

Theatre Review: Marriott's Too-Clean 'Cabaret' Conservatively Mutes Much-Needed Vulgar

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on January 26, 2014 - 5:53pm

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CHICAGO – It's "Cabaret" for god's sake. It's not "Bambi". You're supposed to need to leave the kids at home watching their own Disney flick. You don't go to McDonald's to eat healthy just like you don't go to "Cabaret" for good clean fun.



Play Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The show at Chicagoland's Marriott Theatre starts off with so much potential because of a promise from our Emcee (Stephen Schellhardt). He guarantees we'll delve into the sketchy world of sin in the Kit Kat Klub where we can put our real-world worries aside. It's a "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" kind of warranty, but you never feel it realized. And that is the show's biggest downfall.



Stephen Schellhardt as the Emcee in "Cabaret".

Photo credit: Peter Coombs and the Marriott Theatre

For a moment, I considered that I've already "seen it all" on stage and in film (certainly not true) and I've become desensitized. Yes, I do need much more these days to be impressed. But it's just not that. "Cabaret" should leave you feeling dirty. That's what you *want* from it. You should feel like you need to take a shower after.

The beautiful women and men are there. The skin is there. The bodies are appropriately ripped and stripped. The gyrating dancing is there. But the smut is absent and it appears to be consciously so. The decision feels like it's catering to an audience who might not want to be too offended or overly shocked. Regardless of who you are, coming into this show we do. The choice to stray from the script's authentic intention is a fatal one.

Amid memorable and enjoyable songs, the show also too sensitively touches on the gay and bisexual themes. There's only a quick kiss on stage between two men and our androgynous Emcee leaves you wanting to understand and explore who he is. We do feel a couple zings because of the German/Jewish hatred and the topic of the Holocaust and Nazi regime, but even that is nothing we haven't seen a hundred times in "Schindler's List" and "The Pianist".



Megan Sikora stars as Sally Bowles in "Cabaret".

Photo credit: Peter Coombs and the Marriott Theatre

I found myself more upset at scenic designer Thomas M. Ryan ("Fiddler on the Roof," "Sweeney Todd," Miss Saigon," "Cats") than congratulatory of him. Before the show started, we commented on the interesting choice to design an upper level to the night club that complements the decadence of 1929 Berlin.

I heard theatregoers questioning whether the people there were human actors in a temporary frozen state who'd come alive when you least expect. That would have been the way to use this staging. Instead, they were just mannequins who added little value to the production – and any walking about "upstairs" by humans during the show was relatively ignored. It's forward initial thinking with the design, but poor execution due to a lack of need to focus there.

The show has two co-leads: our Emcee and Sally Bowles. Sally feels older than she should be. She needs to be younger than the 36-year-old Megan Sikora ("Wicked" on Broadway). By contrast, Liza Minnelli (who was born in 1946) was 26 as Sally when "Cabaret" the film debuted in 1972. Sikora can't be dinged for her age or the way she played her part. The casting decision should have gone to someone younger and her direction as Sally should have made her raunchier.



Megan Sikora and the cast of "Cabaret" perform "Don't Tell Mama".

Photo credit: Peter Coombs and the Marriott Theatre

The Emcee, on the other hand, is a voyeur. He's watching what unfolds in the show just as we as audience members are voyeurs watching him watch the rest of the cast. Stephen Schellhardt has more of the "R"-rated idea and is the closest thing the Marriott's show has to staying true to the script. He brings just the right amount of grit, intrigue, deviance and immorality to the famous character's role.

Aside from the Emcee and Sally who are supposed to be the co-stars of the show – and the Emcee for the most part is – the decision to cast veteran actors Craig Spidle (as Herr Schultz) and Annabelle Armour (as Fraulein Schneider) blows every other one away.

This later-aged duo has been seen on stage many times over and has had plenty of time to perfect their chemistry. The fire between Megan Sikora as Sally Bowles and Patrick Sarb as her main squeeze Clifford Bradshaw had literally squat on them. There's about nothing as precious I've ever seen on stage as Craig Spidle's confession of his love to Annabelle Armour through the gift of a pineapple as his metaphor.



Annabel Armour as Fraulein Schneider and Craig Spidle as Herr Shultz in "Cabaret".

Photo credit: Peter Coombs and the Marriott Theatre

Now *he* is a real man and any woman would be so lucky to find a gentleman like that. Whether or not the German/pro-Nazi Fraulein Schneider should marry the German/Jewish Herr Schultz is the most fascinating character exploration in the show. The relationship between Sally and her American writer doesn't hold a stick to the one of this later-in-life couple.

Most of the much-needed "dirty" and vulgarity that *isn't* missing on stage is partially made up for by Jeff-awarded costume designer Nancy Missimi behind the scenes. She truly is one of the stars of this show, and without her, the sexual innuendo that *is* there wouldn't sell.

But that's exactly the problem with the Marriott's incarnation of "Cabaret". There's just too much innuendo and not enough hitting you smack dab in the face with it. Bob Fosse isn't an innuendo kind of guy. He's a provocative slow burn and then an in-your-face climatic explosion.



Christine Sherrill as Fraulein Kost in "Cabaret".

Photo credit: Peter Coombs and the Marriott Theatre

Fosse was nominated for an Oscar four times and won for his direction of "Cabaret". When he did, he beat Francis Ford Coppola for "The Godfather" with Marlon Brando. He was born in Chicago in 1927 and died too soon in 1987. Also well known for "Chicago," "Sweet Charity"

and “Damn Yankees,” Fosse won an impossible eight Tony Awards for choreography and one for direction. Look for Bob Fosse Way on Paulina Street in Chicago where his spirit is honored forevermore.

Due to its “mature subject matter,” “Cabaret” is suggested for audiences aged 16 years and up. But coming from a critic who often takes an imaginative and theatric 9-year-old girl to many Disney and “PG-13” movies, realistically the Marriott’s version of “Cabaret” is appropriate for kids 13 and up. Based on today’s standards, I’d rate this live show at “PG-13” while it should be “R”. The 1972 film “Cabaret” from director Bob Fosse stars Liza Minelli as Sally. It is rated “PG,” but ratings then certainly aren’t what they are today.

“Cabaret” is now playing through March 16, 2014 at the Marriott Theatre at 10 Marriott Drive in Lincolnshire, Ill. The show is based on Christopher Isherwood’s novel “The Berlin Stories” and John Van Druten’s play “I Am a Camera”. It is directed by David H. Bell and choreographed by Matt Raftery with music direction from Ryan T. Nelson. The show has one 15-minute intermission. Ticket prices range from \$40 to \$48 and can be purchased [here](#) [23].



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