



## Welcome to Berlin:

### A New Take on *Cabaret* in Chicago

It may be more than 40 years old, but the musical *Cabaret* is still dazzling audiences with its bizarre, hypnotic vision of Weimar Berlin as it falls into the grip of the Nazi Party. Based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, the piece also seems to be in an eternal state of revision. Harold Prince's original 1966 staging ran for 1,165 performances. Bob Fosse's acclaimed 1972 film dropped several supporting characters, and songwriters John Kander and Fred Ebb swapped out several musical numbers. Sam Mendes' London and Broadway stagings combined elements of both the musical and film (with the cooperation of the librettist, Joe Masteroff), while adding a new ending that dispatched several characters to a concentration camp.

For the recent, and acclaimed, production at the Drury Lane Oakbrook Terrace in suburban Chicago, the director, Jim Corti, implemented a few innovations of his own.

The original production alternated scenes in the cabaret of the title—the Kit Kat Klub—with scenes around Berlin. More recently, directors have tended to place the entire show inside the Kit Kat Klub. However, because the action takes place in the memory of the protagonist, the struggling writer Clifford Bradshaw, Corti placed this *Cabaret* in Berlin's Friedrichstrasse train station, where, as Clifford flees Berlin, he begins to put his memories on paper.

Also, recent revivals of *Cabaret* have emphasized the squalor of the Weimar era. In contrast, as Brian Sidney Bembridge, the production's set designer, "Jim wanted a beautiful production—because that makes the show's end more tragic." Thus the designer created an Industrial Revolution train station, defined by 28 towers—built to look like iron lace work—at stages right and left, with a leaded window placed upstage, and a spiral staircase upstage left and downstage right. (The orchestra was located upstage center, under the window.) A clear Plexiglas deck allowed the lighting designer, Jesse Klug, to provide uplighting effects. Hanging in front of the upstage window was an electric sign that spelled out "Kabarett."

The train station idea was implemented at the top of the show, when the audience saw the light of a train engine through the show curtain. "There was steam and lights, and the backlight of the train became the followspot of the club," says Bembridge. Because a train station is a public space, certain scenes featured cast members watching the action from the sides or the upstage gallery level.

Bembridge says that Corti wanted a feeling of intimacy—the Kit Kat Klub is a small dive—so the designer made use of only a portion of the theatre's stage. A curtain made of



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scrim was supplied by Rose Brand. For the book scenes, the locations were suggested using a minimum of pieces. For Clifford's room, a bed was added. For the fruit shop belonging to the elderly Jewish widower Herr Schultz, a set of scalloped lights and a work table set the scene. The number "Pineapple," a duet for Herr Schultz and his companion, Fraulein Schneider, was done abstractly, with each performer in a his or her own special.

Klug says the lighting was designed to "make sure that everyone else became part of Cliff's dreamscape. Everything had a soft edge, and the lighting existed in a void. It's like when you're dreaming—everything appears and disappears. To do this, I designed a vocabulary of pools of light to define whether people were at the forefront of Cliff's consciousness or not."

For the Kit Kat Klub numbers, Klug made good use of the lights in the deck, turning them into footlights. "When they were off, it meant we were in a book scene," he says, adding that the units were 120W flood lamps. He adds that Bembridge's decision to shrink the stage space proved fortuitous, as it allowed him to create a number of side lighting positions, which proved crucial to realizing the design.

Corti's "memory" concept influenced the design in other ways. "It started in a very colorful world," Klug says, "with the number 'Willkommen' in red, pink, and blue. It was meant to be colorful, idealized, a place you'd

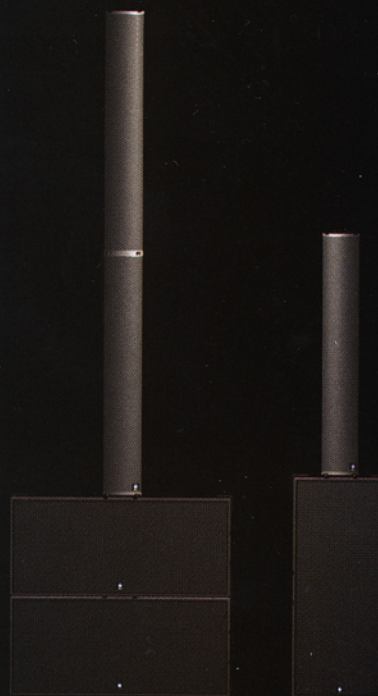
want to enter. As the show progressed, it slowly lost color. When we got to the number 'Cabaret' near the end, the work lights went on; they stayed on through the rest of the show."

The rig included four Vari\*Lite VL3500s. "They were wonderful; the shutters were great," Klug says. Also, the theatre owns five SGM Giotto 400 spots, which the designer used as specials. "They have a really nice frost wheel," he adds. Also used were a pair of Rosco I-Cues; otherwise, the rig consisted of the house package of ETC Source Fours, many fitted with Wybron Forerunner scrollers.

Stylistically, says Klug, the show, especially in Corti's staging, "lends itself to not using buttons on the numbers. We wanted to push the story forward, especially since we saw it as a dream. For example, when you get to one of the ballads, we'd go to a single look for Cliff, and then push right out of it into the next thing. The cabaret numbers have a number of modulations, so I moved the lights constantly. The Emcee's numbers were more radical, all over the map."

The result was a production that, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, "avoids a self-consciously revisionist conceit, but feels remarkably fresh."<sup>3</sup> The scenery was built by Ravenswood Scenic. Additional lighting gear was supplied by Intelligent Lighting Creations. *Cabaret* closed on October 11. ☺

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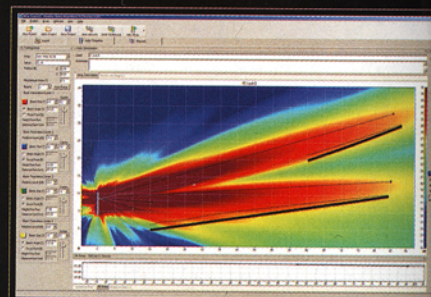
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