were Nazis. Misled by their own erotic vision of a New Sparta, they fondly supposed that Germany was entering an era of military man-love, with all women excluded.”

It’s important to note that many Germans did not even vote in the elections that brought the Nazis to power – just as most people in America do not vote today. And significantly, Hitler did not come to power through a vote of the people. The Nazis actually lost votes in the Reichstag in the election before Hitler took over, but the German president appointed Hitler chancellor, in hopes of bringing the still powerful, rogue Nazi party under some sort of control. But then the Nazis pressured the Reichstag into passing the “Enabling Act” which gave Hitler unlimited power. This allowed the German people to deny responsibility for Hitler being in power. They could claim that they didn’t even vote, or if they did, they never voted for Hitler. One of the most fascinating things about Cabaret is that we don’t see a swastika until the end of Act I, we don’t hear the word “Nazi” until Act II, and we never hear the name “Hitler” during the whole evening, all this even though the whole show is about how Hitler and the Nazis were able to come to power.

The second phenomenon is that many people (like Herr Schultz in Cabaret) simply couldn't believe that anything so terrible could happen to loyal Germans; who could've dreamed before Hitler's rise to power that anyone would've orchestrated the systematic extermination of millions of Jews and homosexuals? Most Jewish men refused to leave Germany, despite their

wives' pleading. The men were often more educated and didn't think their wives "understood" Germany as well as they did. They couldn't bring themselves to give up their businesses, to give up their connections, to be rejected by the country for which they had fought in World War I. Because German men tended to be more connected to and involved in culture outside the home, they felt an even deeper connection to Germany. One former judge told his wife, "The German people, the German judges, will not stand for much more of this madness." One woman remembered that she knew so many "decent Germans" that she never thought the Nazis could get a foothold because of the "moderate character" of the German people. It's important to understand that Herr Schultz represents many, many real German Jews, who could not fathom that the Nazis could orchestrate something as horrific and far-reaching as the Holocaust.

The "mixed" marriage between Herr Schultz and Fraulein Schneider was also a common thing in Germany before the Nazis. But the Nazis criminalized sexual relations and marriage between "Aryans" and "non-Aryans." In 1938, a state superior court in Germany allowed a man to divorce his wife only because he found out she had had an affair with a Jewish man in 1932, before they were married. After the Nazi takeover, "Aryan" women who married Jews were forced to walk through the city with shaved heads and signs proclaiming their "crime" of "race defilement." Because any association with a Jew could lead to trouble or even imprisonment for an "Aryan," the majority of gentiles broke off relationships – even family relationships – with Jews, to protect themselves. Many flew the Nazi flag specifically to negate the shadow of past relationships with Jews. In many cases, German citizens whose family members planned to marry Jews, would threaten to report them to the Gestapo, to avoid trouble for the rest of the family.

Is there a parallel situation in America today? Yes, though it's far less dramatic. In February 2001, former U.S. Republican congressman Steve Gunderson wrote, "I'm struck by the conflict many Republicans in Congress feel regarding gay issues. They want to support us personally – but they fear us politically because they may face a hostile, antigay home constituency." The Republicans Gunderson describes don't fear for their lives or their families, only for their political careers, but like many Germans

in the 1930s, they end up practicing prejudice not because they believe in it but because they're afraid not to practice it.

Fraulein Schneider's decision in *Cabaret* to break off her engagement with Herr Schultz is not just soap opera. She has a business to run. She has to maintain an image of respectability. This happened in Germany far too often. People like Fraulein Schneider were frequently punished and even sent to prison camps merely because they were married to Jews. (Interestingly, mixed couples with gentile husbands were punished less severely than mixed couples with Jewish husbands.) Perhaps *Cabaret* gives Fraulein Schneider too much credit in foreseeing this danger in 1930, but the danger was real. Isherwood wrote about the real life model for Fraulein Schneider: "Like millions of others, she had to go on living in Germany and making the best of it, no matter who was in power. She would remain what she essentially was, a sweet, muddled victim of her rulers – guilty only by association with them – no more and no less a Nazi than she had been a communist."

Bi, Bi, Birdie?

Through the many incarnations of the story – Christopher Isherwood's book *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), John Van Druten's play *I Am a Camera* (1951), Henry Cornelius' film of the same name (1955), the stage version of *Cabaret* (1966), its movie version (1972), and its three revised stage versions (1987, 1993, 1998) – the Isherwood character (Cliff or Brian in *Cabaret*) has been variously straight, gay and bisexual. Isherwood himself was gay, but because of societal restraints, earlier versions made his character straight. The 1966 stage version of *Cabaret* kept him straight; while the movie made him a gay man who decides to be straight and later ends up bisexual; and the two revivals made him gay. The gay subtext that underlines all these versions parallels the outsider status of Sally and all the people at the Kit Kat Klub. They live outside society's norms, outside the accepted rules. They are marginalized and they create their own insular community as homosexuals have done for decades. The Emcee in *Cabaret* reinforces this theme of any and all sexualities.

