

# Come to the Cabaret!

 By Eugene Yiga

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After KickstArt's production of *Cabaret* premiered in Durban last August, it went on to win 11 Mercury Durban Theatre Awards. And after its highly praised Johannesburg run came to an end earlier this month, the classic musical is finally showing at Cape Town's newly renovated Theatre on the Bay. My verdict? It's the best show I've seen all year.

*Cabaret* seems to be destined for greatness given how successful it's been for almost 50 years. The original Broadway production won eight Tony Awards in 1967 and went on to perform almost 1200 times; the 1972 movie won eight Oscars (including Best Actress for Liza Minelli); and there's already growing excitement for the upcoming West End revival, opening in October 2012 and starring original UK Idol Will Young as Emcee.

It all started with Christopher Isherwood's semi-autobiographical short novel *Goodbye To Berlin* (1939), which was the basis for John van Drusten's play *I Am A Camera* (1951). In 1966, John Kander and Fred Ebb teamed up with Joe Masteroff to create what was initially meant to be a dramatic play with a prologue of songs describing the atmosphere in Berlin. But they soon decided to make it a traditional book musical instead.





## Two stories in one

Cabaret ends up telling two stories in one. The first centres around English performer Sally Bowles (Samantha Peo) and her relationship with American writer Cliff Bradshaw (Bryan Hiles) while the second focuses on the romance between German boarding house owner Fräulein Schneider (Charon Williams-Ros) and Jewish fruit vendor Herr Schultz (Peter Court).

And then there's Emcee (German performer Sascha Halbhuber making his South African debut), the Master of Ceremonies at the Kit Kat Klub. He's my favourite character and one I still can't make sense of. It's like he's everywhere and nowhere; more a sign of the times than an actual person living through them.

Halbhuber, who won the Durban Mercury Theatre Award for Best Actor in a Musical, really puts on an amazing performance that brilliantly captures Emcee's leering, ghoulish and flamboyant traits. "I spent a lot of time reading the original book to help me prepare for this role," he said after the show. "It's all been a lot of fun!"



The story still feels a bit incomplete

Kander and Ebb made a number of changes when adapting Isherwood's book, a notable one being the addition of prostitute Fräulein Kost (Kate Normington) and Nazi Ernst Ludwig (Lyle Buxton). And yet the story still feels a bit incomplete. Take Cliff's relationship with Bobby (Reg Hart). This subplot was casually introduced, briefly discussed, and quietly tossed aside. If it was just a fling, why mention it at all? The portrayal of Berlin as an intoxicating flirt was already complete.

Digression aside, there's something about turning any story into a musical that makes it so much better. In addition to strong performances from a gorgeous cast (also starring Duane Alexander, Londiwe Dhlomo, Malan le Roux, Carmen Pretorius, Jodie Renouf, Suzzi Swanepoel, and Marlee van der Merwe), Cabaret features sexy dancing (choreographed by Janine Bennewith), naughty costumes (designed by Neil Stuart-Harris), and sizzling music from the seven-piece live band (conducted by onstage musical director Stefan Lombard). Three days after the show and I'm still walking around my apartment, singing songs I never knew. (No neighbours were harmed in the singing of said songs.)

## A theatre's bombed ruins

And then there's the set, which probably deserves a review of its own. To find their inspiration, director Steven Stead and set designer Greg King looked through pictures of cabaret clubs from 1930s Berlin. They eventually came across the image of a theatre's bombed ruins and decided to go with it. "Once that idea had us, it was lift-off," King said in an interview with the Cape Times.

Diverting from previous versions and having the show open in the smoky ruins of the club presented some challenges. The stage for the Durban run was much larger than the ones in Johannesburg and Cape Town, which is why parts of the production had to be scaled down. But King loves the intimacy. "People are going to feel like they're in the club," he said. More than that, seeing the set smoulder in Tina le Roux's flaming lights made me feel like I'd woken up in a Tim Burton dream.





## **A comfortable balance between the extremes**

Another challenge for Cabaret, which is set in Germany as the Nazis are rising to power, is maintaining a sense of seriousness for what was happening at the time. Fortunately, this production finds a comfortable balance between the extremes of being too sentimental and being too glib.

Part of this is achieved in the way that the people express themselves. "For the first time ever, leading characters didn't get to sing directly about their feelings or situations," Stead explained. "They were rather commented on in song by the burlesque and knowing Emcee and the dancers of the Kit Kat Klub. This gave the whole show a mockingly ironic tone."

Yet in addition to the racy moments, there are some really moving scenes. "You don't know whether to clap or sit in silence," one viewer mentioned in reference to the powerful end of the first act. And I'm sure many people will leave the theatre with the musical's closing image burned in their minds like it's still burned in mine.

## **An absolute winner**

In the end, Cabaret is an absolute winner; a raucous reverie that's both deliciously scandalous and surprisingly sweet. So put your troubles aside and experience a world of fun. You know you want to! ;)

*Cabaret (PG-13) is showing at [Theatre on the Bay](#) in Cape Town until 6 October 2012. Tickets are available from [Computicket](#), but if you'd like to enjoy discounts of up to 50% as a Theatrics Club member (or have dinner at the new [Sidedish Theatre Bistro](#), an offshoot of [Dish Food & Social](#)), go to [www.theatreonthebay.co.za](http://www.theatreonthebay.co.za).*

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow [@eugeneyiga](#) on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.  
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