

## Notes from the blog of David Armstrong, Producing Artistic Director at Seattle's 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Theatre where the physical production of our show originated:

**Welcome!**



Hello and welcome to my new blog!

The goal of this blog is to give you a behind-the-scenes look at what goes on here at The 5th, and at what my job as Producing Artistic Director entails. At least once a week I hope to share with you some candid observations about life and art in this particular musical Theatre, and in the "musical theater" in general.

Our current production of *Cabaret* has sparked a certain amount of conversation and controversy regarding the look and atmosphere of the production, as well as the director and cast's unique interpretation and approach to this material.

This makes me very happy. One of the goals of The 5th Avenue Theatre is to create bold new productions of great classic musicals. Like any classic work, from Shakespeare to Puccini, I believe that *Cabaret* can be re-imagined in any number of ways. And this production is markedly different from nearly every previous production I am aware of.

It is especially different from the 1998 Broadway revival that had a long run in New York and twice toured to Seattle. As much as I admired that production, I would never dream of attempting to recreate it. One thing we do not do here at The 5th is reproduce faded copies of other artists' productions.

Because our approach to *Cabaret* is so unique, some people have questioned whether the staging and design of this production is appropriate to the musical's time, place and setting.



As they were preparing this production, our director, Bill Berry, and his design team did an extensive amount of research into the look, feel and performance style of actual Berlin cabarets during the Weimar period in which *Cabaret* is set. They studied several dozen books on the subject, pored over scores of photographs, studied the era's art and artists and viewed all available documentary film footage. The design of the set and costumes for this production was directly and specifically based on this research. ([View the images](#) they used as inspiration - a partial list of books and films they referenced can be found at the bottom of this entry.)

What this research reveals is that the look and feel of Weimar Berlin cabarets and nightclubs was not all that different from night spots in New York, London and Paris during the same period, and that they also bore striking similarities to other popular entertainments of the day such as the Follies Bergere, Charles Cochran's London revues, and Ziegfeld Follies type shows whose styles were, much later, co-opted by old-school Las Vegas revues. (Some have commented that our show looks "Vegasy," they might just as well have said that classic Las Vegas style looks much like vintage Weimar cabaret.)

Even more significantly our creative team (and cast) were heavily influenced by Eric D. Weitz's acclaimed new book "Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy." In this book (which first came to our attention about a year ago when it received a glowing review in the *New York Times*) Mr. Weitz makes a compelling case for viewing the Weimar period as not only a time of political turmoil and financial instability, but also as an astounding period of progressive social change, utopian longings, and significant artistic creativity and innovation. (Mr. Weitz was a guest speaker at our *Cabaret* Spotlight Night event last month.)

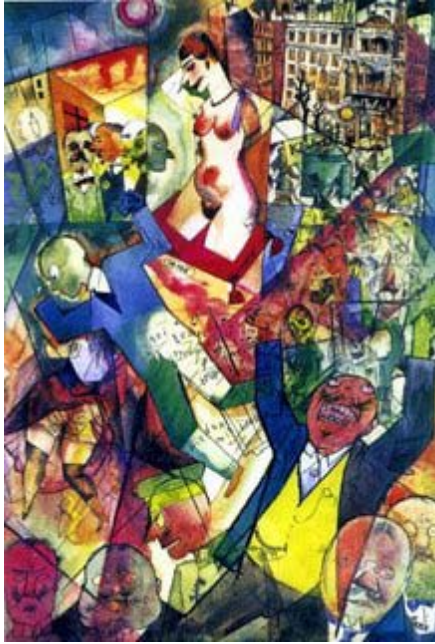
As outlined in the book, this dynamic period saw the rise of early versions of all of the liberation movements we would not see again until the 1960's and 70's – Women's liberation, gay liberation, and sexual liberation of all sorts. Additionally, "back to nature," athletic "body culture" and nudist movements were socially and politically influential during this time. (This body culture movement inspired the staging of "Tomorrow Belongs To Me" in this production.)

Another important reference source for this production was the book "Voluptuous Panic: the Erotic World of Weimar Berlin," which includes among other fascinating tidbits a map and listing of 50 of the cabarets and nightclubs that were active in Berlin between 1927 and 1932 (still representing only 10% of the all the night clubs then in existence.) These include 12 feminist clubs, 10 homosexual clubs, 10 lesbian venues, five transvestite clubs and many others. Photos and descriptions of these clubs directly inspired the design of our production.