In the original version, where Cliff was straight, he represented the norm against which the extremity of Sally and Nazism are measured. He was the

outsider in this world precisely because he was the ultimate insider elsewhere – a straight, white male. In later versions, as Cliff became a member of a sexual minority, he lost that status, and by default we, the audience, became the norm against which to measure the characters in the show. But Cliff remains the emotional and moral center of the story. We still see it all through his eyes, the eyes of a non-German.

Cliff also mirrored the changing face of America in 1966. Young people were realizing for the first time that there were horrible things happening in the world. They were waking up, realizing that they had a responsibility to speak up and register their dissatisfaction. It was a new age of political activism. The first line of the title song, asking what the point was in sitting home doing nothing, was a question young people across America were asking themselves. Demonstrations were breaking out on college campuses everywhere. People were marching on Washington. Cliff's growing awareness of the Nazis' presence and the implications of their politics portrayed the growing political awareness of America.

But this new political awareness among young people brought with it a naivete and an over-simplification of issues. For many young people this was their first Fight for What's Right, and they jumped into the fray without really understanding the full complexity of what they were fighting for. Passion won out over complete understanding. Cliff's immaturity and his many contradictions and hypocrisies give him that kind of naive, slightly ridiculous moral outrage that only a twenty-five-year-old can muster. He is just like so many college kids, then and now, who discover politics and find themselves suddenly outraged over injustices about which they actually know very little. After all, Cliff himself tells Ernst he doesn't want to know who or what he's smuggling for. Cliff knows he's working (indirectly) for a political party but he wants to stay blissfully ignorant. But then once he finds out Ernst is a member of the Nazi party, suddenly Cliff becomes political. He lectures Sally in Act II ("Don't you see? Either you're against all this or you're for it.") but he conveniently forgets that he actually helped the Nazis by smuggling for them. In fact, he takes the same moral posture that the Nazis take – that only his morality is the right one, that all others are wrong. Extremism in any form is dangerous, and Cliff is perhaps even more an extremist than Ernst. At the end of the show, when he insists that Sally leave Berlin with him, Cliff is making a moral decision for himself, but can

he make it for Sally as well? If he dictates her morality, isn't that exactly what the Nazis are trying to do?

Cliff is also something of a hypocrite, but that too can be chalked up to immaturity. In his song "Why Should I Wake Up?" the fact that he's "drifting" is a romantic, positive thing. Yet just a few minutes later, after he finds out Sally's pregnant, he decides the fact that they are "drifting" is something that should be remedied. In the song, the idea of "waking up" is a bad idea. In Act II, he screams at Sally to wake up.

Cliff begins the story no more aware than anyone else. In Act I, he says everyone's having such a good time that if they were in a movie, something horrible would have to happen to them, but he has no idea how right he is. He's too naïve to notice that when he meets Ernst on the train, Ernst has no interest in him until Cliff pretends to have "smuggled a little" himself. Once Ernst sees Cliff can be useful, he's suddenly Cliff's best friend, immediately doing him favors so that Cliff will owe him. Later, Cliff agrees to smuggle for Ernst, asking Ernst not to tell him who's he smuggling for. Cliff is happy just being an observer, not a participant. In the original novel the narrator says, "I am a camera, with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Someday, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed." Some recent productions have opened the show with those sentences.

At the party at the end of the first act, Cliff starts to "wake up" and gives up his passive role as only an observer. He finds out he has been drawn into Nazi politics without knowing it, just as many Germans were. Now he's involved whether he likes it or not. He no longer merely records. He interprets. People he cares about are at risk. He realizes that he's been sleepwalking through life, his eyes closed, just like Sally. But though Cliff eventually wakes up, Sally does not. When he demands that Sally return to America with him and leave the powder keg that Germany has become, she refuses. He orders her to pack and therein makes a fatal mistake. Sally is a woman who deeply cherishes her independence; Cliff's attempt to force her into doing as he says only makes her more resolved to stay. He forces her to choose between family life – at which she thinks she'd fail – and the exciting, dangerous, potentially lucrative night life of Berlin.

When he begins to write his book at the end of the show, he mentions the three main elements of the Nazis' rise to power – the Kit Kat Klub and the Emcee, examples of apathy and the “decadence” the Nazis will use to illustrate the downfall of Germany; Germany itself, crippled by political, social, and financial collapse; and Sally, one of the people who are unwilling to think about politics, to see what's happening, to take a moral position and stand up for they believe. The flashbacks that end the show are Cliff's thoughts swimming around in his head, falling into a kind of logical order so that he can put them down on paper. Though he is running from the Nazis, he is finally taking his stand by telling the story.

