

The Arts Center's 'Cabaret' is a glittering production with a heart of darkness.



"What good is sitting alone in your room? Come hear the music play..."

My husband and I answered that siren call on opening weekend of the Arts Center's spectacular new production of 'Cabaret,' which runs through October 25th. A lifelong musical fanatic, I confess I went into this

particular

musical with middling expectations. Oh, I knew the production would be first rate; they always are at the Arts Center. But I had some preconceived notions about the show itself – visions of Liza Minelli in fishnets and Alan Cumming in pasties danced in my head – and I was fairly certain that, despite its TWELVE Tony awards, 'Cabaret' just wasn't my type.

I love being pleasantly surprised.

First, I should acknowledge that most of what I'd dreaded about 'Cabaret' *did* come to pass. It just wasn't...

dreadful

. Let me explain: As a theatre-goer, I'm not normally drawn to bawdy, burlesque entertainment. It's not that I'm a prude; I just tend to find it boring. Camp for camp's sake doesn't interest me. Fortunately, it didn't interest the creators of this celebrated Broadway musical, either. As it turns out, beneath all the glitter and sequins, behind the slapstick facade, 'Cabaret' is a dark, poignant show that resonates long after curtain call. It's a morality play posing as a Vaudevillian romp... a tragedy disguised as a comedy.

Intrigued? Keep reading. I want you to see this show!

Set in Berlin in the early 1930s, 'Cabaret' celebrates the spirit of that remarkable time and place. Throughout the 1920s, Berlin was known for its innovative, sophisticated culture. Artists, musicians, and writers flocked from all over the world to soak up the city's sizzling energy. (One

of those writers was Christopher Isherwood, who penned a series of Berlin novels, as well as a play called 'I Am a Camera,' which would later become the basis for 'Cabaret.') By the early 30s, Germany was falling under the influence of the Nazi party, but Berlin – “a haven of vice,” according to Hitler – was holding out with gusto.

This is how our story begins, with a bunch of holdouts – social rebels and fun-loving free spirits – who frequent a place called the Kit Kat Klub. Into their midst comes a young American writer, Clifford Bradshaw, who takes up with a wild, madcap Brit named Sally Bowles. All kinds of revelry ensues, most of it involving scantily-clad showgirls.

These fabulously-costumed “Kit Kat Girls” strut their stuff beneath hot pink lights on a dazzling set; the Elizabeth Wallace Theatre has *become* a Berlin nightclub. The jazzy score – performed with aplomb by a live orchestra from a loft above the stage – is witty and infectious. The songs are memorable, and you probably know more of them than you think.

If I have one (slight) criticism of 'Cabaret,' it's that I never quite bought into the central love affair between Clifford and Sally. This, I believe, is not the fault of the appealing actors (Ben Gunderson and Laura Beth Wells) who valiantly work to bring it to life, but of the play, itself, as it's now written. According to my research, the original 1966 production featured Clifford as your standard issue romantic hero. When the show was revived in the late 90s, however, lines were added to make the character more sexually ambiguous. Actually, 'ambiguous' might be too *ambiguous*

a word. It's made clear early in the play that Clifford likes boys. Does he also like girls? This is *less*

clear. He agrees to take the glamorous Sally into his boarding room reluctantly, and complains continually that she's distracting him from his writing. She, in turn, makes sly references to “Bobby,” a cabaret regular who has his sights set on Cliff. So when all of a sudden, in one quick exchange, Sally goes from being Cliff's annoying roomie to The Love of His Life, it doesn't quite ring true. It isn't the first time good story-telling has been sacrificed on the altar of edgy statement-making, and it won't be the last, but I always think it's a shame. A more passionate, authentic love affair between our leads would have raised the dramatic stakes considerably, setting us up for a bigger, more powerful conclusion to their tale.

Fortunately, the show features a secondary love story that's absolutely irresistible – one of the most beautiful I've seen on any stage, ever – between landlady Fraulein Schneider and shopkeeper Herr Schultz. The accomplished actors inhabiting these roles (Sue Mathys and Bruce Sabath) are as good as musical theatre gets – their characters breaking our hearts, making us laugh, then breaking our hearts again. And their voices! Imposing and tender and

everything in between. I really can't heap enough praise on this pair of deeply gifted performers.

It's through the doomed romance of their wonderfully complex characters, one of whom is a Jew, that we first see the Nazis as a clear and present danger in 'Cabaret,' not just some vague notion referenced occasionally by our young bohemians with the catch-all word "politics." The specter of Hitler looms subtly over the whole first act, but our youthful hedonists seem oblivious, escaping each night to the Kit Kat Klub in search of wine, women, and song. Clifford, a bit more serious than the others, is reading Mein Kampf, and his friend Ernst, who's said to be "in politics," makes his living carrying mysterious briefcases to and fro. But it's not until the end of Act I, during a joyful engagement party that goes terribly wrong, that the truth about "politics" in Germany becomes suddenly, and quite chillingly, real.

In the rapid-fire second act, we see the lives of our main characters unraveling against the backdrop of a rising Third Reich. If Hitler is the show's invisible, but most prominent, Boogymon, the unnamed antagonist in 'Cabaret' is the aimless, destructive club-kid lifestyle, itself, which ultimately fails to bring salvation. The razzle-dazzle of Berlin nightlife takes on a forced, almost frantic feeling that culminates in Sally's performance of 'Cabaret's' iconic title song. The happy-go-lucky lyrics sound almost obscene as Sally delivers them with false bravado, her huge, vacant eyes signaling an SOS, her painted smile crumbling under its own weight as she rushes to her riveting finish. We expect this number to be a show stopper, and Ms. Wells does not disappoint. It's painful to watch, but impossible to look away.

Speaking of which... I'm not sure how I've written this far without mentioning the actor who held us firmly, but ever so delicately, in the palm of his masterful hand throughout the show. 'Cabaret' begins and ends with the Emcee.

Literally and figuratively. A one-man Greek chorus, he is at once both
in

the action and outside of it, commenting... both innocent and all-knowing. Joel Grey won big kudos for his stiff, tuxedoed marionette of an Emcee in the original production. The hip, in-your-face 90s revival featured Alan Cumming with suspenders over his crotch and red paint on his nipples – a raunchy, hyper-sexed Emcee – and again, the critics swooned. I am pleased to report that the Emcee currently treading the boards on Hilton Head Island is neither puppet nor pervert. He is, quite simply, perfection. Thank you, Daniel Frank Kelley, for a mesmerizing night of theatre. I'll hang out in your klub any time.

'Cabaret' runs through October 25th at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina. For ticket information, call (843) 842-ARTS or visit www.artshhi.com

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