

Stripping the Veneer and Exposing a Symbol in Mendes's *Cabaret*

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Abstract

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The 1998 Broadway revival of *Cabaret*, conceived and directed by Sam Mendes, exemplifies the versatility of the American musical. Arguably, the most iconic role in *Cabaret* is that of the Master of Ceremonies (Emcee), who dazzled audiences as the consummate entertainer in the original 1966 Broadway production and in the 1972 Fosse film. Mendes's revival proved that musicals could transform to take on entirely new meanings. His overtly dark and disturbing concept prominently featured the Emcee as a puppet master, a deviant, and ultimately, a victim.

Mendes's treatment of the character of the Emcee, as portrayed by Alan Cumming, demonstrates how a character who functions as an observer throughout the musical, and who does not even exist in the original source material for the work, could become the single most important character. The production features a shocking twist in the final scene, but this twist is subtly prepared for the audience by the Emcee's songs throughout

the musical, each one of which exposes a different part of his persona. The songs transform him, chameleon-like, into a symbol of those persecuted during the Holocaust.

This thesis will explore the genesis of the Emcee to his transformation in the Mendes version. By exploring the songs, this thesis will reveal the dramatic motivation for the final scene, along with the ability of the musical to remain a relevant, new, and vital dramatic form.

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## NOTE ON SOURCES

Except where noted, the following are referenced:

Quotations from the libretto—*Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics* by Joe Masteroff, John Kander, and Fred Ebb (1999, Newmarket Press)

Musical examples from *Cabaret: Conductor's Score* (1998 version) by John Kander, Fred Ebb, Bob Golden, and Paul McKibbins (1999, Tams Witmark)

Audio recordings from *Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording* (1998, RCA Victor)

Video Recordings from *Cabaret*, filmed at the Donmar Warehouse, London (1994, ITV)

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## INTRODUCTION

*Once in a while, a Broadway revival comes along that is so inventive, so galvanic that theatergoers feel they are experiencing something entirely new. Such is the case of Sam Mendes's daring production of "Cabaret," the Kander and Ebb musical—about an English singer and American writer who meet at a nightclub in Berlin on the eve of Hitler's rise...It is a production...that conclusively demonstrates that Broadway musicals can be treated like Shakespeare and other classic texts, that in the hands of a gifted director they can be repeatedly reimagined and made to yield new truths.*

—Michiko Kakutani  
*The New York Times Magazine*  
April 26, 1998

The red carnation. A flower so commonplace today that it is often overlooked for the gentleman's boutonniere. But a century ago, a red carnation was a *très chic* choice for the cosmopolitan man. The impact of a crisp, crimson blossom against black wool cannot be diminished; neither can the impact of it missing. Christoph Zuschlag's poster for the 1938 *Entartete Musik* exhibition in Düsseldorf synthesized two decades of modernist and popular musical styles into one striking image: an ape in top hat and tails, playing the saxophone. Missing from the subject's lapel was a flower boutonniere; a Star of David took its place.



Christoph Zuschlag's poster for the *Entartete Musik* exhibition, ca. 1938.

In 1966, the image was “replicated” by Hal Prince in his new musical *Cabaret*. The Master of Ceremonies donned a top hat and tails and danced with his gorilla lover. Three decades later, Sam Mendes would complete the image by adding a Star of David in his 1998 Broadway revival. The connection between the poster and the Master of Ceremonies is compelling but seems to be completely coincidental—there is no research to suggest that Hal Prince conceived of the Master of Ceremonies (hereafter the Emcee) based on this image. Indeed, the character was based on Prince's own experiences being stationed with the army in Stuttgart in 1951. Prince frequented a nightclub called Maxim's, where there was “a dwarf MC, hair parted in the middle and lacquered down

with brilliantine, his mouth made into a bright-red cupid's bow, who wore heavy eyelashes and sang, danced, goosed, tickled, and pawed four lumpen Valkyries waving diaphanous butterfly wings.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this happenstance, there is a connection between the poster and the Emcee.

Joseph Goebbels distinctly understood the impact of symbols. As the Third Reich Minister of Propaganda, he spearheaded one of the most successful political propaganda campaigns in history. Through performing and visual arts and the media, the Nazi message was thoroughly communicated. In the quest to “purify” Germany, the artistic movements of the early decades of the twentieth century became part of this propaganda campaign, culminating in 1937-1938 with exhibitions in *Entartete Kunst*<sup>2</sup> and *Entartete Musik*<sup>3</sup>. Zuschlag's poster was a “grotesque caricature” of the title character from Ernst Krenek's 1927 opera *Jonny Spielt Auf*, a work targeted soon after its premiere as “an ‘outrageous introduction of Jewish-Nigger filth’...whose title character is a black violinist and jazz bandleader, combin[ing] aspects of nineteenth-century Wagnerian tradition with elements of jazz, operetta, spirituals, Broadway musicals, and big-city noises.”<sup>4</sup> It was Raymond Knapp who would connect *Cabaret* to *Jonny Spielt Auf*, suggesting that the opera itself was a product of its time, representing the “Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Prince, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-Six Years in the Theatre* (New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Munich, Germany. July 19-November 30, 1937

<sup>3</sup> Düsseldorf, Germany. May 24, 1938-June 14, 1938

<sup>4</sup> “Entartete,” *The University of Virginia Libraries*, accessed May 15, 2015, <https://explore.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/censored/walkthrough/entartete>.

cabaret appropriation of style”<sup>5</sup> developed by Weill and Brecht with an “exuberant sexuality that...tended...toward a cruder emphasis on sexuality—an emphasis that was magnified...to become almost animalistic.”<sup>6</sup> He further suggests that this musical style was the basis for *Cabaret*, completing the connection between the poster, the opera, and the musical.

This thesis will explore the character of the Emcee in the 1966 musical *Cabaret*, by Joe Masteroff (book), John Kander (composer), and Fred Ebb (lyricist) and the characters transformation through the three definitive versions of the musical: the original Broadway production directed by Hal Prince; the 1972 Bob Fosse film; and finally, the re-conception in the 1990s by Sam Mendes which resulted in successful runs in London, on Broadway, and a “revival-of-the-revival” on Broadway in 2014.

Specifically, it will explore how a character—who does not exist in the source material and who essentially behaves as an observer—changes function with each version. The thesis will concentrate on the Mendes production, where the Emcee becomes a symbol, essential to the plot and concept of the musical in the final, shocking minutes. It will show how the twist in the final scene of this production is actually set up throughout the musical, with each of the Emcee’s songs exposing a different part of his persona, allowing him to become representative of the many factions of those persecuted by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 241.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

## WHAT IS CABARET? “LIFE IS A CABARET, OLD CHUM.”

“There was a cabaret and there was a master of ceremonies and there was a city called Berlin in a country called Germany—and it was the end of the world...” Thus begins the finale in the musical *Cabaret*, a reprise of the opening number “Willkommen.” The speaker is Clifford Bradshaw, an atypical leading man and the narrator. The monologue is the beginning of the novel for which he has struggled to find inspiration; by the end of Act II, he has found that inspiration. The novel plays an important dramatic role in the musical; not only does it serve as the pretext for Cliff’s adventure to Berlin, but it also connects the musical to its ultimate, though very much removed, source material: Christopher Isherwood’s novellas about Weimar Berlin.

*The Berlin Stories*, published in 1945, was actually a combination of three novellas: *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), *Sally Bowles* (1937), and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939).<sup>7</sup> *The Berlin Stories* was a “semi-autobiographical novel, more accurately a grouping of sometimes intersecting stories set between 1929 and 1933. To one degree or another, Isherwood’s stories were based on their author’s personal experiences as a British expatriate residing in Berlin during these years.”<sup>8</sup> In 1951, John van Druten dramatized these novellas, focusing heavily on *Sally Bowles*, in the play *I Am a Camera* which opened on Broadway on November 28, 1951 at the Empire Theatre, starring Julie Harris as Sally. The title came from the opening paragraphs of *Goodbye to Berlin*:

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<sup>7</sup> *Sally Bowles* was included in the original printing of *Goodbye to Berlin*

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Block, “Is Life A cabaret? *Cabaret* and its sources in reality and the imagination,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 5, no.2 (2011): 164.

From my window, the deep sole massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied façades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scrollwork and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. <sup>9</sup>

In addition to extrapolating Sally Bowles from the novellas to become the heroine of *I Am a Camera*, Van Druten also kept the point-of-view of the narrator, Christopher Isherwood. The young writer, who has come to Berlin to write his novel, lives in a boarding house owned by Fräulein Schneider. He is passive—an observer of the pending threat of Nazism—but begins to live more freely when he is introduced to the nightclub singer Sally Bowles. The free-spirited, flamboyant Sally and Christopher strike up an immediate friendship as the political turmoil grows around them. The play was “perceived by many critics as a loosely strung together but theatrically effective series of scenes. To most playgoers, its main attraction was Harris’s incandescent performance.”<sup>10</sup> Harris would win her first of five Tony Awards as Best Leading Actress for her portrayal of Sally Bowles and would revive the role in the 1955 film version, directed by Henry Cornelius.

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 3 ed., s.v. “I Am A Camera,” accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169867.001.0001/acref-9780195169867-e-1541>.