The actual cabaret performers and songwriters of the time were by all accounts dynamic entertainers, many of whom also were involved in the German film industry of the day. Photos and contemporary reviews of these performers reveal sexy vibrant women and men who were masterful at engaging and entertaining their audience. This production has used them as our inspiration. One local critic complained that our company of performers was "conspicuously fit" and in no way suggested "an undernourished post World War I generation." This makes no sense to me. After all, they are professional singers and dancers playing professional singers and dancers who – at least in my experience – have in every culture, time period and circumstance, no matter how modest their means, usually looked fabulous.

(For many years some people have suggested that leading lady Sally Bowles shouldn't be too talented, or else "why would she be stuck in the Kit Kat Klub and not be a major star?" What is most likely holding her back is not her talent, but rather the fact that she parties all night, does not get up until noon, and does not have drive, ambition or physiological makeup to rise to the top. I could name a hundred performers with star quality and talent who will never achieve stardom because they don't have everything else that it takes to become one.)

What did set German cabaret apart from similar entertainments in other countries was its penchant for pointed political and social satire. The original creators of *Cabaret* understood this and that is why the show includes "Mein Herr" (a comment on the rise of the "new woman" of the day), "Two Ladies" (a satire of the sexual freedom of the time), and most bitingly "If You Could See Her" (an indictment of the growing anti-Semitism of the day – in this number the Emcee is not an anti-Semite any more than an actor playing a Klansmen on Saturday Night Live is actually a member of the KKK. He is an actor making a political point.)



The script of the musical also tells us much about the nature of the Kit Kat Klub. The first dialogue scene tells us that it is “the hottest spot in Berlin” and this is spoken by a character who does not work at the club and who is trying to impress and reward his new acquaintance. We can only assume he means it and that the club is indeed “hot”. Late in the play, Sally Bowles states that “business is off at the club” since she left. From this we can only assume that at the beginning of the play, when we see the club in action, business is quite good. It is hard to imagine a significant number of people being willing to shell out hard-earned cash during a depression to attend a cabaret where “everything was black, bleak, stripped to a chilling bareness, right down to the cabaret girls and

boys... their eyes sunken holes, their expressions all heroin-blank and depraved” as one critic expressed so much longing for.

I could go on and on, but let me close with these final thoughts. What makes the musical *Cabaret* so fascinating is that it is so open to interpretation. A director must ask and answer for himself the questions of “Who is the Emcee and what does he represent? What does the Kit Kat Klub represent?” Who is the protagonist of the story?” None of these issues is directly spelled out in the text. What Bill Berry and his team did was to answer those questions in their own unique way. They present the Kit Kat Klub as the spectacular creation and refuge of a troupe of talented bohemian artists who will eventually be destroyed by the rise of the Nazis – their spirit of freedom and liberation is wiped out by the forces of bigotry and fascism. He has created a world in which it is indeed possible to “leave your troubles outside” until inevitably and devastatingly they come crashing in on us at the end of the first act.

I personally find this more dramatically satisfying than many other productions that telegraph the end of the story right from the beginning. In any event, it is what we pride ourselves on here at The 5th – creating new productions of classic musicals with our own stamp and point of view. If you have not yet seen it I have to tell you – it is not to be missed!

Research materials:

"Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy" by Eric D Weitz

"Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s" by Sabine Rewald, Ian Buruma and Matthias Eberle

"Cabaret Berlin: Revue, Kabarett and Film Music between the Wars" Edited by Lori Munz

"Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin" by Mel Gordon

"The Hot Girls of Weimar Berlin" by Barbara Ulrich

"The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape" by Brian Ladd

"The Men with the Pink Triangle" by Heinz Heger

"The Berlin of Sally Bowles" by Christopher Isherwood

"I Am a Camera" by John Van Druten and Christopher Isherwood

"The Berlin Stories: The Last of Mr. Norris and Goodbye to Berlin" by Christopher Isherwood

"Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider" by Peter Gay

"The Weimar Republic Sourcebook" Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimendberg

"Tophats and Flappers: The Art of Russell Patterson" Edited by Shane Glines and Alex Chun

"Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore" Edited by Louise Downie

"The Cabaret" by Lisa Appignanesi

"Berlin: Symphony of a Great City" Directed by Walter Ruttmann

"Berlin's Hidden History" Directed by Brian Ladd and John Woods

"The Blue Angel" Directed by Josef Von Sternberg

"Paragraph 175" Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman

"I Am a Camera" Directed by Henry Cornelius