

# Cabaret

By Stephen Tropiano

"Divine decadence" is the phrase the flirtatious Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli) tosses out to describe her emerald green nail polish when she first meets her future lover, Brian Roberts (Michael York). But Sally may well have been describing "Cabaret," the 1972 musical that infused a genre that up to then was synonymous with family entertainment with a much needed dose of "divine decadence." In his rave review of the film, "Hollywood Reporter" critic Garry Giddins described "Cabaret" as "a musical for people who don't particularly care for musicals." He was right. Director Bob Fosse succeeded in reconceptualizing the genre and its conventions, resulting in a Hollywood musical with a European art house sensibility.

On the surface, the 1972 screen version of the popular 1966 stage musical has some elements in common with most Hollywood movie musicals. The central plot is a "boy-meets-girl" love story, though in this case it's Sally, a free-spirited American cabaret singer, who meets Brian, a very proper and repressed bisexual British writer. Like the backstage musicals popularized by director/choreographer Busby Berkeley in the 1930s, Sally is seeking stardom, and the musical numbers -- in fact, all of them -- are performed within the film in front of an audience (Berkeley, a Hollywood legend, visited the set of "Cabaret" during its filming in Germany when he was in town to receive an honorary award at the 1971 Berlin Film Festival). Yet, what broadened "Cabaret"'s appeal to ticket buyers, who at the time might not have otherwise paid \$1.70 to see recent Broadway to screen adaptations like "The Boy Friend" (1971), "Man of La Mancha" (1972), "1776" (1972), or even "Fiddler on the Roof" (1971), is how the film defied and subverted the conventions of the Hollywood film musical in terms of its setting (Berlin, 1931, during the collapse of the Weimar Republic and rise of National Socialism), its treatment of adult subject matter and themes (Nazis, bisexuality, anti-Semitism, etc.), and the innovative, stylized direction of Bob Fosse.

The source material for "Cabaret" has a long and complex history. The stage musical, which ran on Broadway for three years (1966-1969) and a total of 1,165 performances, won eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical, Best Composer (John Kander) & Lyrics (Fred Ebb), Best Direction (Hal Prince), and Best Supporting Actor (Joel Grey, who is the only cast member to appear in the film). The show's book



Re-release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

by Joe Masteroff is based on two sources. The first is a collection of short stories by British writer Christopher Isherwood (published in 1939 under the title "Goodbye to Berlin"), based on his experiences living in Berlin from 1929-1933. The second is John Van Druten's adaptation of Isherwood's stories as a 1951 stage play, "I Am a Camera," which was later adapted as a film in 1955. Van Druten's play focuses on the friendship between two Brits living in Berlin -- cabaret singer Sally Bowles (played on stage and in the film by Julie Harris) and British writer Christopher Isherwood, who, unlike the real-life author, is heterosexual. While Isherwood never disclosed the identity of the real Sally Bowles, a 1968 article in the British newspaper, the "Daily Mail," revealed Jean Ross, a left-wing journalist married to fellow journalist Claud Cockburn, was the basis for the character, whose last name Isherwood borrowed from writer Paul Bowles, whom he met in Berlin. Ross later turns up as a character (played by Imogen Poots) in the 2011 made-for-television British movie, "Christopher and His Kind," based on Isherwood's 1976 autobiography that gives

a non-fictional account of Isherwood's gay life in 1930s Berlin.

In adapting the stage musical *Cabaret* for the big screen, screenwriter Jay Allen relied heavily on original source material (John Van Druten's play and Isherwood's stories), with some major changes along the way in regards to the characters' nationality (Sally is American instead of British; Cliff, the American writer in the stage musical, renamed Brian in the film, is now British). Allen replaced the subplot in the stage musical involving the proposed "mixed marriage" between Cliff's German landlady, Fraulein Schneider, and a Jewish grocer, with another pair of "mismatched" lovers from Van Druten's play, a Jewish heiress, Natalia (Marisa Berenson), and Fritz (Fritz Wepper), a gigolo who is after Natalia's money, but makes the mistake of falling in love with her.

The most significant change in adapting "Cabaret" for the screen pertains to how the songs are integrated into the story. The score by Kander and Ebb consists of two types of musical numbers: songs (including the title song) performed onstage at the Kit Kat Klub by Sally or the Emcee; and songs performed, in the tradition of the American stage musical, by Sally and the other characters to express their feelings, whether it to be to themselves or another character. But Fosse and producer Cy Feuer agreed that characters bursting spontaneously into song would detract from the "reality" of the film's period setting, which used West Berlin locations. Consequently, all but one musical number is performed in the dark, smoky, interiors of the Kit Kat Klub, where the crude, clownish Emcee serves as your host. The musical numbers performed by the Emcee revel in the decadence that serves as a metaphor for the political decline of the Weimar Republic, and the rise of the Nazi Party, which, in a few years' time, would be closing down establishments like the Kit Kat Klub and burning "un-German books" in the streets of Berlin. The presence of the National Socialists increases over the course of the film, most chillingly in the one song performed outside of the Kit Kat Klub ("Tomorrow Belongs to Me"). It takes place in a country Biergarten and is initially sung by Aryan youth with an angelic voice, who manages, through the course of the song, to whip most of the German clientele into a microcosm of national frenzy that becomes the perfect metaphor for the rise of the Nazi Party.

"Cabaret" was praised by the critics and scored at the box-office, earning over \$2 million in its first five weeks and over \$25 million domestically by the end of January 1973. The film at the top of box-office chart for 1972, "The Godfather," would be "Cabaret"'s main competitor when award season rolled around. Both films received ten nominations. "The Godfather" won three (for Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay--Francis Ford Coppola, Best Actor--Marlon Brando), while "Cabaret" won eight, which set a record for the most Oscars won without winning Best Picture. The biggest upset was Bob Fosse's best director win over Coppola, who would win for direction two years later for "The Godfather II."

The film also made Liza Minnelli, who also took home an Oscar, a movie star. Although she was Kander & Ebb's first choice for Sally Bowles for the stage musical, Harold Prince rejected her and mistakenly went in another direction by casting Jill Haworth, a young British actress with no musical theatre experience, to play the role of the mediocre cabaret performer. Some people (including Isherwood) thought Minnelli was too talented to play Sally Bowles, though it would be difficult to cast a performer with limited talent in the lead role of a film musical.

"Cabaret" proved the ideal vehicle for Fosse, whose work often reflected the human condition through the sensibility and setting of show business. But his boldness in taking on a surreal time in politics and human tragedy through song and dance remains unparalleled in motion picture history.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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