*I Am A Camera* seemed ripe to make into a musical, because of Sally's profession as a cabaret singer, though—by the accounts in *Sally Bowles*—not a very good one: “She had a surprisingly deep husky voice. She sang badly, without any expression, her hands hanging down at her sides—yet her performance was, in its own way, effective because of her startling appearance and her air of not caring a curse what people thought of her.”<sup>11</sup> There is a historical precedent for making this type of play into a musical. Rodgers and Hammerstein musicalized Lynn Riggs's 1930 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, as the 1943 landmark musical *Oklahoma!* *Green Grow the Lilacs* also had been a play with music already present. As with most adaptations, finding the right tone for a musicalization of *I Am a Camera* was paramount, and to find the right tone, the right team had to be in place. After a failed attempt by composer Sandy Wilson (*The Boy Friend*), Hal Prince acquired the rights and put together a splendid team of Joe Masteroff (libretto), John Kander (composer), and Fred Ebb (lyricist) to bring Isherwood's stories to the musical stage. Prince's initial interest came from “the parallels between the declining society of the 1920s and 30s Berlin and the racial hatred and violence of the 1960s.”<sup>12</sup>

Each time *Cabaret* has come to life on stage or screen, it has done so with great critical and commercial success.<sup>13</sup> *Cabaret* exists in three definitive versions: the original 1966 Broadway production directed by Hal Prince, the 1972 Bob Fosse film adaptation, and

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<sup>11</sup> Isherwood, *Goodbye*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Hillman, *Echoes of the Holocaust on the American Musical Stage* (Jefferson, McFarland, 2012), 91.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix I for a production timeline including selected Broadway and London productions, creative teams, and awards.

the 1998 Broadway Revival directed by Sam Mendes. “In surveying some of the differences between the various versions of *Cabaret* and its literary, stage and screen predecessors, it seems crucial to emphasize that the Masteroff-Prince-Fosse-Mendes interpretation of the cabaret as a metaphor for life in Germany in the early 1930s, so central to the musical in its stage and film versions, was peripheral in Isherwood’s autobiographical stories, as well as in Van Druten’s play and its film adaptation. In fact, in the entirety of the *Berlin Stories*, Isherwood allows his readers to witness Sally Bowles perform at *The Lady Windermere* (the prototype of the *Kit Kat Klub*) exactly one time and for only one and a half pages at that in the story that bears her name.”<sup>14</sup> Though the cabaret itself is not central to Isherwood’s novellas, sociocultural aspects of the plot are utilized in the staging of the cabaret numbers in the musical, giving each director the freedom to explore various sociocultural aspects in their respective versions. For instance, the Mendes interpretation relies heavily on the counterculture and sexual identity aspects of Isherwood’s novel in his staging of the cabaret numbers.<sup>15</sup>

*Cabaret* has—since its conception to present—remained one of the most shocking and unexpected musicals to grace the Broadway stage. Structurally, *Cabaret* is significant for bridging the gap between the full “book” musical and the “concept” musical. The “book” aspect of the musical was inspired by both *I Am a Camera* and *The Berlin Stories*, using the source materials as a sort of grab bag of characters, events, and circumstances that

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<sup>14</sup> Block, “Is Life a cabaret?” 169.

<sup>15</sup> See “Two Ladies” in the *Transformation* section

were not necessarily connected in the original materials.<sup>16</sup> The plot revolves around American writer Clifford Bradshaw and his arrival in Berlin in 1931, towards the end of the Weimar Republic—just before the Nazis come to power—and his relationship with the nightclub singer Sally Bowles.<sup>17</sup>

Interwoven with the “book” musical is the “concept” musical. The concept musical consists of performance numbers which take place in the seedy *Kit Kat Klub*. These songs have a greater function than mere entertainment. Indeed, “at the centre of Prince’s dramatic realization of Isherwood was the concept of the cabaret as an indispensable metaphor for life in general and pre-Hitlerian Germany in particular. ...The notion of the cabaret as a metaphor is a powerful one that has been put to effective artistic use by Prince and others and has intrigued, disturbed and entertained audiences from the 1960s to the present.”<sup>18</sup> For this metaphor to work, it was essential to create a character who existed inside of the cabaret—this character is the Emcee.

In an early draft of the show, the Emcee performed all of his numbers at once, after the first scene on the train with Cliff and Ernst. This resulted, essentially, in two disjunct shows: a realistic show about a writer and his encounter with Sally Bowles, and the Emcee’s show-within-a-show. Eventually, the Emcee’s songs were taken and scattered throughout the musical “in an ascending curve energetically and descending curve

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<sup>16</sup> This adaptation is not without precedent, either. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1949 musical *South Pacific* was loosely based on a set of stories, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947) by James A. Michener.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix II for a full plot summary.

<sup>18</sup> Block, “Is life a cabaret?,” 165.

morally. He opened effortfully, empty laughter to an empty house. He'd lost the war, his self-respect. He carried his money around in bushel baskets. With National Socialism he found his strength, misdirected and despotic, feeding off his moral corruption. In those eight numbers the MC [sic] became the metaphor."<sup>19</sup> However, Prince still struggled with how to combine these two seemingly disparate formal elements (a traditional plot and a metaphor), despite their thematic connection. Prince found his inspiration at Taganka Theatre in Moscow, where he attended *Ten Days that Shook the World*, an experience he considers a turning point in his thinking as a director. Prince recalls:

Until that night at the Taganka, I believed the most important element of a musical to be the book. The score was secondary. A rule and as such, no more valid than the reverse, which is subscribed to by most of my peers... A few seasons later the Taganka's production of *Hamlet* worked brilliantly...Effortlessly, the actors moved a blood-red screen to divide rooms, to construct unseen walls, to isolate the interior workings of a character's mind from his external behavior...I suggested splitting the stage into two: an area to represent the **real world**, the vestibule in Sally's rooming house, her bedroom, the train, the cabaret; and an area to represent **the mind**. [The Emcee's] material was divided between realistic numbers performed in the cabaret for an audience on stage and the metaphorical numbers illustrating changes in the German mind. We called this the Limbo Area.<sup>20</sup>

The extent to which Prince worked to incorporate the Emcee and the metaphor into the book musical and have a cohesive work of theatre is clear. In each of the three definitive versions of the work (Prince-Fosse-Mendes), the metaphor has changed extensively—a change that has affected no character as much as the Emcee. With each version, the role has embedded itself deeper into the metaphor. In 1966, the metaphor was the cabaret, and the Emcee was the performer in the cabaret; he "started out as a pathetic, self-

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Prince, *Contradictions*, 128-131.

deluded entertainer who gradually turns into an emblem of the Nazi mentality."<sup>21</sup> In Fosse's interpretation, the Emcee *was* the metaphor; by the end of the film, through his characteristic ambiguity and irony, he has transformed to represent Nazi Germany, and perhaps Hitler himself.<sup>22</sup> By the 1990s version, the Emcee's part in the metaphor is the polar opposite of the Fosse film; he is gradually revealed as a symbol of those persecuted in the Third Reich, literally and figuratively. Once a supporting player to the primary and secondary couples, this transformation throughout the life of the work, and the remarkable aesthetic and aural qualities of the role, have made the Emcee the most significant and memorable part of *Cabaret*.

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<sup>21</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (New York, Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2005), 60.

<sup>22</sup> By taking the “book” music out of the film and having only the “realistic” cabaret numbers, Fosse removed the cabaret as the metaphor—it’s the only rendition in which the Emcee plays a role in the plot. As previously noted, the Emcee becomes the metaphor in this version.

## PROGRESSION

The performer charged with bringing the “spiky metaphor”<sup>23</sup> to life and evolving him through the first two incarnations of the Emcee was Joel Grey. The son of comedian Mickey Katz, Grey was “born in a trunk”—a childhood performer touring with his father. Prince recognized in Grey that he “shared experience with the MC [sic], recognized the gaucheries, the hollow laughter, the courage and vulnerability of a performer in a sputtering limelight.” He insisted on casting Grey, a decision (as with many in Prince’s career) that did not fail, and gave the American musical one of its most epitomized characters. Grey’s performance, universally lauded, has become an indelible part of Broadway history, like *Show Boat* or *West Side Story*, for “who can forget Grey’s Emcee in top hat and tails, looking like a *compère* eager to please while also serving as a satirist in his own right?”<sup>24</sup> A Tony award for the original Broadway production and an Academy Award for Bob Fosse’s film version solidify that Joel Grey was essential to the success of the role—synonymous even. In his Oscar acceptance speech, Grey thanked many people, but especially “Fred Ebb and John Kander, who wrote me the best songs in the world.”<sup>25</sup> For a character with no plot-driven dialogue, the musical material was paramount for the success and memorability of the character.

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<sup>23</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Garebian, *The Making of Cabaret* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), xi.

<sup>25</sup> “Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database: Joel Grey,” *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*, last modified 2014, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/045-2/>.

Grey is responsible for bringing the role of the Emcee through his original concept to his first progression in the film. In the original Broadway production, Grey quickly stole the show as recalled in the *New York Times* review (November 21, 1966):

Master of Ceremonies Joel Grey bursts from the darkness like a tracer bullet, singing us a welcome that has something of the old 'Blue Angel' in it, something of Kurt Weill, and something of all the patent-leather night-club tunes that ever seduced us into feeling friendly towards sleek entertainers who twirled canes as they worked. Mr. Grey is cheerful, charming, soulless and conspiratorially wicked. In a pink vest, with sunburst eyes gleaming out of a cold-cream face, he is the silencer of bad dreams, the gleeful puppet of pretended joy, sin on a string.

The complete unknown Grey shared the review with performing legend Lotte Lenya—who had “never been better, or if she has been, I don't believe it”—and held his own.

The *New York Times* theatre critic Walter Kerr couldn't get enough of *Cabaret* when twelve days after his original review, he used *Cabaret* as a case-study for the current state of musical theatre (December 4, 1966). He applauded the show for:

wrench[ing] the stale pattern” by “insist[ing] on music as a mediator between audience and characters, as lord and master of the revels, as mocking *conférencier* without whose ministrations we should have no show at all...popp[ing] the painted clowns and gartered girls directly into our faces, making them, in effect, a brightly glazed window—with a musical staff scrawled all over it—*through* which we can perceive the people and the emotional patterns of the plot...a pushy, lipsticked, sinus M.C. become[s] the distorting mirror through which we peer at an actual world. Joel Grey, commanding the floor show in spats, red neckerchief, and a spangled gold hat, couldn't be more indifferent to the realistic life going on behind him; life, like the show, is the next breezy, heartless, sleek and scatterbrained turn coming up...We need a wild spin with a dancing gorilla now...The show is a Peeping Tom humming a tune.

From Kerr's account, it is clear that the most memorable aspect of the show was the Emcee. In the November of 1966, something happened on Broadway, and that something was *Cabaret*, but the someone was Joel Grey.

To create the role that would not only make him a household name, but also launch *Cabaret* into the "greats" of American musical theatre, Grey had to embody the role. He took to searching for the character inside him, staring at the mirror for hours to create the right persona for the role. In 1987, he revealed to Richard Alleman in *Playbill* (November, 1987) : "Eventually I came to see him as a sort of marionette, and I saw his eyelashes moving all in one piece—not feminine or fluttery—but like a ventriloquist's dummy. Then I found this greasepaint called 'Juvenile Pink,' and I thought to myself, 'this creep, he would want to look young, and this is what he would use.'" Taking performance cue from his own memories of every "second-rate musical hall entertainer he had ever seen, I tried to cram all that terrible stuff—the stuff that I hated on those guys—into this one man." For Grey, the Emcee was on the edge of "darkness and danger," and he wanted the audience to experience that feeling.

