

Nazi Party: "Cabaret," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through August 20

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 15 August 2006 22:54

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There are a number of fascinating and entertaining elements in the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's production of *Cabaret*. But at the show's opening-night performance last Thursday, what fascinated and entertained me most was watching how

cabaret

's thematic storyline was being unwittingly enacted by

Cabaret

's

audience

This highly regarded Kander & Ebb musical - embarrassingly, a work previously unseen by me - takes place in Berlin during the early days of the Third Reich, and makes frequent visits to a decadent night spot called the Kit Kat Klub. The venue's emcee (played here by CAST's artistic director, Jay Berkow) leads his charges in a series of creepy/funny/sexy musical routines, but as *Cabaret* progresses - as the Nazis grow in numbers and power - the Kit Kat Klub (notice the initials) begins to look less like a forbidden paradise than a cabaret in hell. The club's performers and onlookers, lost in a haze of music and alcohol and sex, are blithely unaware (or are they?) of the outside world, and when a few finally *do* sense the monstrous change in the political climate, it's too late - the Nazis have taken control of Berlin.

Remove the alcohol, and a similar thing appeared to happen with *Cabaret's* opening-night

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audience.

As the lyric goes, "Life is a cabaret, old chum," and during this production's first act, it certainly was one; the sold-out crowd, which included a great many season-ticket subscribers and several past Showboat performers, cheered mightily and cheered often. Berkow's opening rendition of "Wilkommen," in fact, was interrupted by applause more than once - the helmer will be much missed when he departs from CAST at the season's end - and performances by area favorites Jalayne Riewerts and Colin Douglass led, deservedly, to ecstatic cheers.

But there was plenty of reason to cheer even if you *weren't* part of the Showboat family. From minute one, CAST's *Cabaret* was enjoyably carnal - perhaps not as slyly raunchy as some of us would have liked, but definitely more so than most of us could have expected. (Those who adored Zach Borja's and Jack Maisenbach's delightful bookend routine in *Anything Goes* might easily blanch at the duo's pairing here.) As played by a gifted, appropriately attired quintet, the musical numbers were quite nicely done, and the orchestra's conductor and pianist, Allison Hendrix, was spectacularly vibrant; she not only plays, and plays well, but plays in *character*. (Although I missed seeing her in a major role, Hendrix was no less riveting here than she was in *The Mousetrap*, *Anything Goes*, and *Incredible Sex*.)

And, best of all, there were some *serious* acting chops on display. Benjamin Cole, who delivered a series of highly amusing comic caricatures this season, was effortlessly convincing as Clifford, the American writer making his first acquaintance with the debauchery of Berlin; Cole provided the show with a warm, honest center. The continually excellent Jeffrey Fauver was in full, untrustworthy character as the shadowy Ernst; Paul Luoma and Nicole Horton infused minor roles with major talent (kudos to Horton for the accordion playing!); and Riewerts and Douglas managed to be simultaneously larger-than-life and beautifully real as tentative lovers Fraulien Schneider and Herr Schultz; these CAST performers are beloved for *reason*.

Everything at *Cabaret's* opening-night performance was going along swimmingly until the Act I

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finale, when everything took a turn ... for the *better*. In director Mark Liermann's ingenious staging, the act's climactic number, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," was transformed from a rousing, patriotic song-and-dance to a full-scale rally; in short order, an enormous Nazi flag was unfurled, many of the show's characters - whose political bents we weren't previously privy to - stood in solidarity, and to the Showboat crowd's astonishment, several *audience* *members* stood, and sang, as well. (Fear not - they were plants.)

The moment was extraordinary. Liermann - whose work throughout the show, with characters dexterously slipping in and out of musical fantasy and reality, was superb - actually gave the audience the sensation of being in that club, in 1929, and feeling as shocked by the dramatic turn of events as many of *Cabaret's* characters do; just like the show's Berliners, the audience had been suckered unawares. It was a sequence of stunning drama in musical-comedy format, and as Act II unfolded, it wasn't the only one. We witnessed the heartbreak of Schneider's and Schultz's doomed love, the seething disbelief in Cliff's confrontation with Sally Bowles (Cassandra Marie Nuss), the show's exquisitely unsettling final seconds - all pulled off splendidly.

I just wish we had more *preparation* for the drama. But part of the reason these scenes have such force - and why the show, as a whole, has perhaps less than it

should

- is because they seem incongruous with much of

Cabaret

's presentation. Berkow's emcee is less a malevolent tour guide than an amusing, lecherous Groucho Marx; the musical numbers, while enjoyable, don't grow in the ironically sinister manner the material seems to warrant. (I never expected, and didn't particularly want, the emcee to be

lovable

.)

And while Nuss has a playful charm and sings well, we don't get much sense of who Sally

is

. It's unclear whether the character truly loves Clifford or is merely marking time with him, so their scenes together don't have the heft they need. (Even the show-stopping title number, with Sally trying not to break down, is confusing, as Nuss' anguish seems merely perfunctory.)

A heightening of the show's dramatic urgency would have aided this *Cabaret* enormously, but that's the thing about terrific theatre - it

always

makes you want more. With its inspired direction, Erica Eng's marvelously racy costumes, and

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CAST's dynamic ensemble and musicians obviously having a great time, the fact that *Cabaret* is merely terrific instead of sensational is hardly a complaint, and I can't *wait* for more ... from the Showboat *next* summer.

For tickets, call (563) 242-6760.