Interestingly, Cliff's two songs, “Why Should I Wake Up” and “Don't Go” (added for the 1987 revival and now “optional”) don't sound like the rest of the score. They're both closer to a traditional 1960s Broadway sound and they don't seem to match the dark, minor, German sound of the other songs. Even Sally's 1920s flapper sound in “Don't Tell Mama” and “Perfectly Marvelous” retains the dissonant, minor quality of the more German sounding numbers, and her final number “Cabaret” is as German sounding as “Wilkommen” – in fact these two songs even share accompaniment patterns. And Sally's two songs added for the film and later stage versions, “Mein Herr” and “Maybe This Time,” fully invest her with the torchy, minor sound of German cabaret. But making Cliff's music different was a conscious choice. Cliff himself does not fit into German life and philosophy. He is an outsider and therefore his music must be outside as well. He sings a verse of “Perfectly Marvelous” (and Sally's verses of this song are actually her speaking in Cliff's voice, so there's an argument to be made that this is his song as well) but “Perfectly Marvelous” is the least German sounding of Sally's songs. Some would argue Cliff's songs disrupt the unity of the score, and though this may be true to a degree, it would be wrong to give Cliff the same sound as the others. The only other option is to leave Cliff as a non-singing role (as the movie did), but in a musical, songs give a character weight. Cliff is the moral and narrative center of the show, and to leave him without music would diminish his importance.

A Perfectly Marvelous Girl

Sally Bowles functions as the connection between the two worlds of Cabaret. She is a part of the world of the Kit Kat Klub (note the initials), and

a part of the real world that includes Cliff, Fraulein Schneider, Herr Schultz, and Ernst. She is a little girl playing dress-up, making up stories, trying to be sexy and shocking, never really being too successful at either, always performing her sexiness, putting quotation marks around “sexy.” Isherwood once said to playwright John Van Druten, who dramatized *Goodbye to Berlin*, “She’s a little girl who has listened to what the grownups had said about tarts, and who was trying to apply those things.” In fact, though some stage versions of the show use the songs “Mein Herr” and “Maybe This Time” from the movie, those songs don’t really work for Sally as she’s written on stage. “Mein Herr” is not the song of a little girl; it’s the song of a worldly wise woman. “Don’t Tell Mama” is much more Sally Bowles, the child-woman who still cares too much about what her mother thinks. And “Maybe This Time” is far too romantic for the stage Sally. She’s not mature enough for these sentiments. In the stage musical, she doesn’t get a song about love for a very good reason. She doesn’t understand love and has probably never experienced mature love. Songs in musicals express emotion, and Sally is not an emotional woman. It’s no accident that she only gets three songs – “Don’t Tell Mama,” a playful club number about sex, “Perfectly Marvelous,” essentially a self-involved con job on Cliff, and “Cabaret,” the manic, tragic result of her carelessness.

There are hints throughout the stage and film versions that Sally’s vast sexual experience, her many sexual conquests, might be exaggerations or even outright fabrications. In Isherwood’s book *Christopher and His Kind*, he writes about discussions of the play *I Am a Camera* with playwright John van Druten and Julie Harris, who played Sally. “John Van Druten and [I] discussed with her the possibility that nearly all of Sally’s sex life is imaginary; and they agreed that the part should be played so that the audience wouldn’t be able to make up its mind, either way.”

Also, logically speaking, Sally shouldn't be too good a singer; she's supposed to be a second-rate performer who'll never make it out of the third-rate Kit Kat Klub. Judith Newmark wrote in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* that Sally is more pose than talent onstage and more pose than heart offstage, and that perfectly captures this deliciously complex character. That's how Sally is portrayed in the stories on which *Cabaret* is based. Unfortunately, that creates a practical problem – how do you put a second-rate singer in a leading role in a musical? In the original Broadway

production, Hal Prince cast Jill Haworth specifically because she wasn't a great singer, and the critics blasted him for it. In Bob Fosse's movie version, he cast Liza Minnelli, who turned in an amazing performance, yet we could never believe that this astounding singer was stuck in anonymity in a seedy little night club.

As an extension of her little girl persona, Sally's game playing is an essential part of her character, the part that guarantees that her relationship with Cliff won't work out. And we see this from the beginning. When Sally and Cliff first meet face to face in the Kit Kat Klub, two small moments speak volumes about Sally. First, she doesn't really get interested in Cliff until she finds out he's a novelist looking for "something to write about." It's only when she realizes she might be the subject of a novel that she finds Cliff worth exploring and starts asking him questions. Second, he exposes her game playing later in the same conversation:

Sally: I say, am I shocking you, talking like this?

Cliff: I say, are you trying to shock me?

This is when Sally loses interest. Cliff won't play the game and what's worse, he won't let her play the game either. If there isn't going to be a game, she's bored and goes looking for a game elsewhere. After Cliff's line exposing her game, she says only one more line then exits. The flirtation is cut short and Cliff is left wondering what just happened. This scenario will play out over and over again. Cliff repeatedly exposes Sally's games over the course of the show and in every case she either shuts down or leaves. Only games can hold her attention, and only if she's in control of the games.