That "darkness and danger" was taken to new levels in the Fosse film, where the Emcee was redefined with "sharp, spiky, malicious detail."<sup>26</sup> The film version looked to redefine film musicals by removing the non-diegetic songs; Fosse believed he was making the "first adult musical." The "book" and "concept" were merged: the cabaret became part of the plot, no longer existing in an area of "limbo" and no longer functioning as a metaphor. Of Grey, Fosse "insisted that the character had to become more literal than

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<sup>26</sup> Garebian, *The Making of Cabaret*, 133.

symbolic because now he was in close-up.” Fosse nicknamed Grey’s character “Mister Porno” out of great admiration for the role, but was very hard on Grey about abandoning his stage persona—abandoning the role as he had conceived it. For Grey, the adjustment took weeks, but he “dug deeper into the role than he had on Broadway, discussing with Fosse where the Emcee slept and lived, what his food, politics, and sexual preferences were, and what the Kit Kat girls had had to do for him to get their jobs. Fosse and Grey even developed a subtextual relationship between the Emcee and Sally, expressed—in shorthand, ‘by an exchange of glances between Liza and me, or just pursed lips. It was enough. It didn’t matter whether he had actually slept with her.’”<sup>27</sup> For the Emcee, the first progression of the role was necessitated by the change in medium from stage to film. While there is little film footage of his original performance on Broadway, Grey’s performance on film became the standard for the role. Fosse’s *Cabaret* was a huge success and made an indelible mark on the film musical. Some of the more enduring images of musicals come from Fosse’s interpretation of *Cabaret*: Liza Minelli leaning on a chair wearing a bowler hat; the feminine gorilla in her Sunday best; and Joel Grey staring straight into our souls through a deformed mirror in his tails, bow tie, and rosy cheeks.

Our only glances into Joel Grey’s original concept of the role of the Emcee is from journalism, historical knowledge of the time period, and the original cast recording, forcing us to make an educated guess about the original performance. To say that the mid-1960s was a time of transition on Broadway is an understatement; in the years leading up to *Cabaret*’s Tony Award for Best New Musical, the winners were *A Funny*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,148.

*Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1963), *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1965), and *Man of La Mancha* (1966). Though there is much merit in these musicals, the fact remains that they are all traditional book musicals, and though the subject matter was a departure from the musicals of the 1950s, each musical employed a leading man or leading lady and other standard musical theatre conventions. All this is to point out that Grey's Emcee, as we know him from the film, would be *too* dark and nuanced for Broadway at the time. While America's taste for musical theatre was changing through the decade—due, in large part, to the Baby Boomers coming of age—by 1966 and the premiere of *Cabaret*, tastes hadn't transformed radically. Audiences still went to the theatre to be entertained, and though *Cabaret* hoped to challenge those expectations, it was a "dark horse" when it premiered in 1966. Its need to balance entertainment while still commentating on the human condition was paramount, and the Emcee was the perfect role to bridge the two. Grey's leap into the nuanced and provocative Emcee in the film would help bring cohesion to the musical. While the original production was criticized at times for being schizophrenic, the full incorporation of the book and concept musical in the film gave impetus for the next definitive stage version, wherein the "book" was fully integrated with the "concept."

In 1972, when the film *Cabaret* was released, it was hard to imagine another performer could step into Joel Grey's soft-shoes. The man had progressed the role of the Emcee through two definitive versions, from an entertainer and commentator to an entertainer and Nazi. But, as is true for all great theatre roles, there are always different and new ways to interpret a character.

## TRANSFORMATION

*“I think I realised [sic] in the theatre that it wasn’t enough to like a play or simply feel like you could make it work; you have to ultimately feel like you have a secret about the play. A secret that only you have and that, in the end, you make available to the audience.”*

*-Sam Mendes  
from Sam Mendes at the Donmar by Matt Wolf*

An ill-fated revival in 1987, with Grey as the top-billed star, proved that *Cabaret*, as conceived by Hal Prince, was in desperate need of an overhaul. The original Broadway production and film had exposed viewers to a multitude of social *faux pas*—polyamory, bisexuality, and abortion amongst others; but what was *faux pas* in the 1960s and 1970s no longer carried the same shock value in the 1980s. Six years later, a small London theatre reconceptualized *Cabaret*, and with it, returned the musical to its disturbing origins.

Sam Mendes became the artistic director of the renovated 251-seat Donmar Warehouse in London’s Convent Garden in 1992. The first show under his direction was Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins*. During Mendes’s tenure, the theatre emerged as an institution “eclectic, entertaining, brazen, [and] unapologetic in its pop-art aspirations,”<sup>28</sup> committed to producing the best of live theatre with relatively little funding and a talented ensemble of actors, designers, and directors. Essentially, the Donmar was the anthesis of the West End, dominated by Cameron Mackintosh blockbusters, such as *Les Miserables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon*. In 1993, the Donmar participated

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<sup>28</sup> Matt Wolf, *Sam Mendes at the Donmar: Stepping into Freedom* (New York, Limelight Editions, 2003), 2.

in the Christmastime<sup>29</sup> tradition of staging plays;<sup>30</sup> *Cabaret* was the first of these musicals and became the production that transformed the theatre in its early years.

Of Mendes's *Cabaret*, John Kander said, "when *Cabaret* was first done, it was fresh and imaginative and no one had ever seen anything like it. And in a funny way, that's what Sam did for a whole other generation: we got back the feeling *Cabaret* had its first time out."<sup>31</sup> To do this, the work needed an entire overhaul. A revised score was pieced together from the songs of the original Broadway production and the Fosse film; songs were cut, added, rearranged and given to different characters. Additionally, the score was re-orchestrated by Michael Gibson and included a nine-piece pit band comprised from members of the ensemble.<sup>32</sup> As the original Broadway show used *The Berlin Stories* as a grab-bag of characters and situations, Donmar's production used the older versions of the show to create something entirely new.

The Donmar production became the basis for the 1998 Broadway revival, which Mendes described as his "fully realized" version. It opened in the Henry Miller Theatre on March 19, 1998 before moving to the renovated Studio 54 (renamed the *Kit Kat*

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<sup>29</sup> In subsequent years, "lighter" fare would be staged at Christmas, including *The Threepenny Opera*, *Company*, and *Nine*.

<sup>30</sup> From the Christmas Pantomimes the week leading up to Christmas in Great Britain

<sup>31</sup> Wolf, *Sam Mendes*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> This production preempted the trend in the 2000s of ensembles playing instruments, notably at the Roundabout Theatre's productions of *Company* and *Sweeney Todd*.

*Klub*) in November of that year. The revival played for 2377 performances, outrunning the original production, and won a host of awards.<sup>33</sup>

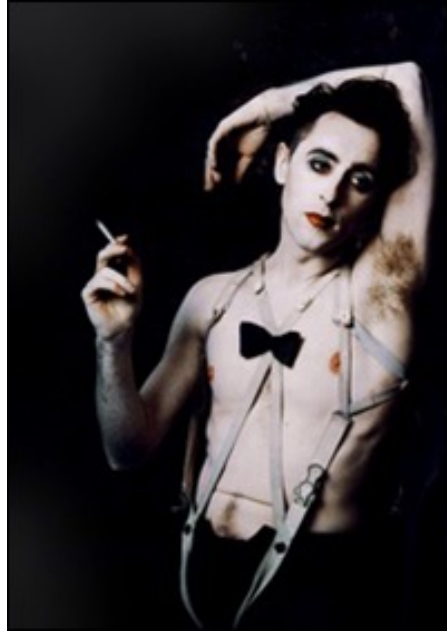
Mendes treated *Cabaret* like a piece of straight theatre;<sup>34</sup> he had the performers examine their characters through Masteroff's book and Ebb's lyrics to create intricate background stories. The design and concept of the show were decidedly darker than the original. There was no hint of glamour of Minelli's Sally Bowles. With runs in her stockings, poorly bleached hair, and hyper-sexual performances, Sally made us aware of just what sort of club she worked in. The *Kit Kat Klub* girls embodied the prevailing "Heroin Chic" of the 1990s—complete with bruises, track-marks, and tattoos—running around in their skivvies. The *Kit Kat Klub* itself was a decaying theatre—abandoning the colorful seediness of Fosse's film—rather, black, red, and white dominated the color scheme. Homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality were freely and vividly explored by the all the characters, including Cliff, whose ambiguous sexuality had been problematic for the show since its inception. The original concept and metaphor were also overhauled. By changing the theatre into a literal cabaret, the "two worlds" of Prince's production blurred together; now, the audience would be an active part of the decaying society. At the helm is the Emcee as an overseer of the entire show, not just the cabaret, as a the character who would go on to disgust, entertain, and violate the audience throughout the evening. "The atmosphere of the evening is very much his making. He's down and dirty. He's come up from the streets and he brings the streets with him...he is a drug addict. You can see the track marks on his body from the drugs.

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>34</sup> A term used colloquially within the theatre world to differentiate plays from musicals.

And as the play progresses, with the rise of fascism, the Emcee gets more and more debauched.”<sup>35</sup>



Alan Cumming (Playbill)

Mendes cast Alan Cumming as the Emcee, a respected Shakespearian actor relatively unknown outside of the Great Britain. Prior to *Cabaret*, Cumming was in a touring production of *Hamlet* as the title character which happened to be at the Donmar in the fall of 1993. By day, he rehearsed the Emcee; by night, he delved into one of the greatest roles written for the stage. Cumming was unsure about tackling a musical theatre role, telling Mendes, “I don’t do musicals; they’re not my bag. I don’t really want to — the Emcee, yuck. I had a problem, and still sort of do, about ending a sentence and bursting into song.”<sup>36</sup> Knowing that “every musical theatre actor in London would want to kill

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<sup>35</sup> Melvyn Rothstein, “Back to the Kit Kat Klub,” *Playbill* (February 20, 1998): accessed May 15, 2015, <http://playbill.com/features/article/back-to-the-kit-kat-klub-101119/print>.

