

CABARET

Writing Sample #1
Dramaturgical Program notes

PROGRAM NOTES

The cabarets of the 1920s and 1930s in Berlin presented high-spirited spectacle on a miniature scale. The atmosphere was festive, champagne flowed readily, and a host worked as an enticing ringmaster over the dimly lit, cigarette smoke-filled room. With clubs like the Katakombe (The Catacomb) and Wilde Bühne (The Wild Stage) dominating the scene, the spirit was boisterous, and a frank realm of sensual indulgence and lack of governmental censorship led to a lack of restraint on stage. The primary pursuit of the cabaret was pleasure. Some cabarets with strong or stable financial backing strayed from the standard format of improvised characters and bawdy musical numbers into the forum of political commentary in the early 1930s in response to the ascent of Fascism and political absolutism in Europe. However, the rise of the powerful Nazi Party in the early 1930s and Adolph Hitler's subsequent appointment as Reich's Chancellor in 1933 brought a return to censorship in theatre unseen since the fall of the monarchy in 1918. By 1935, political theatre was strictly monitored and forced to extol Nazi Party values, and the risqué charms of the earlier cabarets were extinguished by the brute force of the Nazis' secret police, the Gestapo.

Christopher Isherwood chronicled his experiences in Germany during the rise of the Nazis in his book, Berlin Stories. Later, John van Druten adapted the decadence and tragedy of Isherwood's Berlin for the stage in I Am A Camera. Druten's focus was the subtlety of hate and its insidious nature affecting the lives of all of its players whether they were passive in the face of it, aggressive in their response to it, or just not interested. His commentary extended to all of Europe, including the rise of Franco in Spain, Mussolini in Italy, and Stalin in Russia. Worldwide, a similar struggle between political tyranny and the citizenship appeared in Nationalist China, Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia, and in the Chaco War in South America.

The familiar musical version of Cabaret, blending both Isherwood's and Druten's texts, arose from the collaboration of director Hal Prince and writer Joe Masteroff. Prince chose the piece in response to the unrest and civil rights riots in the 1960s in the United States. John Kander and Fred Ebb were recruited to compose the accompanying music and write the lyrics for the musical version, resulting in forty-seven songs which were not all used in the stage debut. Cabaret opened to a mixed public response and unfavorable reviews in 1966 due to the change it brought to the contemporary standard of musical theatre. Cabaret, unlike other popular musical theatre of its day, such as My Fair Lady, rejected cheerful endings and happy settings and brought the audience into a sultry nightclub and told a tale of a poignant love story against a backdrop of Nazi prejudice and oppression. Cabaret was successfully translated to the screen in 1972. In recent years it has seen a revival, bringing the tale of love, oppression, and business as usual at the Kit Kat Klub to the stage in New York, Los Angeles, and now at San Francisco State University.

— Michelle Mitchell, Dramaturg

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