What makes Sally such a bizarre leading character is that she doesn't change or grow. In all drama – books, plays, movies – leading characters have to learn something over the course of the story. They have to change in some way. But Sally Bowles doesn't. In a 1937 interview, Isherwood said, "It seems to me that Sally, without the abortion sequence, would just be a silly little capricious bitch. The whole idea of the story is to show that even the greatest disasters leave a person like Sally essentially unchanged." Sally tells Cliff in Act II that you can't really stop things from happening and that you can't really change people. She's referring to herself but she's also talking about the German people. The Nazis will take

power no matter what anyone tries to do to stop them. She is finally moving from ignorance to the beginnings of awareness, but she will end up more like Fraulein Schneider than Cliff. She tells Cliff that he's an innocent, and in a way, she's right; he still believes that you can fight for what you believe in and make a difference in the world.

Sally's big number in Act II, "Cabaret," has become a pop standard outside the show, but in context it is a decidedly unpleasant song. Sally is going on stage at the club to sing about living life to the fullest, after losing the man she loves, deciding to pursue a career that will never happen, and possibly after deciding to have an abortion (it's unclear exactly when she makes that decision). Cliff can't stay in Germany anymore, but Sally has to stay in order to follow the dreams that will never be realized. She is a tragic character, self-deluded and self-destructive. And really, neither of Sally's choices – either full, unrelenting domesticity or extreme and dangerous eroticism – is realistic for her. Either path leads to destruction for her. Sally can't have the baby because in her mind, her mother is all mothers and she doesn't want to be that – boring, smothering, anti-sexual – as her mother is portrayed in *I Am a Camera* and in the song "Don't Tell Mama" in *Cabaret*. (Isherwood later wrote of his own mother in these terms.) In the 1993 London revival the song "Cabaret" became much more painful and more dramatic than in earlier versions, a primal scream of pain, an angry, frightening howl of despair, that closes Sally's story in hopelessness.

A Bizarre Little Figure

Director Hal Prince had seen a dwarf emcee at a club in Germany once, and that was the inspiration for *Cabaret's* Emcee. The Emcee represents German popular entertainment, metropolitan nightlife, the newfound sexual freedom that the Nazis would exploit in their propaganda. The Emcee is Berlin, in all its glamour and danger and wildness. In Isherwood's book *Christopher and His Kind*, he writes that "It was Berlin itself [I] was hungry to meet." When Cliff starts writing his book on the train leaving Berlin at the end of *Cabaret*, the Emcee is mentioned before Sally, giving him even more weight. In the original production, the Emcee was onstage during many of the book scenes, observing the action, a device Prince would use again in *Company* and *Sweeney Todd*. The Emcee gets twice as many songs as Sally, as well as both opening and closing the show. If the show's

concept is the central character, he is certainly the personification of that concept. He lies (“Even the orchestra is beautiful...”) and shows us the horrific truth through his lies. He's charming but also dangerous. His behavior is completely uncontrolled; he has no boundaries, no conscience, no rules – not unlike Hitler. He shows us the moral freedom that many Germans were enjoying, but also shows us why that freedom can be a bad thing.

The Emcee pretends to be apolitical but most of the club numbers are political and social satire. Many of the cabarets in Germany at that time included biting political satire in their shows. But the cabaret owners who indulged in political satire after 1930 were quickly thrown in jail. The Nazis publicly stated that the cabarets in Berlin were responsible for losing the war in 1918 and for the “decadence” that was destroying Germany. Obviously, a handful of clubs and theatres in one city could not have had such an effect, but this stance was necessary to justify Hitler’s censorship of the cabarets and his banishment of Jews from cabaret stages.

When the Emcee welcomes us at the beginning, it is unsettling precisely because it is too perky, too happy, like old-fashioned musicals but distorted. Prince used the kind of brainless, happy, musical comedy conventions of the 20s and 30s to illustrate the danger in ignoring the real world. Hollywood in that era put on the same happy face, asking us to forget the war, the Depression, the death, the poverty. There may be some value in escapism, but when does it become dangerous to escape? When do we do ourselves a disservice by forgetting the horrors of the world? The Emcee tells us to leave our troubles outside, but in reality, those troubles are already inside, pervading every moment of the show. We already know what will happen in Germany during the 1930s. The Emcee tells us the girls and the orchestra are beautiful when we can plainly see that they are garish, vulgar, scary – some of the “girls” are actually men in drag. He looks us straight in the eye and tells us to enjoy ourselves as he presents portrayals of immorality, prejudice, hatred, and self-delusion.

When he repeats his welcoming speech at the end of the show, it is even more frightening now; he's still perky even after we've watched several lives utterly destroyed – and we know this is only the beginning of the horror for some of these characters. At the very end, the Emcee briefly

reprises “Willkommen,” perhaps an ironic welcome to the new Germany Ernst and the Nazis are building, but the Emcee doesn't finish the final phrase; the song stops, unfinished, and he disappears. We know the story is not over. Herr Schultz will undoubtedly be put in a concentration camp and murdered. We've already seen a brick thrown through his shop window in Act II, a sinister foreshadowing of the 1938 Kristalnacht riots, a horrific night when the Nazis smashed Jewish shop windows, looted and burned synagogues, and took tens of thousands of Jews to concentration camps. And yet the Emcee is now happy to have helped us “forget” our troubles.