<sup>36</sup> Wolf, *Sam Mendes*, 41.

him” for taking the role, Cumming committed himself to making the Emcee “proper” and not “shlocky or musical theatre-y.” With this approach, Mendes and Cumming took what Joel Grey had created and progressed through his twenty years performing the role, and brought the Emcee to his place of transformation.

At the core of Mendes’s production was his “secret” for the play and the use of the Emcee as a symbol. In the shocking final moments of the production, the Emcee teases the audience as he strips off his black leather coat to reveal striped grey and blue pajamas with a yellow Star of David and a pink triangle on the chest. As he bids the audience “Auf wiedersehen!/À bientôt,” the scrim rises behind him, revealing industrialized steel—a concentration camp. The lights flicker. He is extinguished.<sup>37</sup>

The twist at the end of the show was set up throughout the musical through the Emcee’s numbers. With each song, he reveals a layer of himself which could make him susceptible to persecution under the Third Reich. The songs begin lighter, but get darker and darker as the show progresses. By adding a dramatic curve to his observational role, the Emcee becomes a symbol in the last moments, elevating the role to the most essential in the entire musical.

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<sup>37</sup> The revelation was, indeed, shocking. In the 1998 touring production at the Paramount Theatre in Seattle, I remember the final scene and the absolute silence that fell on the audience. This feeling was replicated nearly fifteen years later when I saw the Donmar production. My stomach dropped at the final scene; I was completely empty. With repeated viewings, the feeling never diminished. But with those repeated viewings, the use of the Emcee as a symbol for those persecuted in the Holocaust became clear.

By examining each of the Emcee's songs—"Willkommen," "Two Ladies," "Money," "If You Could See Her," and "I Don't Care Much (as well as the connection between "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" and "Finale")—musically and as conceived by Mendes and realized by Cumming, these layers will be brought to light as they are over the course of the musical.

### “WILLKOMMEN”

The Emcee first reveals himself as a “degenerate” performer with the opening number “Willkommen,” a song with melodic and lyrical style “innocuous enough [that] for a time in the late 1960s, [it] became a staple for school-children, valued for its friendliness and ‘United Nations’ mix of languages.”<sup>38</sup> In its previous versions, the song may, indeed, have been welcoming. At the 1967 Tony Awards, the song opened the ceremony in a large chorus number involving actors from the shows nominated that season<sup>39</sup>; in 1976, the song was featured on the first season of *The Muppet Show* with Joel Grey as a guest star. In reality, the song has become a *cliché* of musical theatre, so much so that the opening line is repeatedly featured in Mel Brooks's 1974 film *Blazing Saddles*.

The song has a basic verse-chorus structure, though each of the verses are spoken monologues. This facilitates a number of effects. With the repeated chorus, the audience is given a sound bite that will lead them through the musical. The kernel of the vamp

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<sup>38</sup> Knapp, *The American Musical*, 243.

<sup>39</sup> The 2015 Tony Awards were also opened with “Willkommen.”

(Figure 1) is found throughout the score in songs like “Don’t Tell Mama,” “Mein Herr,” “Money,” and “Cabaret” (Figure 2a-d). But by having the verses spoken instead of sung, Kander and Ebb eliminated the need for conventional rhyme scheme, allowing for a great deal of information to be conveyed by the verses. The extended introduction of the chorus men and women allows each of them to be individual characters, rather than lost in the background. Since the song is built on a vamp, the verse is awarded the freedom of flexibility in overall length. The Emcee is instructed to ad-lib the verses, and though they exist in a "definitive" form on cast recordings, in actual performance, they vary from night to night, as detailed below. This freedom gives the feeling of a live cabaret performance—one where the performers and performances change from night to night. It also solidifies the "live" theatre aspect of the musical itself. On Broadway, many shows are timed with technical precision; “Willkommen” allows the opening of *Cabaret* to breathe.

Figure 1: “Willkommen” mm.1-4 Vamp

Drum roll (long) Cym. crash [3] Allegretto  
 Flut. & Clarinet, Tpt.  
 mp

Play 4 times  
 p

Figure 2: "Willkommen" throughout the score

Ma-ma what you saw!

*ff*

71

Detailed description: This figure shows a musical score for the song "Willkommen". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "Ma-ma what you saw!". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It features a prominent oom-pah rhythm in the right hand, with chords and eighth notes. The left hand provides a steady bass line. A dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) is present in the piano part. The measure number 71 is indicated at the start of the piano part.

Figure 2a: "Don't Tell Mama" mm. 71-75

Bye bye mein lie - ber Herr — fare - well mein

Detailed description: This figure shows a musical score for the song "Mein Herr". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "Bye bye mein lie - ber Herr — fare - well mein". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It features a prominent oom-pah rhythm in the right hand, with chords and eighth notes. The left hand provides a steady bass line. The texture is reminiscent of the oom-pah rhythm predominant in "Willkommen".

Figure 2b: "Mein Herr" mm.11-13

Texture reminiscent to the oom-pah rhythm predominant in "Willkommen."

GIRLS Mon-ey. mon-cy. mon-ey. mon-cy. Mon-cy. mon-cy. mon-cy. mon-ey. Mon-ey,  
'round.

*sub.p cresc.* *sub.p*

42

Detailed description: This figure shows a musical score for the song "Money". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "GIRLS Mon-ey. mon-cy. mon-ey. mon-cy. Mon-cy. mon-cy. mon-cy. mon-ey. Mon-ey, 'round.". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It features a steady bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. Dynamic markings include *sub.p* (sub-piano) and *cresc.* (crescendo). The measure number 42 is indicated at the start of the piano part.

Figure 2c: "Money" mm.42-43

me, as for me, I made my

*fp* *fp*

134

Detailed description: This figure shows a musical score for the song "Cabaret". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "me, as for me, I made my". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It features a steady bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. Dynamic markings include *fp* (fortissimo piano). The measure number 134 is indicated at the start of the piano part.

Figure 2d: "Cabaret" mm. 134-137

“Willkommen” follows musical theatre conventions by introducing the audience to the show. Because of the specific setting of this musical, the song also doubles as an opening number of a cabaret act. The dual purpose of this song, along with Sally’s career as a performer, often cause casual observers to believe *Cabaret* is a conventional backstage musical *a la Show Boat* (1927) or *Gypsy* (1959). But *Cabaret* differs from a backstage musical for two reasons. Primarily, the surface plot does not revolve around putting on a show; secondly, the intentional separation of the “book” and “concept” musical removes the essential interaction between “book” characters and the “show.”

Theoretically, the “book” musical is unaware of the “show.” This distinction between the backstage musical and *Cabaret* is important in understanding the opening number.

“Willkommen” is not the song it seems to be. It appears to be a conventional opening number, welcoming the audience and introducing the show; but in reality,

“Willkommen” draws an audience into a world that is anything but standard by Broadway conventions. When *Cabaret’s* final curtain falls, order will not have been restored to the world, the primary and secondary couple will not ride off into the sunset, and the audience will leave uncertain about the fate of the characters.

Mendes, whose interpretation is arguably “the most incisively accurate tone and interpretation”<sup>40</sup> of *Cabaret*, understood “Willkommen’s” full function within the musical. Instead of a fun and flirty opening number, Mendes allowed the darkness of his production to be apparent from the get-go. In the smarmy guise of Alan Cumming, “Willkommen” transforms into an opening number that does not welcome, but dares the audience to indulge in the evening. With his sharp, angular face and white, sickly

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<sup>40</sup> Garebian, *The Making of Cabaret*, 164.

makeup, he draws the audience into the *Kit Kat Klub* in a disturbing, yet wonderfully decadent performance.

The opening vamp, one of the most recognizable gestures in musical theatre, which “evokes a smoky cabaret atmosphere, and perhaps Berlin itself,”<sup>41</sup> becomes the background for a strip-tease, predatory in nature. As the lights come up, the Emcee enters into a spotlight. He wears a full-length leather trench coat and teases the audience as he delivers his opening monologue:

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome!/. . .Leave your troubles outside.../So-life is disappointing? Forget it!/In here life is beautiful.../The girls are beautiful.../Even the orchestra is beautiful!

The 9-piece pit band swells into a sleazy instrumental break, driven by the insistent bass drum, punctuating the strip-tease. As he prances around the stage, flirting with various levels of undress, the audience now knows: this is not your father’s *Cabaret*. Gone are Grey’s top hat and tails. In their place, black culottes, sock suspenders with military-style boots, and a groin harness are adorned with the requisite bowtie and painted, red nipples. He mocks the audience for their willingness to indulge with him, while perhaps judging the audience for their hypocritical nature. The highly ad-libbed opening number is almost a monologue. In three versions, he introduces the girls differently:

**1993 Donmar Warehouse**

I told you the orchestra was beautiful.../ And now, presenting the cabaret girls!/ Rosie—so called because of her cheeks, see?/ Lulu—She’s a tiger/

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<sup>41</sup> James Leve, *Kander and Ebb* (New Haven, Yale University Press, (2009), 53.

Frenchie—She loves to party / And Texas—You like Texas? Too bad, because Texas likes girls.

### 1998 Cast Recording

...Rosie—is so called because of the color of her cheeks / Lulu—oh you like Lulu? yah? Well too bad, so does Rosie / Frenchie—You know, I like to order Frenchie on the side. “On your side, Frenchie!” Just kidding / Texas—Yes, Texas is from America, but she’s a very cunning linguist / Fritzie—oh Fritzie would you stop that? Already this week we’ve lost a two waiters, a table, and three bottles of champagne up there like this/ And Helga “Helga is the baby, I’m like a father to her, mmm-hmm, and when she’s bad, I spank her...and she is very, very, very, very, very, very bad.

### 2014 Revival

...Rosie—is so called because of the color of her cheeks (spank, spank). Yup! They’re rosy!/Lulu—Oh you like Lulu? You like her? Yah? Well too bad, so does Rosie..but for a few marks, they will make you some frittatas / Frenchie—I like Frenchie best when she’s undressing. You get it? Frenchie undressing? French Dressing? It’s called a play on words / Texas—Texas is from America, but she’s a very cunning linguist—thank you, Show them Texas / Fritzie—Oh Fritzie, please be careful when bending over like this. Already this week we’ve lost three waiters, two magnums of champagne, and the *Kit Kat Klub* cat up there like this. This is a hazardous zone / And Helga—Helga and I go way, way, way, way, way back. I know it’s hard to believe, but we first starting dancing at this job last century. I’m like a father to her, um hum, and when she’s bad, I spank her...and she is very very very very very very bad.

