

Spring 2019

## Camera Obscura: Exposing, Framing, and Staging the Implicit Politics of Christopher Isherwood and the Various Adaptations of his Work

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2019

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Melina Drake Young  
*Bard College*

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Camera Obscura: Exposing, Framing, and Staging the Implicit Politics of Christopher Isherwood  
and the Various Adaptations of his Work

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature and to the Division of Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Melina Young

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Acknowledgements & Dedication

In the creation of this project many, many thanks are in order. The first goes to Christopher Isherwood.

To the Bick Jewish Studies Fund and Bard College Musical Theater Collective.

To my advisers, official and otherwise: Chiori Miyagawa, Daniel Mendelsohn, Jeremiah Hall, Cole Heinowitz, Matt Mutter, Jack Fever, Danny Zippi, Heidi Helen Davis.

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This project is dedicated to my grandmother, Sylvie Drake.

## List of Abbreviations & Note on Citation

In text citation is used to identify the primary works that I analyze in this project. The following abbreviations are used in order to clearly identify which particular work among works that share an author is being cited. Abbreviations in the body of this project will include:

*TBS* for *The Berlin Stories*

*CAHK* for *Christopher and His Kind: A Memoir 1929-1930*

*IAC* for the play of *I Am a Camera* by John Van Druten

Numbers after the abbreviations indicate page number. The 1955 film version of *I Am a Camera* directed by Henry Cornelius will be cited as *I Am a Camera*. Dialogue from the films versions of *I Am a Camera* and *Cabaret* (1972) will be cited by title and time stamp; for example (*Cabaret* 01:30:30-01:31:00). For the 1966 musical *Cabaret*, numbers appear in a (Act. Scene. Page Number.) format; for example (1.1.1.) to indicate Act 1, Scene 1, page 1. Footnotes are used for all secondary sources.



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### Synopsis of Scenes

- 16 August 1904 Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood born in Wyberslegh Hall, High Lane, Cheshire UK to Francis Edward Bradshaw Isherwood and Kathleen Isherwood.
- 1929-1933 Christopher Isherwood lives in Berlin, keeping a diary that he will use as the source material to write his now famous stories.
- 24 August 1934 Christopher Isherwood finishes writing *Mr Norris Changes Trains* in Orotava on Tenerife in the Canary Islands of Spain.
- 1935 *Mr Norris Changes Trains* published in the UK.
- 9 May, 1935 *Mr Norris Changes Trains* published as *The Last of Mr. Norris* in the United States.
- 1937 *Sally Bowles* published as separate small volume.
- 1937-1939 *The Nowaks, The Landauers* and *Berlin Diary: Autumn 1930* published in issues of John Lehman's *New Writing*.
- 1939 *Goodbye to Berlin* published, containing short stories *A Berlin Diary: Autumn 1930, Sally Bowles, On Ruegen Island: Summer 1931, The Nowaks, The Landauers, A Berlin Diary: Winter 1932-1933*.
- 19 January 1939 Christopher Isherwood immigrates to the United States with W.H. Auden on the French liner *Champlain*. Auden goes to Manhattan, Isherwood to Hollywood and later to make his residence in Santa Monica, California.
- 1945 *The Berlin Stories* published as one novel under this title, containing *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*.
- Summer 1951 John Van Druten adapts *Sally Bowles* with the permission of Christopher Isherwood and writes the play, *I Am a Camera*.
- 28 Nov 1951 – 12 Jul 1952 *I Am a Camera* by John Van Druten opens on Broadway at the Empire Theater, starring Julie Harris as Sally Bowles

and William Prince as Christopher Isherwood; dir. John Van Druten; stage and lighting design by Boris Aronson; costume design by Ellen Goldsborough.

- February 1952 Christopher Isherwood visits England and Berlin (his third visit after the war).
- 12 March 1952 Laurence Olivier Productions submits *I Am a Camera* to Lord Chamberlain's Office for pre-production scrutiny. After disapproval from the office, LOP drops the project.
- 30 March 1952 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Tony Awards: Julie Harris wins award for Best Leading Actress in a play for her role as Sally Bowles; Marian Winters wins Best Featured Actress in a play for her role as Natalia Landauer.
- Autumn 1951 Donald Albery hopes to mount a British production of *I Am a Camera* to be directed by John Van Druten and produced in Spring of 1954.
- 12 Mar 1954 – 8 Jan 1955 An edited version of *I Am a Camera* opens at the New Theatre, St. Martin's Lane after a one week run at Theatre Royal in Brighton. It stars Dorothy Tutin as Sally Bowles.
- 7 February 1955 *I Am a Camera* begins a twelve-week provincial tour at the New Theatre, Oxford, starring Moira Shearer as Sally Bowles.
- 13 April 1954 Director Henry Cornelius sends a script of the play *I Am a Camera* to the British Board of Film Censors for approval to be made into a film.
- June – Sept 1954 BBFC examiners John Trevelyan, Mary C. Glasgow, Gerald Sharpe, and Audrey Field view performances of *I Am a Camera* in order to determine whether the play suitable to be turned into a film. They come back with wildly mixed opinions.
- October 1954 Henry Cornelius and John Collier submit a screenplay for a film of *I Am a Camera* to Arthur Watkins of the BBFC for approval.
- Mid-October 1954 *I Am a Camera* begins filming based out of Walton Studios with Guy Green as cinematographer, Clive Donner as editor, Julie Harris reprising her role as Sally Bowles, and