As the show ends, is the Emcee saying goodbye to us or Cliff, or both? Or is he saying goodbye to the good times in Germany? It's interesting that in the opening song, “Wilkommen,” the Emcee repeatedly delivers his message in German, French, and English (for example, “Wilkommen, bienvenue, welcome.”). But here at the end of the show, he says goodbye only in German (“auf wiedersehen”) and French (“à bientôt”). There is no English goodbye. The melody doesn't end and neither does the lyric. The Emcee doesn't finish his farewell. The English “goodbye” isn't articulated, perhaps because it belongs to Cliff/Isherwood, who won't be finished with Berlin until he writes his novel, which will be titled Goodbye to Berlin, finally finishing the Emcee's farewell. But the question remains: is the title of the novel referring to Isherwood leaving Germany or to the fact that the old Berlin, a place of excitement and freedom, was being destroyed and would never return?

Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz

Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz are in some ways a traditional musical comedy couple in this very untraditional musical – and also the primary romantic couple – yet in keeping with the tone of the show, they are left without a happy ending. Still worried about audience expectations in 1966, the show's creators turned Cliff and Sally into a mostly traditional musical comedy couple (though they are less so in the revised versions), with the older lovers as the second (only somewhat) comic couple. Fraulein Schneider is described in the stage directions as indestructible. In some ways, this is true, though by the end of the show, her heart, her love has been destroyed. Her first song, “So What,” shows us her ability to get past almost any obstacle, to take life as it comes, but this philosophy has a sour

side. The older couple has two songs. “It Couldn't Please Me More” accompanies Herr Schultz's gift of a pineapple, a very expensive, extravagant gift, to Fraulein Schneider (a moment echoed in *The Blue Angel* when a sea captain brings Marlene Dietrich a pineapple as a gift). They are older and wiser than Sally and Cliff, so their material needs are few, but their emotional needs are every bit as substantial as the younger couple's. Later, Herr Schultz is caught in Fraulein Schneider's room and is forced to pretend they're engaged to save her reputation – a stock comic situation. They decide it's maybe not such a bad idea, and they sing “Married.”

Similar in nature to “Somewhere That's Green” from *Little Shop of Horrors*, these songs are so effective and so charming because we're touched by the simplicity of their love. Merely being together is all they need to be happy; and it is that simplicity that makes it so much more tragic when they are forced to cancel their engagement due to the prejudice sweeping through Germany. The show's creators have set up a traditional musical comedy love story, specifically to have it destroyed by the malevolence always lying just under the surface of the show, just as the new rules of concept musicals shattered the musical comedy conventions in *Cabaret*. Though Cliff can leave Germany, Schneider and Schultz can't. Schneider's song, “What Would You Do?” is a companion piece to “So What;” but here her philosophy of simply surviving no longer has the same appeal it did at the beginning of the show. Now that she has had love, simply surviving is no longer enough. As they did in most of their musicals, songwriters Kander & Ebb wrote old-fashioned Broadway tunes for completely unconventional, morally and emotionally complex situations. It's this incongruity that lends each moment its peculiar power.

The Importance of Being Ernst

Ernst Ludwig is a fascinating and important character in *Cabaret*. When we meet him, on the train carrying Cliff to Berlin, he seems to be a charming, jovial, friendly guy. It's important that the audience loves him, that he is the most non-threatening character in the show, so that at the end of Act I, when we find out he's a member of the Nazi party, it's as upsetting for us as it is for Cliff. We have to share Cliff's disillusionment and sense of betrayal. Among the messages of *Cabaret* is the idea that not all Nazi party

members were monsters. Ordinary, decent Germans bought into the rhetoric of the Nazi party, some because they feared repercussions, some to better their social position, some because they needed to feel pride in their country that was falling apart, and some because the Nazi's hateful, aggressive rhetoric didn't pop up over night – the Nazis were brilliant in the way they introduced their ideas very gradually, very discreetly, into the German culture. If Ernst is played as a “dark” character from the beginning, if clues are given to the audience that Ernst may not be a nice guy, the impact of his party membership is diluted, and the reality of 1930s Germany is lost. Ernst may not be a particularly honorable character, but he is real, and that is what's most disturbing.

The song “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” further reinforces this point. It's used twice in the show. First, it's performed by performers in the Kit Kat Klub, whom the script describes as handsome, well-scrubbed, and idealistic. The song comes after a scene in which the romance between Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz is firmly established; it has also been established earlier that Herr Schultz is Jewish. Knowing what we do about pre-war Germany, we know there is trouble on the horizon. As if to reassure us of the dangers that lie ahead, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” illustrates the sincerity and self-righteousness of the people who will follow the Nazis, the people who believe the Nazis are their only hope for saving Germany. Kander and Ebb have really stacked the deck with this song to make it sound as wholesome and healthy as possible. The first two verses are filled with lyrical themes – nature, awakenings, the future, children. As the lyric becomes less pastoral and more nationalistic, the orchestra joins in, with the french horn and guitar prominent, adding a rustic, bucolic sound. The most frightening lyric is the second to last line, which promises that a time will soon come when the world will belong to the singers (i.e., to Germany). On one level this can be interpreted as a deep connection to nature; on another level, it refers to Hitler's desire to conquer the world. The love of nature is transformed into fanatical nationalism, one of the most dangerous forces in history, a force that still today motivates “ethnic cleansing” and wars around the globe.

