

Review:

Stunning 'Cabaret' moves its opening night audience to silence



Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune

Kelly Felthous, who plays Sally Bowles in the [Paramount](#) Theatre production of "Cabaret" did not get a lick of applause Saturday at the end of the show's famous title number, despite this being opening night. Was it down to frostbite?

No. That is also what happened when I saw Natasha Richardson do Sally in the 1998 Broadway revival, the one directed by Sam Mendes and Rob Marshall, the one that made a star out of [Alan Cumming](#), the one that has influenced every subsequent staging of the title, even to the point of blending

into our perception of the material. Richardson's drugged-out Sally was desperate and despairing; she turned the number into a furious cry of nihilistic anguish, shocking an audience expecting Liza Minnelli-like resilience into total silence.

But that is not what is going on in director Katie Spelman's "Cabaret" in Aurora. Felthous' Sally is closer to what composer and lyricist John Kander and Fred Ebb first had in mind (I think). Sally is a modest talent (and, by the way, it takes a huge talent to play a modest talent). She's an arrested adult addicted to the attention and the party, refusing to believe that Berlin has turned nasty because she has no direct experience thereof. She is, this production makes clear, complicit. Just like the emcee, played with a terrifying level of emotional denial by Joseph Anthony Byrd. But all these things, of course, are more complicated than we like to discuss these days, and Felthous unpacks all of that as Sally tells us to come out from our lonely rooms in a moment when she should know that many would be safer inside.

The audience was quiet not just because the song was followed by one of many fluid and dynamic transitions from Spelman, but mostly because people were so moved.

The Paramount has, of course, a huge stage and Spelman and her designer, Scott Davis, hit on the inspired idea of making the Kit Kat Klub a basement operation, allowing for a huge descending staircase into the depth of its depravity, meaning that characters with a conscience, or a doubt, can stand thereupon, half in, half out, partaking just the same but with an eye on the door. And you also get a glimpse of the street, where the stones fly and glass breaks.

Most productions fill the club with patrons, at least in Act 1, when Clifford Bradshaw (Garrett Lutz, whose work completes this study in denial) first arrives with a book to write and a self to find. Here it always looks half-empty,

even at its height, and thus you intuit why no one there wants to take a stand, for an artist or a manager has to eat.

The emcee gets this own "Cabaret" moment, of course, with "I Don't Care Much," one of those songs that uses the signature Kander and Ebb idea of attaching the most heinous words or emotional position to such a beautiful melody that you close your eyes when someone sings it well, as Byrd does here. He approaches it as a ode to self-loathing, sung by a man, just a little more than a modest talent, who tries to overcome his own personal bankruptcy by paying absurdly close attention to the formal demands of the song. It is as if he is saying, I at least can do this and take this to my grave. It's quite a couple of minutes in the theater.

Those defining moments are, though, hardly atypical of this very shrewdly cast show — which includes Broadway veterans and a generous 16 players in the orchestra pit under the music direction of Tom Vindafreddo, although these are not quite the full original orchestrations. It is a production with both a profound sense of mood — even the costumes, beautifully created by Mieka van der Ploeg, seem to feel as they flutter on people's backs, never quite inhabiting the body.

Most productions of this show try to work within one palette: these designers are explicitly working with collision. That's why this is such a great "Cabaret": it makes sense of the show's organizing principle of overgrown children playing with decadence while the consequences of the apolitical life play out above them, finally oozing down into their playpen.

The lives of Fraulein Schneider (Hollis Resnik) and Herr Schultz (Ron E. Rains) are collateral damage, of course, and they are deeply sad and vulnerable in this production, their panic intensified by the sheer rigor and force of Meghan Murphy's Fraulein Kost, who is anything but comic relief.

Sadness and self-awareness make up the most desirable of things to be felt at a production of "Cabaret," a masterpiece of musical theater penned as a cautionary tale and not at all leavened by the embrace of paradox. This is revival work of the highest level — and a remarkable showcase of what this young Chicago director can do.

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Review: "Cabaret" (4 stars)

When: Through March 18

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Tickets: \$36 to \$64 at 630-896-6666 or www.paramountaurora.com