The varying levels of sexual innuendo in the spoken introductions of the cabaret girls are mild compared to the physical expression of the innuendos. The Emcee grabs, slaps, prods, and rubs the girls as it suits him; they grab, slap, prod, and rub each other also as it suits him. Everything anyone does in the cabaret is controlled by the Emcee, even the audience’s laughter. He introduces the cabaret boys, “Bobby/...Victor/or is it Victor/... Bobby/ There’s really only one way to tell the difference.../I’ll show you later.” He does just that later in the number when he grabs each boy’s groin to size up their genitalia

("That's Bobby!). He is a pansexual predator, a deviant. As the company joins in a chorus line to end the song, the Emcee has brought the audience to a place of acquiesce; they are now part of the decaying society.

In the dramatic trajectory of Mendes's *Cabaret*, "Willkommen" presents the Emcee as a "degenerate" performance artist, one with—at very least—poor taste, and perhaps devious intentions. By bringing sexuality to the forefront of the number and the entire musical, Mendes was making a connection with Christopher Isherwood's experiences in Weimar Berlin, firmly planting the musical within the counterculture of the era. The 2009 BBC documentary *The Real Cabaret* explored those living outside cultural and gender norms (LGBTQ) in Weimar Berlin, analogous to San Francisco in the 1960s. Guidebooks, such as Eugen Szatmari's 1927 "*Berlin: Was Nicht Im Baedeker Steht*," specialized in sex tourism. From the beastiality implied on the cartoonish cover, explicit drawings of sexual fetishes, maps of fetish clubs and cabarets, and guides to prostitution, these books appealed to Berlin's counterculture, including the world of Christopher Isherwood. This is the Berlin Mendes draws inspiration from in his production, not a proper, polite middle-class Berlin. In heightening the Emcee to the epitome of degenerate artists, Cumming is making him a target for the conservative backlash that becomes the Nazi Party, revealing the first part of the Emcee as a symbol of those persecuted by the Third Reich.

In a sense, the Emcee's second song extends the performer's public on stage persona to his private persona. In "Two Ladies," the audience is introduced to the Emcee as a

bisexual, polyamorous individual in his private life, rather than just as a degenerate performer.

### THE VAUDEVILLE NUMBERS

“So you see, everyone in Berlin has a perfectly marvelous roommate. Some people have two people.” The Emcee’s second song provides commentary to Sally and Cliff’s new rooming situation and is the first of three vaudeville-style songs bookended by “Willkommen” and “I Don’t Care Much.” Though these songs can be grouped together stylistically, each serves a distinctive purpose in the transformation of the Emcee. “Two Ladies” exposes the Emcee as a bisexual man with a penchant for bestiality, sodomy, and *ménage à trois*. “Money” plays into the Jewish stereotype of the “greedy miser” who makes his money by questionable means, in this instance, running a prostitution ring. “If You Could See Her,” again plays into Jewish stereotypes, but adds to it layers of miscegenation and Black stereotypes. By utilizing the Vaudeville guise, these songs are capable of communicating very serious information about the Emcee under the veneer of a comedic number.

“Two Ladies” comes early in the first act, after Sally has convinced Cliff to allow her to stay in his room. The song doesn’t necessitate explicit staging because the music and lyrics are already suggestive. Despite this, with each production (Prince-Fosse-Mendes), the staging has become more *risqué*, culminating with the Mendes production. However, whereas some of the raunchy staging in his production seemingly came from

“nowhere,” “Two Ladies” has evolved steadily, through the definitive versions of the musical.

“Two Ladies” represents the perfect cohesion of music and lyrics; both utilize sets of three throughout. The song itself is a trio for the Emcee and two “women” in standard AABA-BA form. The opening gesture features a descending triplet figure followed by the introduction of the trio, each singing “Beedle dee beedle dee dee” (Figure 3), which will become the main lyrical motive for the song. Each A section states the “theme” of the section three times lyrically (“Beedle dee dee dee dee/Two ladies./Beedle dee dee dee/Two ladies/Beedle dee dee dee”), which ends on the highest note of the musical phrase before the conclusion of the phrase (“And I’m the only man, Ja!”). The girls begin each “Beedle dee dee dee dee,” in unison, ending the first phrase in unison, and then on ascending minor thirds for the next two phrases. Each “Beedle dee” is answered by the Emcee (Figure 4). This voicing changes throughout the song; in the second A section, the Emcee sings the “Beedle dee” sections and is answered by the girls.

The B sections are musical bridges, but lyrically function as verses, propelling the plot of the song forward. In the first B section, the “role” of each member of the trio is stated, “I do the cooking/And I make the bed/I go out daily to earn our daily bread.” The verse ends with a three-fold statement of what they have in common, “the key” (Figure 5). The second B section is more explicit, alluding to the *ménage à trois* implied by the use of “threes” throughout the work. With the line “We switch partners daily/To play as we please./Twosies beats onesies/But nothing beats threes./I sleep in the

middle/I'm left/Und I'm right/But there's room on the bottom if you drop in some night," "Two Ladies" no longer *implies* anything.

Figure 3: "Two Ladies" mm.1-5 Triplet figure followed by thrice repeated "Beedle dee deedle dee dee!"

**No. 13** **Two Ladies**  
 Cue: M.C.: ...Some people have two people

The musical score for "Two Ladies" (No. 13) is presented in a multi-staff format. The top staff is for the Orchestra (Orch.), marked *mf* and featuring a triplet figure. The vocal parts include "GIRL 1" and "GIRL 2", both performing the lyrics "Bee-dle dee dee-dle dee dee!". The piano part (piano) is marked *ff* and features a prominent triplet figure. The score also includes a Tenor (Ten.) part and a Swiss Accordion (T.Sx.) part. Dynamics range from *mf* to *fp* and *pp*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of two flats.

As stated above, with such an explicit song, there is no real need to make it lascivious; the music and lyrics do that perfectly well. Yet, “the suggestive sexual antics of the Emcee and the two ‘ladies’ with whom he cavorts bawdily” are enhanced by “the out-of-tune piano, Swiss accordion, and brass carry the melody, raising the pitch on the nonsense syllables...as the novelty act verges on soft porn. Tacky and smutty, the number revels in kitsch.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Garebian, *The Making of Cabaret*, 78.

Figure 4: "Two Ladies" mm. 7-16 Girls end on a unison in m. 7, then a minor 3rd in m.9, and finally, a minor 3rd one minor 3rd higher than the previous in m. 11 before the Emcee responds in mm.12-14.

[7] *Cl.*

*p*

*Tbn.*

*GIRLS*<sub>3</sub> *M.C.* *GIRLS*<sub>3</sub>

Bee dle dee dee dee dee, Two la - dies. Bee-dle dee dee dee dee,

*W.W., Br., Synth.*

*M.C.* *GIRLS*<sub>3</sub> *M.C.*

Two la - dies Bee-dle dee dee dee dee, And I'm the on - ly

[15] *Cl.*

*Tbn., T.Sx.*

*GIRLS*<sub>3</sub> *M.C.*

man. Ja! Bee - dle dee dee dee dee I like it.

Figure 5 "Two Ladies" mm. 51-54 The Key

*Bee, dee, dle, dee, dle*

*GIRL 1* *M.C.* *"GIRL" 2* *M.C.* *GIRLS*<sub>3</sub>

The key, Bee-dle dee dee, The key, Bee-dledee dee. The key.

*p*

Without video recording or stage notes of the original Broadway production, we cannot really know to what level the original production embodied this description. A photo from the original Broadway production only shows us costuming—the sweaters and shorts on the ladies imply that the number was tamer than the Fosse film. In the film, the girls wear dirndls, which allowed the Emcee to play underneath the tulle skirts; the Emcee wears his tuxedo. The girls, in their Fosse decadence, drop the key down the Emcee's shirt and go to find it. A bed sheet is used like a parachute to hide the sexual activities during the instrumental break with a strobe light adding to the chaos. The Emcee loses his pants as the threesome pops out from under the sheet in postcoital bliss. The Emcee behaves effeminate, allowing the girls to pick him up and carry him around the stage; he uses a falsetto. The whole number, which is definitive “camp,” previews what Mendes and Cumming would do twenty years later.

Like "Willkommen," the concept of "Two Ladies" by Mendes and its execution by Cumming add multiple layers of sexuality to the original song. From the Donmar Warehouse to Broadway, the number was significantly changed. We will focus on the Broadway version. From the outset, this number is dramatically altered. The colorful sweaters, dirndls, and tuxedos are replaced with women's lingerie and men's undergarments. The stage has a similar, unfriendly color scheme. Reds, nudes, white, and black dominate the set as the "ladies" pop out of a trunk on stage; one of the ladies is a man in drag. Mendes adds layers to the gaucherie. Taking cue from the Fosse film, Mendes chose to use a sheet in the simulated sexual act, but rather than hint at the act by having the singers under the sheet with a strobe light, Mendes uses the sheet as a backlit curtain. What transpires behind the curtain during the instrumental break

includes sodomy, oral sex, implied bestiality, sadomasochism and a host of other sexual acts in black and white silhouette.

This scene alone caused Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* to label the production as "seedier, raunchier and more sinister than either the original groundbreaking Broadway version...or the movie. But it is also, in the long run, less effective. Like its heroine, Sally Bowles, it wants nothing more than to shock, and as with Sally, the desire winds up seemingly more naive than sophisticated." Mark Steyn of *New Criterion* furthered the sentiment, accusing Mendes in his depiction of gay sexual practices<sup>43</sup> as being historically inaccurate, claiming that these activities had not yet been invented in Weimar Germany. Reception and perception of this number are up for debate, but Rodger Copeland pointed out that "Mendes's production wants nothing more than to entertain us—to entertain us *to death*, if necessary. It wants to make us fully complicit with what goes on in the cabaret, while outside, the world (or at least the world of democracy and cultivated values) is coming to an end."<sup>44</sup> As a response to Brantley and Steyn's accusations, I'll simply note the production was never seeking to be an accurate portrayal of life in Weimar Berlin, just as the original production and film were not. It seems hypocritical and prudish to disregard one production because of "anachronisms" when every definitive production contains these "anachronisms" to varying degrees.<sup>45</sup> As for Copeland, his reading is in line with the idea that the Emcee is a symbol, whose job as that symbol is to show us, through his songs, the people persecuted during the

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<sup>43</sup> Specifically the act of "fisting."