Then, at the end of Act I, at the engagement party, Fraulein Kost sings this song again to keep Ernst from leaving the party. With only an accordion accompaniment, the song still sounds pretty and innocent. Ernst joins her,

with a swastika now prominent on his sleeve; if the subtext of the song wasn't obvious earlier, there can be no mistake about it now. Soon everyone at the party – except for Schneider, Schultz, Sally, and Cliff – is singing proudly about the Fatherland. Like the earlier version, this rendition moves up a key for each verse, increasing the dramatic impact. (Considering the Nazis' official position on immorality, it's ironic that the song is started by a prostitute.) At the end of the song, the Emcee appears onstage to underline the menace of the lyric, and as he disappears, the lights go out.

The important point the song makes is that the people of Germany were not rallying around a party committed to killing; they only knew that the Nazis promised prosperity and the salvation of Germany. In the film version, Brian and Max are sitting in a beer garden out in the country, when a young blond boy begins singing “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” Slowly the camera pans down to the swastika on his arm band. The people in the beer garden smile at his youth and his love for his country. Two waiters start singing with him, then one by one, the onlookers stand and join in. There is pride in their faces, determination, fierce patriotism. As each verse moves up a key, the crowd becomes more and more impassioned. These are not murderers; they believe they are patriots. They don't know the Nazis will soon be practicing genocide. People today often ask how the German people could have been so easily seduced by Hitler. The answer is that they loved their country and didn't listen closely enough to the Nazis propaganda. At the end of the scene in the movie, Brian and Max are getting in their car to leave and Brian says to Max, “Do you still think you can control them?” It is a deeply disturbing scene to watch mainly because these are simple, good people who have no idea what the Nazis have planned and what the future holds for their beloved Germany.

Kost Effective

Fraulein Kost is a fascinating character who is too often played as a stereotype, there just for laughs about sailors and sex. But she's more than that. She is a survivor like Fraulein Schneider. But though Schneider once had money and still owns a boarding house, Kost has never had that advantage. Her only option (at least in her mind) is to sell herself. She's not just a hooker; she's someone who had very few, if any, other options.

Would she be in this line of work if there weren't an economic crisis? Who knows? But playing her as a one-dimensional "type" dilutes the impact of Germany's economic problems in 1930. She is a rich, complex character who is rarely given her due.

One way to give her the depth she deserves is to assign her the German verse that has been inserted into the song "Married" in recent revivals. It gives her a point of view on love, marriage, and the future. It helps explain her almost desperate attempt to keep Ernst at the engagement party and it tells us that perhaps she needs love as much as money from her sailors.

Comment Songs

The score to Cabaret has two kinds of songs – comment songs and book songs. The comment songs are those performed in the Kit Kat Klub (and in the original production, sometimes in front of a light curtain). They are diegetic, meaning that the characters are conscious of the fact that they're singing. They work in a night club, so the act of singing is part of the action of the story. The book songs are the kind of regular musical comedy numbers that you find in most traditional musicals, in which characters express their thoughts and feelings through the artificial language of singing. The book songs are not realistically motivated; if these characters were real people in real life, they would not be singing; and in the world of the story, the characters aren't aware of the fact that they're singing. Traditional musicals usually use only book songs. When Curly and Laurie sing "People Will Say We're in Love" in Oklahoma!, the characters don't know they're singing. When Arthur sings "How to Handle a Woman" in Camelot, he's not aware that he's singing. In the latter case, we're hearing his thoughts; the song is an internal monologue. The film version of Cabaret cut all the show's book songs (unless you count "Tomorrow Belongs to Me") and only used the realistically motivated comment songs. Because of this, there is debate over whether or not it's still really a musical, technically speaking. The 1993 London revival solved this problem of stylistic schizophrenia by playing the conventional book scenes on the nearly empty club stage, in effect, making every song and all the dialogue scenes club acts as well. It was the first production of the show that really gave the musical a sense of unity it hadn't had before.

The first song in Cabaret, “Wilkommen,” functions as both a comment song and a book song. It welcomes us both to the Kit Kat Klub where much of the action will take place, and also to Cabaret, the musical. The Emcee is addressing the audience in the Kit Kat Klub while he also addresses the real audience. Using the opening song this way prepares us for the two different uses to which songs will be put in the show. The next comment song is “Two Ladies,” positioned just after Cliff has decided to let Sally move in with him. The song presents the Emcee and two female roommates, clearly illustrating the humor and perceived immorality of co-habitation. The song works better in the film in which it describes Sally, Brian, and Max's threesome, a situation more like the situation described in the song. The song also loses part of its punch in the revised versions of the show in which we already know Cliff is gay; although we will later find out they have slept together. This song may be a conscious homage to Trude Hesterberg's actual German cabaret number “Particularly Refined Ladies,” which is similar in content.

