



WHAT LIES BENEATH

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When it first premiered on Broadway in 1966, *Cabaret* shepherded in a new era of American Musical Theatre. Historians cite it as one of the first “concept musicals”—meaning that it was more about its theme and central idea than it was about the narrative arc of its characters. Its status as high concept only grew when the incredibly popular and beloved film adaptation did away with most of the actual story—winning 8 Academy Awards along the way and cementing Bob Fosse’s status as a leading creative force in musical theatre.

But the origins of *Cabaret* lie in the real life and stories of Christopher Isherwood, the British-American author who moved to Berlin in the early 1930s as Hitler rose to power. Isherwood drew on his and his friends’ experiences during this period to write [The Berlin Stories](#). He recounted the decadent nightlife culture of Berlin against the increasing hostility toward Jews and the willful ignorance of a majority of Germans toward Nazi brutality. It’s within these stories that Isherwood created cabaret singer Sally Bowles, modeled after his friend Jean Ross, whom he shared a flat with for a brief period of time. It is worth mentioning that Ross was much more politically engaged and active than her literary counterpart.

Isherwood’s book inspired playwright John van Druten to adapt it into the play *I Am A Camera*, the title taken as a direct



Liza Minnelli in the *Cabaret* film

quote from the evocative words that begin Isherwood’s novel... “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.” The play was quite successful in its initial run, playing over 200 performances on Broadway and garnering a film adaptation. Both starred stage icon Julie Harris, in her first Tony Award-winning performance.

The novel’s ultimate adaptation is John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Masteroff’s unquestionable masterpiece. And the real hero of the musical’s creation was Harold Prince who played the dual role of Director and Producer. Though the writers began to craft the show as a traditional book musical, Prince felt the show’s theme spoke effectively to the growing tensions of 1960s America in regard to the civil rights movement. The team landed on the conceit of using the musical numbers performed by the Master of

Ceremonies (Emcee) as a comment on the action of the plot—rather than directly advancing the story or characters.

The brilliance in this concept is that, to the audience, it seems harmless and is incredibly entertaining. And it perfectly embodies the spirit of the hedonistic culture in which Sally and Cliff are immersed. While the Emcee and Kit Kat Klub performers (notice a particular repeating letter?) dance, evil begins to penetrate the world around them...without us noticing.

In our production, the creative team and designers have taken this notion and fully incorporated it into their vision. As the show progresses, the physical world on the stage begins to deteriorate in front of our eyes. The costumes become grungier, the hair and makeup a little rougher—while the set and lights work together to expose a new way to look at the world we’ve inhabited. And even when it may not be obvious, they’ve used the design to convey this shift in the story.

Cabaret remains a resonant piece of musical theatre because it pleads for us to be aware of the world around us and the inhumanities that occur every day—or as Prince said “any place that there are people.”

As you enter the world of *Cabaret*, I’d encourage you to ask yourself...what would you do?