- Laurence Harvey as Christopher Isherwood. John and James Woolf and Jack Clayton produce the film.
- 28 October 1954      Audrey Field and Gerald Sharpe outline reports of the film script and express themselves as “deeply disappointed.”
- 29 November 1954      A meeting with BBFC officials and the filmmakers resolves conflict. Filmmakers accept an X rating for the film.
- 14 October 1955      The film *I Am a Camera* opens at the London Pavilion.
- 20 Nov 1966 – 6 Sep 1969      Original Broadway production of *Cabaret*, starring Jill Haworth as Sally Bowles; music by John Kander, Book by Joe Masteroff, Lyrics by Fred Ebb. It opens first at the Broadhurst Theater, then the Broadway Theatre, and finally at the Imperial Theater; dir. Harold Prince.
- 26 March 1967      21<sup>st</sup> Annual Tony Awards: *Cabaret* wins 8 awards for Best Choreography (Ron Field), Best Direction of a Musical (Harold Prince), Best Featured Actor in a Musical (Joel Grey), Best Featured Actress in a Musical (Peg Murray), Composer and Lyricist (John Kander & Fred Ebb); Costume Design (Patricia Zipprodt); Scenic Design (Boris Aronson); Best Musical.
- 28 February 1968      *Cabaret* opens on the West End at the Palace Theater, starring Judi Dench as Sally Bowles. It ran for 336 performances.
- 13 February 1972      Film musical of *Cabaret*; dir. Bob Fosse, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, screenplay by Jay Allen.
- 27 March 1973      The 45<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards: *Cabaret* wins 8 awards for Best Director (Bob Fosse); Best Director in a Leading Role (Liza Minnelli); Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Joel Grey); Best Cinematography (Geoffrey Unsworth); Best Film Editing (David Bretherton); Best original Song Score or Adaptation Score (Ralph Burns); Best Art Direction ( Rolf Zehetbauer, Hans Jürgen Kiebach, Herbert Strabel), Best Sound (Robert Knudson, David Hildyard). *Cabaret* still holds the record for the most Academy Awards won by a film that did not win Best Picture.
- 4 January 1986      Christopher Isherwood dies in Santa Monica, California.

- 22 Oct 1987 – 4 Jun 1988 First Broadway revival of *Cabaret* at the Imperial Theatre and Minskoff Theater; dir. Harold Prince.
- 19 Mar 1998- 4 Jan 2004 Second Broadway revival of *Cabaret* at the Kit Kat Klub, NY, NY and then at Studio 54; dir. Sam Mendes.
- 7 June 1998 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Tony Awards: *Cabaret* wins 4 awards for Best Actor in a Musical (Alan Cumming); Best Actress in a Musical (Natasha Richardson); Best Featured Actor in a Musical (Ron Rifkin); Best Revival of a Musical.
- 24 April 2014 – 29 Mar 2015 Third Broadway Revival of *Cabaret* at Studio 54; dir. Sam Mendes and Rob Marshall.

## Willkommen

Adaptation suggests that a particular moment in time demands that an existing source material should be altered in order to create a work that differs from the original on which it is based. Christopher Isherwood's tales of life in pre-World War II Berlin, *The Berlin Stories* (1945), serve as the basis of a number of theatrical adaptations: the play *I Am a Camera* (1951) by John Van Druten, and the musical *Cabaret* (1966), with book by Joe Masteroff and music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb, which itself was later adapted as an Oscar-winning film (1973) directed by Bob Fosse. This series of adaptations, based on Isherwood's novelization of his lived experience, reveals the characteristic of each historical moment that necessitated each distinct adaptation. For this reason, a close reading of the adaptations of Isherwood's stories could suggest an answer to the question: What about a particular story in a particular moment calls for that story's adaptation?

I should say here that I will categorize Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* (in which each of its two protagonists, William Bradshaw and Christopher Isherwood, is a barely-concealed version of his author, Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood) as an adaptation of Isherwood's life. In fictionalizing his experiences of Berlin during the 1930s, Isherwood adapts his personal history. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to Isherwood's autobiography *Christopher and His Kind: A Memoir 1929-1939* as a more ostensibly "factual" account of the same years he fictionalizes in *The Berlin Stories*. Much of my research will explore the history of the adaptations of Isherwood's stories, tracing the evolution of those stories as they are explored in various artistic mediums. I will pay special attention to the ways in which the various adaptations of the original (and of one another) continually revise themselves, particularly in

relation to themes of otherness. I will go on to explore the intermingling of performance, queerness, sexuality, and identity within these texts. As each version moves farther from the historical moment in which Isherwood's stories arose, the creative strategies taken by the adaptors reveal the ways in which interpretation can both reflect the original and respond to the social and moral context of its own time.

Isherwood nods to the ability of an individual to capture a historical moment with his now-famous statement—which later became the title of the Van Druten adaptation—that “I am a camera.” The extent to which an individual observer can be documentary seems central to Isherwood's claim, which becomes even starker when separated from its context and stands alone as Van Druten's title. Van Druten's choice of title suggests how strongly he felt the claim captured the ethos of his work. In Isherwood's 1945 novel, his protagonist of the same name—also a writer—reads aloud the start of an unfinished novel: “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day this will all have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed” (*TBS* 207). Isherwood as camera claims not to act on the image he observes, which suggests that the camera does not affect the image it produces. Isherwood's style here is evocative of his larger aims: the string of descriptors, connected without conjunctions, alludes to the “[un]thinking” camera's lack of agency. Isherwood's asyndeton makes the scene seem to flow into order without effortful construction by the author. The only verb the camera invokes in that first sentence is the gerund, “recording,” which is later repeated in the second sentence. The ongoing quality of the action verb in its gerund form mitigates any assertiveness or immediacy of the active participle. The verb is also not introduced in its more clearly active infinitive or conjugated forms. The camera does not “record,” but is rather more progressively

described as “recording.” The self-consciously unadorned prose that Isherwood uses when writing about the two images captured by the “open” camera suggests an attempt to reproduce in language the ostensible passivity of the camera. The central figures of his images are simply “man” and “woman.” Each figure is described with one prepositional phrase and one action again in its gerund form. The pose of Isherwood and therefore of author as camera suggests that the camera, and by extension his prose, is a transparent record of what it witnesses and represents—which, in Isherwood’s case, is a most significant moment in history.