Later in the show, after Cliff accepts a job smuggling for Ernst and his unnamed political party, the scene shifts to the Kit Kat Klub, and the Emcee begins another comment song, “The Money Song.” The song in this spot since the 1987 revival is actually two songs – “Sitting Pretty” from the 1966 stage version and “Money, Money” from the film. This new hybrid begins with the Emcee telling us that, though everyone else in his family is starving (as most Germans were at the time), he's got all the money he needs. The reason? He sells girls (and perhaps himself), the obvious implication being that Cliff is prostituting himself for a buck. The song then goes on to say that money makes the world go around. When you're poor, neither love nor religion makes a bit of difference; only money can put food in your mouth and a roof over your head. If you're lonely, money can buy companionship. If you're overworked, money can buy a vacation. In the minds of the people of Germany, only money can solve their problems. For Cliff and Sally, now expecting a baby, money is more important than ever. An end to the depression was one of the Nazis' biggest promises to the German people. “The Money Song” is a testament to the fact that people will do almost anything – including abandoning their morals – for money.

Gorilla My Dreams

In Act II, scene 2, Fraulein Schneider, unnerved by the events at the engagement party, comes to tell Herr Schultz she has reconsidered and will not marry him. Though she doesn't say it outright, we know she has a great – and legitimate – fear of anti-Semitic acts of violence that would be perpetrated against them both. As she leaves the stunned Herr Schultz, the scene returns to the Kit Kat Klub where the Emcee enters with a gorilla in a dress. He sings, “If You Could See Her.” The song describes the blossoming romance between the Emcee and the gorilla and the prejudice they encounter whenever they go out in public; if we could only see her through his eyes, he pleads, we would understand their love. The audience laughs along with the ridiculous premise of the song, especially during the dance break. At the end of the song, the Emcee stage whispers the shocker: “If you could see her through my eyes, she wouldn't look Jewish at all!” The show's writers have caught us. We easily accepted the fact that a man can't possibly fall in love with a gorilla, just as most Germans easily accepted the fact that a gentile can't possibly love or marry a Jew, or as many people today easily accept the fact that it's unnatural for two men or two women to fall in love. In the film version, the Emcee delivers a short speech midway through the song; he asks if it's a crime to fall in love, and asks why can't the world live and let live. The sad truth is that sometimes in our mixed-up world, it still is a crime for some people to fall in love. There will always be people who want to control other people's behavior. This song is about perception and preconceptions, and about the inherent absurdity of any kind of prejudice. It's meant to make the audience very uncomfortable, and it does. It worked well enough in 1966 that the creators reluctantly softened the last line to appease the many audience members who were infuriated by it. The lyric was changed back for the revivals.

Like “Willkommen” and “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” the song “Cabaret” is used both as a comment song and a book song. It's ironic that Sally sings this song of happiness and contentedness just after Cliff has been beaten senseless by some Nazis. But soon, the song changes from a book song into a commentary song. This is the attitude will allow the Nazis to win the elections. People would rather think about happy things, having fun, enjoying life. Politics, the depression, immorality, the downfall of Germany, these are not topics people like Sally want to think about. Ironically, life in Germany will soon not be a cabaret. Millions will be killed, war will ravage the country, Hitler will commit suicide and Germany will surrender. To the

Kit Kat Klub audience, Sally's song is delightful. To the real audience, with the knowledge of what will happen in Germany, the song is terribly disturbing. Subtextually, the lyric also partially describes the social activist mood of 1966 America, the refusal to sit at home doing nothing.

But “Cabaret” is more. The centerpiece of the song, the story about Elsie, is Sally’s direct response to Cliff, her mother, and anyone else who has criticized her lifestyle. Sally has no doubt read romance stories, which at that time still romanticized the idea of dying tragically young. Sally not only believes that she has to have “several passionate affairs,” but she must also die dramatically and tragically at too young an age, in order to give credibility to her image of herself as a woman who’s Bigger Than Life. The Elsie story is Sally’s justification for her endless party of a life; and Elsie’s status as “the happiest corpse I’d ever seen” is, in Sally’s mind, a perfectly convincing response to Elsie’s (i.e., Sally’s) neighbors’ who believe that “that’s what comes from too much pills and liquor.” Cliff has rejected her lifestyle but now she has the stage. She will tell her side of the story. The tragedy is that she probably doesn’t really even believe it anymore. Life isn’t a cabaret anymore for her; her life is in ruins. It’s not clear if she’s had the abortion already by the time she sings this song, but either way, it’s on her mind. Maybe she’ll bounce back this time, maybe she won’t, and it’s that declaration of something even she doesn’t really believe that gives this song an underlying sadness, despite the manic music and optimistic lyrics. In fact, several recent productions have played this song as an actual nervous breakdown for Sally, with her literally screaming the lyrics by the end of the song.