<sup>44</sup> Roger Copeland, "Cabaret at the End of the World," *American Theatre* 16, no. 1 (January 1999): 27.

<sup>45</sup> See Geoffrey Block "Is life a cabaret?"

Holocaust. In his staging, Mendes is remaining true to the source material. The following passage describes an instance of sadomasochism in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*:

I staggered to my feet, only to become involved in the dancing...I was seized round the waist, round the neck, kissed, hugged, tickled, half undressed; I danced with girls, with boys, with two or three people at the same time...I had wriggled and shuffled about half the distance, when an agonized cry came from the light room ahead of me. 'Nein, nein. Mercy! oh dear! Hilfe! Hilfe!' There was no mistaking the voice. They had got Arthur...Arthur cringed on the floor at her feet. He had removed several more of his garments, and was now dressed, lightly but with perfect decency, in a suit of mauve silk underwear, a rubber abdominal belt and a pair of socks. In one hand he held a brush and in the other a yellow shoerag. Olga towered behind him, brandishing a heavy leather whip. 'You call that clean, you swine!'....As she spoke she gave Arthur a smart cut across the buttocks. He uttered a squeal of pain and pleasure, and began to brush and polish Anni's boots with feverish haste.<sup>46</sup>

Mendes recreates the feeling of this passage in his production, especially in "Two Ladies." Furthermore, he casts the audience as the *voyeur* that the narrator in *Mr. Norris* becomes as he walks down the hall. By forcing the audience to witness the Emcee's behavior, he's forcing the uncomfortable reaction. This discomfort cannot be accidental, and Alan Cumming is able to play on the discomfort in his portrayal.

Cumming's Emcee willingly participates in the sexual "deviance" of this number. But more than that, he *wants* to participate. He's showing us his true self by showing us his sexual tastes. He's revealing himself as a bisexual in his private life, rather than hinting at it in "Willkommen," engaging in behavior that would have been and was persecuted by not only the Nazis, but even by today's society. His pink triangle in the ending scene reveals to the audience that he is being executed for homosexual acts, but the audience was given that information long before, in "Two Ladies."

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 29-30.

"Money" wasn't in the original stage production, but was composed for the film by Kander and Ebb. It replaced a song called "The Money Song (Sitting Pretty)" and its inclusion in the film already progressed the Emcee into a darker character. "The Money Song" is a lighthearted, clever Vaudeville-style number, but "Money" is decidedly more corrupt in its overall tone.

The standard verse-chorus form opens with a haunting solo piano line (Figure 6) and the Emcee singing a slow chorus, introducing the theme of the song, "Money makes the world go around/The world go around/The world go around," as the piano circles around the vocal line (Figure 7). The chorus girls enter with the "money" motif (see Figure 2c) into the first verse. The song essentially splits into two verses: one about being wealthy ("If you happen to be rich/and you feel like a night's entertainment...") and one about being poor ("If you haven't any coal in the stove/and you freeze in the winter..."). The constant use of the "money" motif is obsessive and a distinct attribute of the composition.

In the film, "Money" is a decadent duet between the Emcee and Sally. They are lavishly costumed with rhinestones, monocles, and waistcoats as they prance around stage tossing coins about and reveling in the idea that "money makes the world go round." The tempo is consistent and upbeat, and the song truly functions as a piece of entertainment. But on stage, Mendes transforms the song to comment on questionable practices of earning money. Because it was not in the original Broadway production, Mendes chose to place it in Act I after Cliff has agreed to start running errands for

Ernst (and the Nazi party) for seventy-five marks—“Anything for a buck.” Mendes gives the Emcee his own “questionable” profession—that of a pimp.

Figure 6: “Money” mm.1-4 Cascading-coin piano introduction

Figure 7: “Money” mm. 9-20 Circling piano figure

As Cumming circles down the spiral staircase holding a black briefcase with a white X, he has changed his clothing into a more “formal” white coat with tails. He plays into the stereotype of the “greedy miser,” with his obsession with “money, money, money.” As he approaches each Kit Kat girl, he performs a lewd sexual act with them, before handing

them cash. Prostitution was rampant and legal in Weimar Berlin, so the idea of the Emcee running a brothel out of the *Kit Kat Klub* is not a huge stretch of the imagination, and Cumming embraces the role of the money-hungry pimp with his devious, predatory demeanor.

This song exposes two aspects of Cumming's Emcee. The use of the "greedy miser" stereotype hints that the Emcee is Jewish, while the paying of women for sexual acts alludes to prostitution. Though the Nazis—conveniently—did not disapprove of all prostitution, procurers and prostitutes could be sent to concentration camps for the practice and given a black triangle to symbolize they were "*asozial*." Those who were not were unpaid for their services in military brothels. With "Money," the Emcee reveals a further layer of his symbolic persecution.

The last of the Vaudeville numbers—and perhaps the most-discussed song in *Cabaret*—"If You Could See Her (The Gorilla Song)," is a number which has garnered much controversy in the past five decades and makes the coincidental connection with the *Entartete Musik* poster. It also is the only song that has remained relatively consistent in staging throughout the three versions—though the film version is probably the darkest of the three— and is the "major manifestation of anti-Semitism...in which the emcee provocatively sings and dances with a human dressed up as a female gorilla."<sup>47</sup> The Emcee sings of his adoration of the gorilla: How can I speak of her virtues?/I don't know where to begin/She's clever, she's smart, she reads music/She doesn't smoke or drink gin (like I do). He begs the audience for "a little understanding," for "If you could see her

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<sup>47</sup> Block, "Is life a cabaret?" 173.

through my eyes” — “after a provocatively long fermata, he lets loose with the wickedest line in musical theatre: ‘she wouldn’t look Jewish at all.’”<sup>48</sup>

The gentle, waltz (Figure 8), soft-shoe dance, lyric melodic line, and sentimental lyrics all contribute to the effectiveness of the turn at the end of the song, which relies on “camp” to highlight the “ironic and transgressive” humor. “The dancing gorilla and the Emcee’s unctuous sentimentality seem funny because they are incongruous, but the humor is racist hatemongering [sic]. The emcee’s dancing and crooning give the appearance of a vaudeville turn, but the number is revealed at the end to be Nazi agitprop theatre.”<sup>49</sup> On Broadway, the irony of a Jewish performer singing the song of a Jewish composer and lyricist was lost on audiences. Before the show opened, the last line had to be changed to avoid the show from closing. First, it’s important to understand the original 1966 production. “If You Could See Her” was placed after Herr Schultz’s fruit shop is vandalized by “school children” as he’s trying to convince Fräuelin Schneider to marry him, despite the warnings from her Nazi friend, Ernst. Their engagement is called off. In that production, Schultz had a comedic song in Act I called “Meeskite,” a yiddish word for “ugliness.” The original ending, “If you could see her through my eyes/She wouldn’t look Jewish at all,” was meant to “evoke a complicated response, with an initial laugh caught by an audience who sees themselves in the overhanging mirror, then coming to an ashamed silence or embarrassed applause.”<sup>50</sup> Fred Ebb stated, “I’m very proud of that reaction, and it’s exactly what the mirror

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<sup>48</sup> Leve, *Kander and Ebb*, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Hillman, *Echoes*, 102.

concept<sup>51</sup> means in *Cabaret*—that we are capable of this.”<sup>52</sup> In Boston, the company began to receive angry letters, including one from a Rabbi, and the controversy threatened closure of the show. Prince made the decision, which Ebb referred to as “pandering to the public,” that the line had to be changed. Ebb changed it to, “She isn't a Meeskite at all,” but remained conflicted, yet resigned about the change:

I was doing it for what I felt were the wrong reasons. But I knew it had to be done anyway...I wish Prince had held firm...but I can now understand and have great compassion for his not wanting to blow it for something as seemingly mild as one line in a song. <sup>53</sup>

Kander commented on the misread of the song:

The song was to end that way...to make you the audience realize how easily you could fall into a trap of prejudice. And the Jewish members of the audience, my family included, all insisted that the song was really saying that Jews looked like gorillas. It's a puzzle that has never been solved. <sup>54</sup>

The change was made, to the anger of cast and crew. In protest, Joel Grey occasionally threw in “Jewish” in performance. The “offending word” was reincorporated into the score in the Fosse film, and has remained through subsequent revivals.

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<sup>51</sup> The original Broadway production featured a tilting mirror on stage, forcing the audience to see their reactions to various parts of the musical.

<sup>52</sup> Hillman, *Echoes*, 102.

<sup>53</sup> Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera and Beyond*, (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989), 147-8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Figure 8: "If You Could See Her" mm.57-62 Waltz Break

[57] Waltz (In 1)

Cl.

Sax., Br. (Tacet)

57

Figure 9: "If You Could See Her" mm.91-97 Monologue underscore, Vln. solo

[91] Underscore

Vln. solo

Tacet

91

Figure 10: "If You Could See Her" mm. 109-117 "She wouldn't look Jewish"/Play-off

Ad Lib.

(spoken): "She wouldn't look Jewish at  
small. But if you could see her through

*sfz* *p* *B<sup>b</sup>7arp.*

*sfz*

*all.*

*3x* *sfz*

109

113

For Grey, “If You Could See Her” highlighted the frightening aspects of his characterization. If he conceived the role as a marionette, he became an evil clown in this number, under the guise of a vaudeville soft-shoe. But Grey, ever the intuitive performer, understood that to make the piece be effective with his Emcee, he could not be the recipient of empathy from the audience. His sweet vocal timbre is in contrast to his deviance, but he plays the entire song with exaggerated humor. As mentioned above, this is the only performance in *Cabaret* where Grey is actually more sinister and menacing than Cumming. It was with “If You Could See Her” that Grey opened up the possibility of a truly dark Emcee.