And yet, as we know, a camera cannot, in fact, simply replicate the moment of the captured image exactly. Isherwood conveniently ignores the fact that a camera filters the image through a lens and that the photographer who uses a camera frames the image in a deliberate way. An “open... shutter,” which Isherwood describes as “quite passive,” exposes the film to light, the duration of which exposure significantly alters the image produced. Isherwood seems to be conscious of the implications for his own work and its possible adaptations in the photography metaphor, from the reception of the image to the process of development: “Some day this will all have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.” Here Isherwood writes of the chemical processes fundamental to the creation of a photographic print that transform the latent image captured on film into a photograph. First in development, different densities of silver adhere to the film depending on how much light had touched that film. Several steps constitute the process of development: first (and perhaps obviously) development, and then washing, fixing, clearing, and drying. This process is labor intensive and distinctly *active*. Isherwood acknowledges the effort critical to the printing process when he describes it as “careful.” In the printing process, the print is passed through a series of baths that fix the silver on the image so that it is no longer light sensitive. The image is fixed first in development on the film and then

again after printing. Fixing the image neutralizes or removes any remaining light sensitive silver, creating a stable image. Isherwood writes with an eye toward the future and perhaps toward adaptation, when he imagines these processes: that “this” photograph might be “developed” suggests not only the literal, chemical development in the photographic process, but also implies possibilities of advancement, addition, and elaboration. “Fixed” means at once to halt by securing in place and also, paradoxically, to improve. Isherwood’s emphasis on chemical processes indicates while the work itself “develops” it might also be “fixed” at each stage of its development in a given adaptation. Isherwood suggests that in order to come into being and to persist into the future, his work “will all have to be” changed “some day;” that his prose necessitates future adaptation.

In a 1977 *Daily Mail* article that accompanied the release of Isherwood’s autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind*, Peter Lewis engaged with the camera motif. Lewis described the camera in *The Berlin Stories* as “a camouflage”<sup>1</sup> that Isherwood used to hide his homosexuality. Perhaps reacting to the relative prudishness of the era in which Isherwood first published *The Berlin Stories*, the late 1930s, Lewis, who writes in the late 1970s, characterizes the camera as a façade. Lewis explains that until what he calls the “present rush of confessional autobiographies” from prominent gay men like Isherwood, “homosexuals had to disguise themselves.”<sup>2</sup> Lewis allows the more recent history of the 1960s and 1970s to shape his interpretation of the camera. That “the camera” itself is subject to framing reflective of the era in which it is perceived demonstrates the malleability of image and narrative when influenced by the moment of perception. As a member of society in the late 1970s energized by recent sexual liberation, Lewis

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lewis. "So Come to the Cabaret Old Chum." *Daily Mail* (London), 23 Nov. 1996, Books sec., p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, “So Come to the Cabaret.”



saw Isherwood's 'camera' not as transparent, as Isherwood claimed it was, but as opaque—a tool used to obfuscate a fundamental truth related to the author's sexual identity. In conversation with Lewis, however, Isherwood said that he relied on the "device of a shadowy narrator" in order to "exhibit the other characters," thus revealing the story without drawing undue attention to himself. "If Christopher had been interesting," Isherwood went on, "it would have been a distraction;" Isherwood as camera allowed him to create "stylized portraits of real people." Here Isherwood suggests that the camera can also serve as vehicle by means of which he was able to "styliz[e]...real people" and lived events; this emphasis on "stylization" implies a desire to privilege artistic invention above documentary fact. This emphasis on stylization sits uncomfortably with the author's earlier claim to be merely a recording device: an inconsistency to which I will return in the body of my discussion, since these apparently incompatible poles—of documentary preservation and artistic stylization—constitute the central tension in Isherwood's work as well as in adaptations and criticism of it.

Lewis's article is, in fact, a small fragment of a mountain of testimony—reviews, articles, interviews, drawings, advertisements—about the reception of Isherwood's original work and its many avatars and adaptations over the decades. In the chapters that follow, I plan to use analysis of social and critical reception to create a coherent account of why Isherwood was adapted and re-adapted many times over. Critical responses to *The Berlin Stories* ranged from bemused voyeurism to outrage at Isherwood's apparent failure to address the rise of Nazism with sufficient moral and political indignation. And yet, a closer reading reveals that his text deconstructs the notion that "politics" takes the form of explicit references to political action. Instead, Isherwood's complex and sympathetic portrayal of marginalized people is itself, I will

argue, a form of political protest. As we shall see, Isherwood's adaptors restyled his implicit political stance in a way that responded to the politics and mores of their eras.

## 1. The 1930s & 40s: The View through Isherwood's Lens

Like Lewis's article about the prolific writer, contemporary responses to Christopher Isherwood's work as it was published throughout the 1930s and 40s reflected the time in which they were written. An advertisement published in the *New York Times* on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1935<sup>3</sup> for *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, a novella that was the first published element of what would later constitute Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* (1945), boils the impression of the era into a succinct slug line. The ad lists *Mr Norris Changes Trains* under the American title, *The Last of Mr. Norris*, alongside its price (\$2.50), publisher (William Morrow), and the terse sentence: "An unusual novel." In comparison with Isherwood's autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind*, which to Lewis in 1977 seemed to be a sexually explicit work of non-fiction, *Mr. Norris*, never makes the homosexuality of its characters and themes explicit. However, the novel features a few characters who appear to be attracted to their same gender, a character who writes erotica, and an eponymous character who enjoys sexual domination, group sex, and sex games. And yet, the narrator, William Bradshaw, is distinctly removed from the novella's kink as a fairly impartial (if amused) observer and frequent commentator on the novel's "unusual" characters. Sex, though usually stumbled upon and coded as unusual, is at the heart of Isherwood's novella and is what signals that Arthur Norris is 'other:'

I had wriggled and shuffled about half the distance when an agonized cry came from the lighted room ahead of me.

"*Nein, nein!* Mercy! Oh dear! *Hilfe! Hilfe!*"

There was no mistaking the voice. They had got Arthur in there, and were robbing him and knocking him about, I might have known it. We were fools ever to have poked our noses into a dark place like this. We had only ourselves to thank. Drink made me brave. Struggling forward toward the door I pushed it open.

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<sup>3</sup> "Books Published Today." *New York Times* (New York), May 9, 1935.