But there’s one more thing going on in this song. In a way, this is a very public (though perhaps subconscious) working out of her decision about the abortion. Does she have the baby and enter into the dreary world of domesticity, like her friend Sybil – metaphorically sitting alone in her room – or does she abort the baby and continue her lifestyle of parties, alcohol, drugs, and sex – the tasting of the metaphorical wine, the celebrating of life as a cabaret. She decides in this song that she will continue her wild life, which means she must abort the baby. The show has set up two friends of Sally’s, two opposite role models from which Sally must choose. Her school chum Sybil came to “a bad end” by falling in love, getting married, and having babies. Elsie, Sally’s friend from Chelsea, ended up “the happiest

corpse” Sally had ever seen. By the end of the show, Sally has chosen to be like Elsie. And by rejecting Sybil, she rejects Cliff and their child. It’s after performing this song in the club that she stays out all night, seeing the doctor who aborts her baby. The recent trend to play “Cabaret” as a breakdown makes even more sense with the abortion in mind.

In the Beginning...

One of the clever, usually overlooked devices the score uses is connecting songs and characters through introductions. The introduction of “Don’t Tell Mama” echoes the introduction of “Wilkommen,” connecting these two club numbers. The introduction of “Perfectly Marvelous” is an instrumental reprise of “Don’t Tell Mama,” clueing us into the fact that Sally is performing for Cliff, and also suggesting that just like dancing in a club, living with Cliff is something of which Sally’s mother would not approve. There’s even a second quote of “Don’t Tell Mama” here in the underscoring in the middle of the song.

The introduction to “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” quotes “It Couldn’t Please Me More,” connecting the two songs, making it clear that “Tomorrow” is commenting on the wholesomeness of Schneider and Schultz’s relationship, a wholesomeness that will be turned into horror. The introduction to “Why Should I Wake Up?” is a quote of “Perfectly Marvelous,” showing us that Cliff has bought into Sally’s world view, that he’s enjoying the crazy distraction of her living there, and that her con has been successful. The introduction to “Married” also quotes “It Couldn’t Please Me More,” connecting these two songs about Schneider and Schultz’s romance. It’s interesting that when “It Couldn’t Please Me More” is used as dance music at the fruit shop party, it’s introduced by a musical accompaniment pattern that will be used later for “If You Could See Her.” It’s an almost unnoticeable device, connecting Schneider and Schultz’s romance to the celebration, but also to the very unpleasant Act II comment song that will introduce the idea of anti-Semitism into the relationship.

And finally, the introduction and the final instrumental tag in “Cabaret” echo the introductions to “Wilkommen” and “Don’t Tell Mama,” but this time the chords are much more dissonant, much harsher, and also more manic, more out of control. Sally hasn’t learned anything, and her life has spun out

of control, which her accompaniment illustrates. Again, it may not be consciously noticed by the audience, but they will feel that though this sounds like Sally's earlier music, it also sounds uglier.

What Would You Do?

The question remains: why produce a thirty-five-year-old musical? The answer is simple. Because it still matters. Because there are some lessons in life so important we must revisit them from time to time.

What does Cabaret have to teach us in 2001? That it's not okay to ignore what's going on around us, that we cannot allow our world to be less than it should be, that we should never keep quiet, that it's important to participate, that we have a responsibility to each other and to our community, that any discrimination, any indignity, any prejudice, no matter how slight must be brought out into the light of day and condemned.

What would have happened in Germany in the early 1930s if more people had voted? What would have happened if people like Sally Bowles had paid attention to what was happening in the Reichstag? What would have happened if people like Fraulein Schneider had stood up and said loudly and decisively that they will not accept intimidation, that they will not be bullied, that they will not go along in the name of self-preservation? What would have happened if the people of Germany had listened more closely to the Nazis and then stood up and denounced Adolf Hitler for the madman he was?

Would things have been different? Who knows?

But there was some moment, before the point of no return, when the Germans could have gone down a different road and saved the world from the horrors that should not have been inevitable.

Cabaret is about that moment, a time when it wasn't yet too late, when Germany wasn't yet locked into the path that would lead to the murder of millions of Jews. But the people of Germany couldn't see what we see. They didn't know how their choices, their fear, their apathy would lead to bigger things. People like Fraulein Schneider and Fraulein Kost were busy

just trying to survive. People like Sally Bowles were busy having too good a time.

The extermination of the Jews started small, in tiny, daily indignities, in little, nearly unnoticeable acts of prejudice, in seemingly innocent jokes, in the words people chose. Could the same thing happen today? Of course it could. Right wing political leaders in America today say pretty much the same things the Nazis said about gays, women, family, religion, culture, education, and patriotism. It may not seem dangerous right now, but it didn't seem dangerous in Germany in 1930 either.

We have an obligation to learn from what happened in Germany. We have an obligation to make different choices. If we don't do it today, it may be too late tomorrow.

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