The irony that the “darkness” bestowed upon the character in the Fosse rendition of “If You Could See Her” was not carried out by Mendes in the number itself, but in Cumming’s entire embodiment of the Emcee, is not lost. But with “If You Could See Her,” the audience begins to experience a different part of the Emcee, an “Act II” Emcee, if you will. A childlike Cumming, dressed in a white tuxedo jacket three sizes too big, a polka-dot tie, and fancy, formal hair, he seems ready for a wedding ceremony. The number is uncharacteristically lighthearted throughout, even sincere. The monologue in the middle grows a great deal of empathy for the Emcee, as he speaks of society’s disgust at his true love:

Meine Damen und Herren/ Mesdames et Messieurs/ Ladies and Gentlemen/Is it a crime to fall in love?/ Can we ever tell where the heart truly leads us?/ All we are asking is eine bisschen Verständnis/ A little understanding/Why can’t the world ‘leben and leben lassen’/‘Live und let live?’

Underscored by a “sad violin,” (Figure 9), this is the first moment the Emcee becomes more than his predatory and deviant persona. It’s here that he confesses his great love for a gorilla, revealing to the audience his participation in miscegenation, providing commentary on Black stereotypes, while reinforcing his own Jewishness through vaudeville stereotypes. Cumming relishes this nuance. The Emcee we have come to know does return, on the very last line—“She wouldn’t look Jewish at all”—before engaging in a soft-shoe play-off (Figure 10). But the Emcee has shown the audience something deep within him with “If You Could See Her,” which becomes the overarching dramatic impetus for Act II, including his next song, “I Don't Care Much,” and the “Finale.”

### A FRENCH MÉLODIE

The final revelation of the Emcee is done through a most peculiar song, stylistically. While the bulk of the score is dominated by the “Willkommen” motif, oompah rhythm, and Weill-style cabaret songs, “I Don’t Care Much” takes stylistic cues from a French Mélodie. The original demo of the song exists on the Original Broadway Cast recording and, in fact, features an oompah. It is categorized by the creators of the show as one of five “Berlin Songs” and was originally sung by Cliff before it was cut in rehearsals. “I Don’t Care Much” found life again in the hands of the Emcee in the 1987 revival.

As noted above, the song is stylistically closer to a French Mélodie than to Berlin cabaret song, featuring a number of stylistic elements common to the *mélodie*. The vocal line begins on the dominant instead of the tonic (Figure 11), with an emphasis on

the melody rather than the harmony or form. Furthermore, the “mood” is suggested in the composition and orchestration including the 9th chord that ends the song (Figure 12) and the use of chromaticism. Debussy wrote “clarity of expression, precision and concentration of form are qualities peculiar to the French genius,”<sup>55</sup> qualities not only in contrast with German styles, but represented in “I Don’t Care Much.”

Figure 11: “I Don’t Care Much” mm. 1-8, Vocal line begins on the dominant rather than the tonic

Figure 11 shows the musical score for the first eight measures of "I Don't Care Much". The vocal line begins on the dominant (G) rather than the tonic (F). The piano accompaniment features chords Gm, Bb/C, Gm, Gm2, BbΔ7/C, and Bb/C. The tempo is marked "PIANO solo" and "mp".

Figure 12: “I Don’t Care Much” mm.100-103 Song ends with a 9th chord

Figure 12 shows the musical score for the final measures of "I Don't Care Much". The song ends with a 9th chord. The tempo is marked "rall." and "p". The vocal line includes the word "much." and the piano accompaniment includes the word "Bass".

Lyrically, it’s a gut-wrenching torch song: “I don’t care much/go or stay/I don’t care very much/ either way/Hearts grow cold/on a windy street/Lips grow cold/when there’s rent to meet/So if you kiss me/if we touch/warning’s fair/I don’t care very much.” To suddenly flesh out a character such as the Emcee by giving him such an emotionally

<sup>55</sup> Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, (New York: Praeger, 1970), 33.

revealing and stylistically distinct song is difficult, and was a miscalculation in the 1987 revival. But Mendes and Cumming created a more nuanced Emcee with a dramatic trajectory, and this last song, the most melancholy of the group, finishes the logical dramatic arc.

The song builds throughout, starting with a solo piano and voice, then adding a tenor saxophone and accordion. The “French” compositional style is emphasized further by Cumming’s performance. Dressed in a sequined gown with track marks on his arms, he takes center stage with a microphone, channeling Edith Piaf, and releases a vulnerable and emotionally charged performance while tripping on heroin. The altered state of the singer allows for the change in musical style: he is having an out of body experience, and the audience perceives it through the stylistic change in music. What is more surprising, perhaps, than the stylistic change or the drug use explicitly stated, is the revelation that the Emcee is a transvestite.

## FINALE

The reprise in musical theatre is conventional, giving the audience something to whistle as they leave the theatre; to use a reprise dramatically is a rarity. Mendes’s concept of the reprise in *Cabaret* is one of the most effective and creative in musical theatre. But to understand why the reprise is so effective, the parts must be broken down.

The “Finale” behaves as a mirror to the beginning of the musical, where “Willkommen” is immediately followed by Cliff’s scene on the train as he arrives in Berlin. The Emcee,

with his back to the audience, is the customs agent bidding Cliff a “good journey” before disappearing into the blackness. Cliff begins the “Finale” on the same train, as he leaves Berlin before launching into “Willkommen.”<sup>56</sup> This symmetry is important in the Mendes production because while the entire musical takes place in the cabaret, it is only after “Willkommen”—when Cliff visits the *Kit Kat Klub* for the first time—that the audience enters the cabaret, a world the audience leaves as Cliff departs. Cliff starting the song is important; he has finally found the inspiration to write his novel—or his “voice”—and uses the beginning of the song to introduce us to the opening lines of his novel:

There was a cabaret and there was a master of ceremonies and there was a city called Berlin in a country called Germany—and it was the end of the world, and I was dancing with Sally Bowles, and we were both fast asleep.

He continues, singing “Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome...” before being enveloped in his novel. The Emcee takes over the singing—the audience is now witnessing Cliff’s novel come to life. But what comes to life is not the musical the audience has watched for the past two hours. It seems like a case of *déjà vu*, but as is often the case with such things, something is different. The opening monologue which dared the audience to enter the *Cabaret* and indulge in the decadence has changed tone; the price of indulgence is becoming clear. When Cumming mirrors his opening monologue, “Meine Damen und Herren—Mesdames et Messieurs—Ladies and Gentleman./Where are your troubles now?/Forgotten? I told you so./We have No. Troubles. Here,” a coldness has

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<sup>56</sup> I’ll note here that this is the only time Cliff sings, besides a small part in “Perfectly Marvelous.” The musicalization of the character is often discussed, and is usually tied to his sexuality. By leaving him a non-singing character, the convention of the primary couple matching musical styles does not exist. This foreshadows Sally and Cliff not ending up together at the end of the musical.

taken over the atmosphere. His delivery is cold, and accusatory. As the “beautiful” orchestra enters, the orchestration mimics a gradually decelerating phonograph, giving the “Finale” a “melting” effect. But the physical orchestra is gone, only an empty cabaret and Sally Bowles remain. As the scrim is lifted, a work camp is revealed—a brick wall and blinding white light.

Figure 13: “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” opening tremolo

Cue: [Door closes]

Orch. *mp* *fade under recorded vocal*

Vocal

Piano *fade under recorded vocal*

Figure 14: “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” mm. 30-31, Emcee finishes the last phrase

M.C.

longs to me.

*Attacca [No.17]*

Figure 15: “Finale” The Emcee bids the audience farewell.

M.C.:

*Auf wie-der-sehen* *A bien-tôt.*

Accordion

80

The orchestration of the “Finale” truly sets the mood of the scene, but the “absolute genius”<sup>57</sup> of Michael Gibson’s orchestration comes light in the last minute of the show. A

<sup>57</sup> John Kander, quoted in: Leve, *Kander and Ebb*, 73.

kernel was implanted back in Act I with the Nazi anthem “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” The song— previously performed as a men’s choral piece (1966) and a solo by a young, Aryan boy in a beer garden (Fosse film)—utilizes a boy soprano on a gramophone recording. When first heard in the Mendes production, the Emcee hovers over the gramophone, and a tremolo on the piano accompanies the crack of the record (Figure 13). Before the song ends, the Emcee violently shuts the player, hisses the final line of the song, “to me,” while imitating Hitler (Figure 14). As the scrim rises in the final minute of the show, a violin tremolo gives an aural clue—the piano tremolo that started “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” is mimicked, this time signifying that the Nazis have taken power over Germany and humanity.

The Emcee, once again, engages in a strip-tease—flirting with the audience, about to reveal his secret. His vulgar “welcoming” costume is now replaced with grey striped pajamas, a yellow Star of David, and Pink Triangle on his lapel. He turns, and we see the fear in Cumming’s eyes as the drum roll from “Willkommen” completes the symmetry of the scene(see Figure 1). He bids the audience farewell (Figure 15), but does not complete the line with “goodnight.” He hunches over; the stage goes dark.

The perfect symmetry of the first and last scene in *Cabaret*, the tiny kernel of “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” planted, and the ironic turn the Emcee’s monologue takes in the “Finale” all contribute to the shock value of the final scene. As with so many things, music is a huge part of what makes this scene so effective, especially the “melting” orchestration and the violin tremolo. Cumming’s performance, slowly revealing layers

of the Emcee's persona over the course of the musical, is disturbing and heart-wrenching in the final moments.

Over the course of the musical, the Emcee has become more sympathetic, especially in the final two songs, "If You Could See Her" and "I Don't Care Much." Cumming's Emcee has the opposite dramatic trajectory of Grey's. He goes from menacing, malicious and crass to horribly wounded whereas Grey begins lighthearted and evolves to a malicious, menacing and evil character. This change seems to be at the heart of Mendes's reading of *Cabaret*, and Cumming's performance. In this final scene, the revelation of the Emcee, though disturbing, is a reasonable expectation of his fate under Hitler's rule,

accurately captur[ing] one previously overlooked component and anticipates the near future...one possible implication of this finale is that when the applause is over and the cabaret audience returns to their safe worlds, the emcee may become one of the 500,000 gay individuals to perish at the hands of Hitler's regime. It has long been known that some prisoners of war, including Jewish and gay prisoners, performed in cabaret-style entertainments during the Third Reich.<sup>58</sup>

In this final scene, the Emcee's dramatic arc is completed, and his fate is sealed.

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<sup>58</sup> Block, "Is life a cabaret?" 172.

## CONCLUSION

As the lights come up for the curtain call, there is no music. How could there be? The audience doesn't know whether to applaud as the company takes a perfunctory bow. It is in this moment that the audience can begin to process the show. They were "entertained to death," and left feeling empty and helpless.