The first person I saw was Anni. She was standing in the middle of the room. Arthur cringe on the floor at her feet. He had removed several more of his garments, and was now dressed, lightly but with perfect decency in a suit of mauve silk underwear, a rubber abdominal belt and a pair of socks. In one hand he held a brush and in the other a yellow shoe-rag. Olga towered behind him, brandishing a heavy leather whip.... She gave Arthur a smart cut across the buttocks. He uttered a squeal of pain and pleasure, and began to brush and polish Anni's boots with feverish haste...

My presence did not seem to disconcert any of them in the least. Indeed it appeared to add spice to Arthur's enjoyment...

"Oh dear! William, save me! You won't? You're as cruel as the rest of them..."

[Olga] made a playful slash at me with the whip which sent me in headlong retreat down the passage, pursued by Arthur's delighted and anguished cries. (TBS 33-4).

Bradshaw here seems to make innocent assumptions—and clearly harbors normative, heterosexual expectations of sex. Arthur's invitation that William Bradshaw should join him implies Mr. Norris's bisexuality. However, Isherwood obscures Arthur Norris's potential gayness behind his eccentric sex games. William's refusal of Norris's sexual advance undoubtedly made him a more palatable narrator to a readership that not only demonized but also criminalized homosexuality, as was the case in the 1930s. William's phrase "dark place" suggests the moral judgment that the activities that occur in his environment might be nefarious. William's slight embarrassment, surprise, and ultimate refusal of Arthur's invitation to join are meant to distance him from the other characters' sexual mores. By creating the appearance of distance between William and the others, Isherwood frees William to meditate on the others' sex game at great length and with comical detail—tacitly involving him.

Humor is another element of Isherwood's strategy to make unconventional and explicit sexual practice palatable to readers of his day. Clad "in a suit of mauve silk underwear, a rubber abdominal belt and a pair of socks" as he grovels on the floor Arthur Norris is presented as a laughable figure. His position on the floor places him at the bottom of the vertical hierarchy. Hence, the picture of Arthur Norris is unthreatening despite its graphic nature. When considered

alongside the conspicuous humor of Arthur Norris's sexual practice, Bradshaw's pose of naïveté reads as just that: a pose with an almost ironic tone. This might be a wink from Isherwood to the unbigoted reader of his day—or not. The ambiguity of Isherwood's text is its genius (necessitated by his time).

A 1935 *New York Times* review of *Mr Norris* titled "A Rare Character" does not immediately denounce the titular character as a pervert, but rather opts for a gentler introduction to its assessment, suggesting that "Any one who enjoys collecting queer specimens of humanity, in real life or in books, should consider Mr. Norris a find."<sup>4</sup> The line suggests amusement and pleasure not despite but because of the character's oddity. Adjectives used to describe Norris include: "irresistibly entertaining," "intricate and twisted," "curiously unprincipled and perverted," "pretty slimy," "unappetizing," and in an especially dated idiom he is described part of a group of "queer fish."<sup>5</sup> The adjectives invoked to describe Arthur Norris betray an implied moral judgment that allows for a quixotic stance: the inclusion of moral judgment permits the writer of the review to admit to enjoying the novel's capers just as William Bradshaw's perspective permits the reader to do so.

The review adopts an enthusiastically clinical tone in its description of William Bradshaw as showing "a collector's possessive pride" or of Arthur Norris as "a laboratory exhibit" as well as an "interesting specimen, skillfully displayed."<sup>6</sup> This scientific detachment helps the author create distance between herself and Arthur Norris, aligning herself with William Bradshaw and adopting the voice of one who marvels at what she finds utterly bizarre. The author speaks for readers of her day: "Bradshaw's attitude toward the unsavory fellow is more

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<sup>4</sup> "A Rare Character," *New York Times* (New York), May 12, 1935, BR27.

<sup>5</sup> "Rare Character."

<sup>6</sup> "Rare Character."

tolerant than the average reader's will be." This gives the contemporary great insight into what a mass-produced publication might expect of its audience. "But," she continues, "it is just this fascination of the rare bird for Bradshaw which makes his account richly illuminating, colored with a subtly humorous appreciation of Norris's outrageous activities."<sup>7</sup> The article claims that what makes the character appealing is its "rarity;" that he is out of place in everyday society. The outlandishness of the character makes him worth paying attention to, along with the knowledge that he is unlike you, the reader.

Notably, the article does not address sex. The only exception to this notable absence is the description of Baron von Pregnitz who is described as "a homosexual." He is addressed as part of the collection of the "Minor characters on the fringe of Norris's life [that] are bizarre also."<sup>8</sup> It seems the only attribute which qualifies him as bizarre and that makes him noteworthy is his homosexuality.

The author sums up her review of *Mr Norris* as a "The book is a superlative characterization... It tempers the picture of an unappetizing scoundrel with nervous humor and innocent merriment." The phrase "superlative characterization" suggests categorical denial that the character "characteriz[ed]" (Arthur Norris) might be familiar; instead the reviewer understands him as a superb artistic rendering of a fictional type. The language invoked creates distance between the character and herself as well as her readership. The article's conclusion gets at the core of the author's need for the "unappetizing scoundrel" to be "tempered"—that without equivocation on the part of Isherwood through humor and an innocent posture the character he portrays possesses no redeeming qualities.

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<sup>7</sup> "Rare Character."

<sup>8</sup> "Rare Character."

In 1937, Isherwood had published another tale inspired by the activities and characters that entertained him during his Berlin years, “Sally Bowles.” Later published as a chapter of the novella *Goodbye to Berlin* (and even later published as part of *The Berlin Stories*), “Sally Bowles” serves as the primary source for the John Van Druten, Kander and Ebb, and Fosse adaptations of Isherwood’s work. She appears as the protagonist of *I Am a Camera* (1951), *Cabaret* the musical (1966), and *Cabaret* the film (1972). A contemporary review of “Sally Bowles,” published in *The Times* (London) in October of 1937, focuses largely on the titular character whose presence upstages the harrowing circumstances that surround her—namely the rise of Nazism. The reviewer, who writes under the name J.S., admires Isherwood’s portrayal of Sally’s irresponsibly free spirit and innocently grand ideas, despite the turmoil—political and personal—that surrounds her and which J.S. finds to be truthfully conceived by Isherwood. J.S. introduces his review of Isherwood’s short story by calling it “an aspect of the real Germany.”<sup>9</sup> Yet words like “real” and “truth” are nebulous and subjective, alleging the veracity of a text without evidence of it. J.S. uses both. This perspective is then important to keep in mind when evaluating his language; after all, he is close to the era during which Isherwood wrote “Sally Bowles” and which Isherwood describes in it. J.S. continues, “Without knowing the bygone Berlin which was reported to outdo in freedom and irresponsibility the pleasures of Montparnasse, one can guess at the truth of this unimportant but revealing portrait.” Immediately after J.S. describes Isherwood’s portrait of Berlin as “real,” he admits that Isherwood’s Berlin is personally unfamiliar to him and only revealed to him through “report[s]” (presumably like Isherwood’s book). Therefore, J.S. admits that his authority on the topic is tenuous. What is more significant than the degree of truth of Isherwood’s text, which can only be “guessed at,” is that

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<sup>9</sup> J.S., “The Modern Fairytale,” *The Times* (London), Oct. 22, 1937.

reviewers of Isherwood's day are concerned with truth. Conversely, alongside J.S.'s review of "Sally Bowles," he delights in the fairytale portrayal of Germany in an English translation of *Sparrow Farm* by Hans Fallada (trans. Eric Sutton). Some "aspect" of Isherwood's content (that is absent in other work like Fallada's) as it was read in his day begs the question of authenticity and truth. Though to J.S. the question is answered not by Isherwood's portrayal of Germany, which is only peripheral, but by his portrayal of "an English girl" who "drifts with enjoyment, care-free, happy-go-lucky, and earnest only in pursuit of Bohemia and the great love affair."<sup>10</sup> What interests J.S. about Isherwood's story is not its turbulent setting, but its turbulent ingénue. As we shall see, this inversion of focus would haunt later productions—and later criticisms—of the texts.

In 1939, J.S. wrote a sequel to his review of "Sally Bowles" in a column titled "Berlin in 1930" that focuses on Isherwood's novella *Goodbye to Berlin*, which he calls "a volume of sketches and impressions."<sup>11</sup> J.S. highlights his attention to Isherwood's portrait of Berlin's changing atmosphere (a shift in focus marked by the article's title) as Isherwood's characters reveal it. "The sketchbook as a whole," J.S. wrote "has enough vivid if unconnected anecdotes to provide some kind of general picture of place and time."<sup>12</sup> The literary critic pinpoints Isherwood's capability to convey a sense of "place and time" through people. The connection between character and atmosphere that J.S. identifies in Isherwood's text foreshadows its eventual stage and film adaptations. However, J.S.'s observation betrays a sharp insight into the compelling specificity of Isherwood's people and their setting. Sally Bowles, J.S. continues,

prepared us for the ingenuous charm with which Mr. Isherwood's people carried off their mildly shocking behavior; and even when, like Otto Nowak, who

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<sup>10</sup> J.S., "Modern Fairytale."

<sup>11</sup> J.S., "Nature and Reason," *The Times* (London), Mar. 03, 1939

<sup>12</sup> J.S., "Nature and Reason."



allowed young men to keep him and had his fun with girls, they should be more than mildly shocking, they are so spontaneous and uncritical of themselves that it is impossible to be displeased.<sup>13</sup>

J.S. acknowledges the surprising ordinariness of bisexuality in Isherwood's novel. Though his sentiment might be characterized as progressive for the time, J.S.'s statement also pays careful attention to the acceptable moral posture of his day: that Otto's "exploits... should be more than mildly shocking." Here the word "should" hints at the obligation of the reader to be offended by the novel's content, which intensifies the naughty glee that might arise for a reader who is smitten, like J.S. is, by Isherwood's characters' spontaneity and lack of self-criticism. J.S.'s casual phrase "carried off" reveals his impression that Mr. Isherwood might have gotten away with a literary trick that a less skilled author could not have. He convinces J.S. of his characters' worthiness despite their scandals and "unworldliness." Isherwood's ability to "carry off" this feat in his text is an inconspicuous, but pointed political gesture upon which I will touch later.

Across the Atlantic another 1939 review, published in *The New York Times* and written by Edith H. Walton, takes an entirely different approach to Isherwood's text. In "Berlin on the Brink: Latest Works of Fiction," Walton witheringly criticizes *Goodbye to Berlin*. The chief object of her scorn is what she perceives as Isherwood's levity amid the rise of Nazism in Berlin. Walton writes: "What this book actually consists of, then, is six narratives, very loosely related, which deal with the febrile, anxious world of Germany on the brink of Nazi-dom. It describes people who are conscious of coming crisis, but who seem helpless to do anything to prevent it."<sup>14</sup> Walton's tone radiates both moral and aesthetic judgment. Her "actually," "then," "very loosely related" betray a certain exasperation with the author of the work under review. Whereas J.S. in

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<sup>13</sup> J.S., "Nature and Reason."

<sup>14</sup> Edith H. Walton, "Berlin on the Brink: Latest Works of Fiction," *New York Times* (New York), Mar. 19, 1939, Isherwood, Christopher, 102.

the *London Times* found giddy naïveté and the irresistible allure of following ones fantastical whims, Walton sees in Isherwood's characters a disturbing awareness that gives their "helpless[ness] to do anything" the quality of self-absorbed apathy. Without the innocence that the British critic sensed in the characters, their "helplessness" seems at best uncaring and at worst cruel. *Goodbye to Berlin* Walton continued, "gives a tenuous, high-pitched, consciously decadent cross-section of what was happening to the German capital in those catastrophic years."<sup>15</sup> Walton's phrase "consciously decadent" highlights her primary moral discomfort; she sees Isherwood's characters and world as conscious, and thus as having choice. Walton's awareness of Isherwood's characters' conscious and yet inevitable inaction frustrates her. Furthermore, that Walton describes the rise of Nazism as "catastrophe" demonstrates her awareness of the immense scale of the suffering that surrounds Isherwood's characters.