The secret of a great piece of theatre is its ability to transform, chameleon-like, from production to production. But like its Western European counterpart, opera, musical theatre often suffers from the unwillingness to take true risks in staging. What happens if taking the risk fails? Will the investment fail? Sam Mendes set up a theatre company to avoid this trap. The Donmar Warehouse was, for all intents and purposes, an experimental playhouse. His version of *Cabaret* "could have come and gone very quickly and quite unimpressively,"<sup>59</sup> but his risk paid off in the most unexpected of ways, demanding that we rethink the way we look at *Cabaret*. "The show's evolution serves as a glittering mirror of the theatre's changing Zeitgeist—of how both our esthetic tastes and our attitudes toward sex and history have grown tougher and more explicit over the last half century. Each version of the material was considered startling in its day; each version, in turn, was superseded by one that was more radical and harder edged."<sup>60</sup>

Mendes took the "Emcee's 15 Minutes" and gave it a dramatic trajectory, an idea that perhaps started with Fosse, but was realized by Mendes. The Emcee was not just part of a

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<sup>59</sup> Wolf, *Sam Mendes*, 38.

<sup>60</sup> Michiko Kikutani, "Culture Zone; Window on the World," *New York Times Magazine* 147, no. 51139 (April 26, 1998), 24.

metaphor of a cabaret with society losing control of its humanity; the Emcee could be the symbol of the resulting loss of humanity. A yellow Star of David, an upside-down pink triangle, a *hakenkreuz* or Swastika, SS bolts—symbols were an essential element of the Nazi campaign. It seems apt that the greatest musical about this historical period would utilize a symbol at the heart of its interpretation. What is most impressive, perhaps, about Mendes's reading is that the materials already existed in Kander and Ebb's wonderful songs—they simply needed to be put together differently.

*Cabaret* is a testament to the ability of a show to transform over time, and the ability of musical theatre to provide great roles for actors. The Emcee is one such role, and his transformation over five decades in the hands of Joel Grey and Alan Cumming proves this. Cumming has now dominated the role almost as long as Grey. In his Oscar acceptance speech, Grey singled out Kander and Ebb for their songs; when commenting on the Mendes production, he did so once again. "For me, the production was all about John Kander and Fred Ebb and the fact that their brilliant score was up there able to withstand the challenge of a gang of gifted people seeing it through different eyes; what could be more flattering?"<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, whether realized by Prince, Fosse, or Mendes, in the hands of Grey or Cumming, the ability of the musical to be set in a specific time and place and remain timeless is a testament to Kander and Ebb, who wrote one of the great scores in American musical theatre.

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<sup>61</sup> Wolf, *Sam Mendes*, 45-6.

# APPENDIX I

## PERFORMANCE HISTORY AND AWARDS

| Year /Production | Selected Personnel   | Selected Awards   |
|------------------|--|---|
| 1935             | <i>Mr. Norris Changes Trains</i> (novella)   | Christopher Isherwood (Author)  |
| 1937             | <i>Sally Bowles</i> (novella)  | Christopher Isherwood (Author)  |
| 1939             | <i>Goodbye to Berlin</i> (novella)   | Christopher Isherwood (Author)  |
| 1945             | <i>The Berlin Stories</i> (includes <i>Mr. Norris</i> , <i>Sally Bowles</i> , and <i>Goodbye to Berlin</i> ) | Christopher Isherwood (Author)  |
| 1951             | <i>I Am a Camera</i> (play)<br>Broadway opening,<br>November 28  | John Van Druten (author)<br>Julie Harris (Sally)<br>William Prince (Christopher)<br>Natalia Landauer (Natalia)  |
|                  |  | <b>Tony Awards:</b><br>Best Leading Actress in a play (Harris)<br>Best Featured Actress in a play (Landauer)<br><b>NY Drama Critics Circle:</b><br>Best American Play (Van Druten)  |
| 1955             | <i>I Am a Camera</i> (film)  | Henry Cornelius (director)<br>Julie Harris (Sally)<br>Laurence Harvey (Christopher)   |
|                  |  | <b>BAFTA:</b><br>Best Foreign Actress nomination (Harris)   |
| 1966             | <i>Cabaret</i> (musical)<br>Broadway Opening,<br>November 20   | John Kander (Composer)<br>Fred Ebb (Lyricist)<br>Joe Masteroff (Libretto)<br>Hal Prince (Director)<br>Jill Haworth (Sally)<br>Bert Convy (Cliff)<br>Joel Grey (Emcee)<br>Lotte Lenya (Schneider)  |
|                  |  | <b>Tony Awards:</b><br>Best Musical<br>Best Original Score (Kander and Ebb)<br>Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical (Grey)<br>Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical (Lenya)<br>Best Direction of a Musical(Prince) |
| 1968             | <i>Cabaret</i> (London)<br>West End Opening,<br>February 28  | Judi Dench (Sally)  |

## PERFORMANCE HISTORY AND AWARDS

| Year /Production  | Selected Personnel  | Selected Awards   |
|---|---|---|
| 1972 <i>Cabaret</i> (film)  | Bob Fosse (director)<br>Liza Minnelli (Sally)<br>Michael York (Brian, the British version of Cliff)<br>Joel Grey (Emcee)                    | <b>Academy Awards:</b><br>Best Director (Fosse)<br>Best Actress in a Leading Role (Minelli)<br>Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Grey)<br><b>BAFTA:</b><br>Best Film<br>Best Direction (Fosse)<br>Best Actress (Minelli)<br><b>Golden Globe Awards:</b><br>Best Supporting Actor (Grey)  |
| 1987 <i>Cabaret</i> (Broadway Revival)<br>Opening, October 22                           | Hal Prince (Director)<br>Joel Grey (Emcee)<br>Regina Resnick (Schneider)  |   |
| 1993 <i>Cabaret</i><br>Donmar Warehouse Production<br>Opening, December 9               | Sam Mendes (Director)<br>Jane Horrocks (Sally)<br>Alan Cumming (Emcee)  | <b>Olivier Awards:</b><br>Best Supporting Performance in a Musical nomination (Cumming)   |
| 1998 <i>Cabaret</i> (Broadway Revival based on '93 Donmar production)                   | Sam Mendes and Rob Marshall (Directors)<br>Natasha Richardson (Sally)<br>Alan Cumming (Emcee)   | <b>Tony Awards:</b><br>Best Revival of a Musical<br>Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical (Cumming)<br>Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical (Richardson)<br><b>Drama Desk Awards:</b><br>Outstanding Revival of a Musical<br>Outstanding Actor in a Musical (Cumming)<br>Outstanding Actress in a Musical (Richardson) |
| 2014 <i>Cabaret</i> Limited Engagement of 1998 production<br>Broadway Opening, April 24 | Sam Mendes and Rob Marshall (Directors)<br>Michelle Williams (Sally)<br>Emma Stone (Sally)<br>Sienna Miller (Sally)<br>Alan Cumming (Emcee) |   |

## APPENDIX II

### Plot Summary and book songs of *Cabaret*

On a train to Berlin, Cliff meets Ernst Ludwig, a nervous businessman and smuggler who befriends him. (This opening is much like the opening of *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*.) Ernst convinces Cliff to rent a room from his friend Fräulein Schneider, who runs “the finest residence in all Berlin.”

Fräulein Schneider is welcoming to Cliff, despite his inability to pay the requisite one hundred marks, and accepts his offer of fifty marks for the room (So What?). Cliff meets two other borders, the prostitute Fräulein Kost and Herr Schultz, a wealthy Jewish fruit vendor. As Cliff settles into his new home and begins writing, he is enticed to go explore Berlin by a mystery girl.

He arrives at the *Kit Kat Klub*, “an establishment in which all the tables have telephones on them so that guests can call each other” on New Year’s Eve, 1930. The Emcee introduces “the toast of Mayfair—Fräulein Sally Bowles!” After her performance (“Don’t Tell Mama”), she calls Cliff on the table phone and agrees to buy him a drink, but is interrupted by the club owner and her lover, Max, who fires Sally out of jealousy. She gives a final performance (“Mein Herr”).

The following day, while Cliff is giving an English lesson to Ernst, Sally arrives desperate for a place to stay. She somehow convinces Cliff and Fräulein Schneider to allow her to move in (“Perfectly Marvelous”). Cliff is struggling to find inspiration for his novel, and Sally is

quickly draining his finances when Ernst offers him a job smuggling goods from Paris. Despite their struggles, Sally is engaged in the most stable relationship of her life (“Maybe This Time”).

Meanwhile, a relationship between Fräulein Schneider and Herr Schultz begins to blossom. He brings her a gift “so rare—so costly—so luxurious”: a pineapple (“It Couldn’t Please Me More”). When Herr Schultz is caught in Fräulein Schneider’s room by Fräulein Kost, he proposes to Schneider (“Married”). At their engagement party, Cliff learns that Ernst is a Nazi and his trips to Paris are to support the Nazi cause. Ernst learns that Schultz is Jewish and warns Schneider that the “marriage is not advisable.” Fräulein Kost “breaks” the tension by inviting Ernst to join a sing-a-long of the Nazi anthem “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” Act I ends with Cliff, Sally, Schneider and Schultz standing in dismay as they are surrounded by friends joining along in the fascist theme song. There is a sense of impending doom. The next morning, Schneider confronts Schultz and breaks off the engagement. As Schultz tries to dissuade her, his shop is vandalized by “school children.” (“Married—Reprise”) Schneider seeks counsel from Cliff and Sally (“What Would You Do?”).

Cliff and Sally have their own problems. With Sally pregnant, no money, and the impending threat of the Nazis, Cliff decides that the couple will move to America to escape the political situation. Sally refuses to acknowledge “the party in Berlin is over,” and decides to return to performing at the *Kit Kat Klub*. Cliff leaves to buy train tickets to Paris, insisting Sally stay behind, but she leaves the boarding house for the club, fur coat in hand. Cliff finds her there, and a fight ensues. In her final number at the club, “Cabaret,”

she makes the decision to have an abortion and stay in Berlin. Back at the boarding house, a haggard Sally tells Cliff of her decision to stay in Berlin, her abortion, and the loss of her fur coat to pay the doctor. Cliff slaps her, gives her a ticket to Paris, and leaves. He has finally found the inspiration to write his novel as he boards the train out of Berlin and Germany.

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