Walton pays closer attention than other critics of her day to the larger political and historical undertones of Isherwood's story and shows no little disappointment that, "One has to search about a bit for the sober implications which underlie" Isherwood's text. She finds those "sober implications" in vignettes that address the effect of socio-political upheaval upon the characters. "The real drift and purpose of the book," she argues, is revealed in "the two 'Berlin Diaries.'" Walton describes the Bohemian exploits of the protagonist in the first diary and the elaborates upon the second in which, she argues,

the Nazis come into power, and the narrator is faced with a sudden, shocking change in the city he has loved. Humanly it is the small details which strike him. He sees his friends muzzled and threatened. He remembers poor, play-acting Rudi, in his absurd Russian blouse, whose childish, story-book communism is about, at last to be taken all too seriously.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Walton, "Berlin on the Brink."

<sup>16</sup> Walton, "Berlin on the Brink."

What Walton isolates as the “purpose” of Isherwood’s novel demonstrates most clearly what she values in it most. According to her, the value of Isherwood’s text, the book’s ostensible “purpose,” is the violent confluence of the personal and political and the effects of that confluence upon the human body and memory. Walton’s description of Isherwood’s characters is nostalgic and rooted in remembrance. Its tones echo those of lament, demonstrating the emotional dimensions of her closeness to the historical time period in which these events occurred. Walton’s genuine respect for the people and events of Isherwood’s novel despite her disapproval of it intimates that some aspect of these characters and of this book is real, though she does not credit the author with that achievement.

Instead she is careful to point out that Isherwood distances himself from the reality of the text: “Perversely, however, and just a little confusingly, he [Isherwood, the author] warns one that [*Goodbye to Berlin* is] not necessarily autobiographical. He is merely, he claims, using a device.”<sup>17</sup> Walton criticizes the distance Isherwood places between himself and the events and people of his novel. She holds Isherwood responsible for the fictionality of his novel and seems to fault him for it. While criticizing the aesthetic execution of Isherwood’s “device,” she manages to show discomfort with Isherwood’s reliance upon fiction in the first place—a reliance that coheres with her moral objections to *Goodbye to Berlin*. Walton describes the “actual merits of ‘Goodbye to Berlin’ ... to be very minor:” that Isherwood “does, it is true convey something of the hysteria, the tension, the breakdown of morale which preceded Hitler’s rise to power; but she continues, “his book as a whole seems incommensurate in force with the importance of its theme. He limits himself too much to the frothy scum of Berlin society.”<sup>18</sup> Her praise of Isherwood is essentially a concession (“it is true...”). But the heart of her article is disapproval;

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<sup>17</sup> Walton, “Berlin on the Brink.”

<sup>18</sup> Walton, “Berlin on the Brink.”

she frowns upon the author and his characters as the “frothy scum” that ignore their shared surroundings. At the end of her review, Walton dismissively returns to an introductory reference she makes to Isherwood’s unwritten novel based on his Berlin years, to be titled *The Lost*, and abandons any pretence of professional distance, instead serving her readers unabashed sass: “If this book is any sample of his powers, ‘The Lost’ received a proper burial.”

Let us not be lulled by Walton’s emphatic criticism of Isherwood’s work or by J.S.’s gleeful embrace of Isherwood’s Bohemian characters into accepting without careful examination that his writing is fundamentally apolitical. Rather, Isherwood’s work is subtly and subversively political in a more profound way, frequently normalizing ostracized identities that push the boundaries of what and who could be safely explored in fiction. The stakes for Isherwood were in fact very high: outing himself and his real-life cohort was hardly safe in the 1930s. If anything, the author’s tacit juxtaposition of the characters he explores and humanizes with the spectacular rise of Nazism is deeply political: the historical backdrop—which of course would have been self-evident to the original audience—manifests itself *beside* his text’s main players and that inserts itself in their lives only peripherally until it gains so much momentum that it cannot be ignored and moves to the fore.

I want to argue here that Isherwood engages with overtly political institutional systems of oppression (Nazism) by making them concentric with everyday (if tacit) systems of oppression (that is, homophobia and sexism). In this way, he forces American and British critics—who wouldn’t hesitate to condemn Nazism—to confront their own prejudices which, he implies, are actually parallel to those of the enemy. The danger, the author implies, is in any attempt to construct a hierarchy of oppression: to say, for example, that anti-Semitism, which is

peripherally featured in the novel, is worse than or not as bad as, perhaps, homophobia is. This is precisely the trap into which Walton falls.

An example of Isherwood's implied political undercurrent may be found in the short story *On Ruegen Island: Summer 1931*, where he portrays a relationship between Peter Wilkinson, a neurotic Englishman, and Otto Nowak, a boorish German youth. (Nowak is the figure whose exploits even an Isherwood admirer, the *London Times*' J.S., thinks readers "should [find] more than mildly shocking."<sup>19</sup>) Taking a brief respite from his Berlin escapades, Christopher vacations on the Baltic where he shares a cabin on the sea with the two young men. Isherwood does not make explicit the nature of Peter and Otto's relationship, but rather hints at an implied attraction between the two men by emphasizing the ways in which the two navigate space, their respective bodies, and one another. Isherwood establishes them first as opposites, writing, "It is Peter's will against Otto's body. Otto is his whole body; Peter is only his head. Otto moves fluidly, effortlessly; his gestures have the savage, unconscious grace of a cruel, elegant animal. Peter drives himself about, lashing his stiff, ungraceful body with the whip of merciless will" (*TBS* 283). Isherwood combines antithesis and synecdoche in order to distill and bring into high relief the differences between Peter and Otto. Peter is head; Otto is body. Furthermore, Isherwood's narrative implies that head and body are somehow "against" each other. In fact, though Peter is described as head, not much of his thoughts are explored; like Otto (whose animalistic grace Peter does not share) he is described physically and corporeally. This curious choice sits uncomfortably with Isherwood's description of Peter as head, suggesting that the two men, when considered together (or rather against each other) must and will invariably be

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<sup>19</sup> J.S., "Nature and Reason."

thought of physically. Their innate physicality and animosity is conveyed by scenes of the two rough housing, which hints at a sexual relationship.

The erotic quality of the connection becomes more explicit and thus potentially more dangerous as the story progresses. On a walk through the woods, Christopher becomes acquainted with a doctor who harbors Nazi sympathies. As the doctor examines Chris's twisted ankle, he questions Chris about his roommates. Unsolicited, the doctor pontificates: "My work at the clinic has taught me that it is no use trying to help this type of boy. Your friend is very generous and very well meaning, but he makes a great mistake. This type of boy always reverts. From a scientific point of view, I find him exceedingly interesting" (*TBS* 293). The doctor's language dances around homosexuality without naming it explicitly. He describes Christopher's roommates as "this type of boy" rather than as homosexual. Instead the doctor implicitly refers to some vague corrupting force in the men that we can infer to be homosexuality. The silence that surrounds homosexuality in the novel, despite its clear presence, suggests the degree to which it is taboo, while also rooting it more deeply in the physical realm. No character whether they whole-heartedly endorse, participate in, or are disgusted by homosexuality addresses it directly.

Isherwood's doctor makes rhetorical gestures that dehumanize the "type of boy" of which he speaks, by relegating him to the category of "type." They are specimens to be examined and evaluated rather than understood sympathetically as complex human beings. Pointedly, the doctor uses the pronoun "it" rather than "he" to refer to "this type of boy." Moreover, the doctor also infantilizes his subjects, precisely by referring to them as "boys." Finally, the doctor dissolves any autonomy either character might maintain by referring to them singularly as "this type of boy" and using singular pronouns, so that they are not distinct individuals but an emblem of a type. The doctor positions himself as an authority on the topic of

the “this type of boy[‘s]” future behavior, determining that for them “a great mistake” is and will always be inevitable and grounding his position in ostensibly hard science.

Ironically, the doctor’s tone and rhetoric here parallel those of the author of the 1935 review, “A Rare Character,” who, as we have seen, adopts the voice of an enthusiastic clinician when commenting on another of Isherwood’s characters, Mr. Norris. In this instance, the Nazi doctor of Isherwood’s text *is* an enthusiastic clinician—perversely so, taking pleasure in the suffering of others and in his ability to comment upon and realize it. The striking parallel between the two figures—literary critic and Nazi doctor—bears out the fruitfulness of Isherwood’s “implicit politics,” which, as I have argued, would have forced readers to find in the bases of their everyday attitudes toward transgressive sexuality an ideology not so different to that of Hitler’s followers.

“Smilingly,” the doctor continues, “He has a criminal head!... I believe in discipline. These boys ought to be put in labour-camps... I know this type of boy very well,’ he repeat[s]. ‘It is a bad degenerate type. You cannot make anything out of these boys. Their tonsils are almost invariably diseased” (*TBS* 293-4). The doctor delivers these lines as if to seal the dark and torturous fate of his subjects with inappropriate joy. The misplaced levity as he speaks of atrocity enhances his monstrosity. As I have mentioned, homosexuality, unnamed and unspoken so far in this novel, manifests itself physically. The doctor’s text further roots homosexuality in physicality, but in alarmingly brutal physicality—that of “discipline,” labour camps,” and “diseased...tonsils.” The pro-Hitler doctor’s disturbingly misplaced elation demonstrates the real and palpable threat of open homosexuality to the human body. Furthermore, in the character of Nazi doctor, Isherwood explicitly reveals the sinister intermingling of Nazism and homophobia. Isherwood frames this menacing conversation in the protective posture of observer; for the

story's protagonist, his namesake, listens almost silently to the doctor's hateful speech. Here we see how Christopher, the character, adopts the posture of the camera—not the passive and transparent camera he would like us to identify him with—ostensibly safe and impersonal, but the strategically framing and filtering device that can in fact articulate a political message.

Whatever the ambiguous prose and the slight remove of the narration, the narrator pays close attention to the sculptural physique of Otto Nowak: “The beautiful ripe lines of the torso taper away too suddenly to his rather absurd little buttocks and spindly, immature legs. And these struggles with the chest-expander are daily making him more and more top-heavy” (*TBS* 283). Isherwood's employs the language of visual art metaphorically in order to describe the beauty of Otto's body. By blurring idioms, Isherwood demonstrates the high degree of fineness Christopher sees in Otto's physique. Isherwood then undermines the gorgeous picture he paints when he describes Otto's “spindly legs” and “top-heavy” body. He makes Otto almost comical. Isherwood's critical comedy here ambiguates Christopher's perception of Otto. What might be perceived as physical attraction abruptly changes form and tone, misdirecting the reader.

Isherwood, the author, comments upon this gesture in his autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind*, and reveals that the choice to do so was intentional:

This is how Otto is described by ‘Christopher Isherwood,’ the narrator of the novel. The fictitious Isherwood takes the attitude of an amused, slightly contemptuous onlooker. He nearly gives himself away when he speaks of ‘the beautiful ripe lines of the torso.’ So, lest the reader should suspect him of finding Otto physically attractive, he adds that Otto's legs are ‘spindly,’ Otto's original in life had an entirely adequate, sturdy pair of legs, even if they weren't quite as handsome as the upper half of his body. (*CAHK* 42)

The Christopher that Isherwood writes in the original story is not explicitly gay. The ambiguity of the protagonist's sexual orientation keeps the protagonist free from criticism on the basis of sexual orientation and keeps the author immune to persecution. Avoiding explicitly gay content,



Isherwood, the author, speaks through implication—despite (and perhaps because of) the tremendous personal danger.

Isherwood observes the ways in which systems of oppression intertwine and mirror each other without, however, privileging one type of oppression above another. Immediately following the only scene of explicit violence in the novel, Christopher Isherwood, the character, outs himself, paralleling the danger of explicit gay content with the threat of physical violence that arises from Nazism. The scene of violence portrays “a blond man,” a Nazi, who assaults two young Jewish men in order to “defend the honour of all German women against the obscene anti-Nordic menace” (*TBS* 394). In the vignette that follows, a friend of the protagonist, Fritz Wendel, takes Chris on “a [farewell] tour of the [Berlin] ‘dives’” because “the Police [had] begun to take great interest in these places” as part of “a general Berlin clean-up” (*TBS* 395). Isherwood’s language implies that the “general” category of people that necessitated the “clean-up” according to the Nazis contained the queer population of Berlin alongside German Jews. Christopher and Fritz go on to observe, “A few stage lesbians and some young men with plucked eyebrows lounged at the bar, (*TBS* 395). Sitting next to Christopher, a small, American man voices his unease:

The little American simply couldn’t believe it. Men dressed as *women*? As *women*, hey? Do you mean they’re *queer*? ‘Eventually we’re all queer,’ drawled Fritz solemnly, in lugubrious tones. The young man looked us over slowly. He had been running and was still out of breath. The others grouped themselves awkwardly behind him, ready for anything—though their callow, open-mouthed faces in the greenish lamp-light looked a bit scared.

‘You *queer*, too, hey?’ demanded the little American, turning suddenly on me.

‘Yes,’ I said, very queer indeed.

He stood there before me a moment, panting, thrusting out his jaw, uncertain, it seemed, whether he ought not to hit me in the face. Then he turned, uttered some kind of wild college battle-cry, and, followed by the others, rushed headlong into the building. (*TBS* 396)

Isherwood's first line here poses as third-person objective narration: "The little American simply couldn't believe it." However, the word "simply" betrays a degree of free-indirect discourse, conveying a casual subjectivity that is uncharacteristic of an objective observer. That said, the perspective betrayed by the word "simply" is not what we expect of Chris's stance either. Subtly at first, and then rapidly the voices of character and narrator blur. The lines that follow communicate the incredulity of the "little American," but lack quotation marks, which typically demarcate dialogue: "Men dressed as *women*? As *women*, hey? Do you mean they're *queer*?" Isherwood's clunky italics disrupt the rhythm of his sentences, creating an air of irony around the words they emphasize. He seems to be mocking the man whose speech places awkward weight on the italicized words. The italics hint at the author's inclination to portray the prejudiced American as a buffoon. However, the free-indirect discourse also places the homophobic voice *within* the narration, splitting it between Christopher (the protagonist and assumed narrator) and the reader. The homophobic content of the free-indirect discourse sits uncomfortably with Christopher's implied identity as a gay man, necessitating his explicit coming out. Fritz and not Chris is the first to address the "little American's" remarks with his "solemn" acknowledgment that "Eventually we're all queer." The "lugubrious[ness]" of his tone paired with the long vowel sounds of his sentence inflects the texture of inevitability with gloom. Rather than paralleling the American's homophobia, Fritz's tone communicates his awareness that the queerness he shares with his peers will "eventually" culminate in a troubling end.

When asked directly, Christopher outs himself unequivocally. His statement is terse and unspectacular—a simple "Yes." Chris's "Yes" bears an impressive weight unacknowledged by his understated prose. Isherwood follows his protagonist's admission with another moment of free-indirect discourse. Beyond the quotation marks, the narrator rather

cheekily adds the comment “very queer indeed.” Here, the narrative voice might even be that of the author. His admission comes only once the stakes are high, immediately after a moment of violence and when the latent danger of his environment makes itself known. The emphasis on the American’s jaw parallel’s the description of Otto Nowak that pays close attention to the lines of the body. This recalls the theme of physicality that is entwined with the theme of homosexuality in this work. In this instance, as with the section with the Nazi doctor, the physicality in question here contains the threat of immediate violence. Ultimately, the scene does not come to a violent end, but rather is resolved in a largely aesthetic show of bravado. Nonetheless, Isherwood’s vignette serves to normalize gayness by making its explicit mention unexceptional while demonstrating the lack of safety and threat of violence that often accompanies it.

The objection to Isherwood’s politics in these works of the 1930s and 40s took the form of questioning and criticizing his apparent choice not to be more explicit in his anti-Nazism. However, Isherwood’s politics need not be explicit in order to be powerful. In fact, as he establishes in the scenes I have just explored, they *cannot* be. For Isherwood, politics resides in other places: just by showing non-conforming people in a complexifying way is itself a resistance to a kind of ideology that wants to draw lines around a category of people. Isherwood couples anti-Semitism with homophobia and assimilates gay content to the Nazi doctor without ever allying anti-gay politics to the doctor explicitly as a powerful political gesture. Isherwood’s stance on homophobia and homosexuality communicates by analogy his stance on Nazism. The two are inextricably linked whether critics of his day acknowledge the link. Isherwood uses his text to de-construct notion of politics as being explicit protest. The pose of camera is an attractive fiction, but within it there lies always an implicit subjectivity and by extension an implicit politics.

## 2. 1950s: “Moods” and Codes

Sixteen years after the 1945 release of Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories*, playwright John Van Druten adapted Christopher Isherwood's short story "Sally Bowles." He wrote the play *I Am a Camera*, which focuses on the uniquely fraught friendship between leading lady, Sally Bowles, and leading man, Christopher Isherwood. This first adaptation of Isherwood's work for the stage focuses heavily on the personal lives of its main characters while only peripherally referring to the socio-political climate that surrounds them through acts of shared witnessing, casual conversation, and the presence of Jewish supporting characters. This focus forces audiences to confront the self-obsession of Sally, Chris, and their cohort as well as their inclination to frivolity in the face of atrocity. The production first opened on Broadway, at the Empire Theatre on 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1951, starring Julie Harris as Sally Bowles and William Prince as Christopher Isherwood who were directed by the playwright.

In this version of Isherwood's stories, a young English writer, Christopher Isherwood, gives English lessons out of his boarding room in Berlin. A young German man, Fritz Wendel, introduces him to an over-the-top young English woman, Sally Bowles. She soon takes residence in his apartment and he moves across the hall. The two become fast friends who share intimacies, but are not intimate. In an upsetting and rather shocking turn for its day, Sally reveals that she has fallen pregnant. Chris arranges an abortion for her with the help of their landlady, Fräulein Schneider. Sally recovers and shares her sorrow with her friend. They meet a string of eccentrics including a wealthy American named Clive, who bank rolls Chris and Sally's expensive taste. As political tensions in Berlin simmer, the three make plans to runaway on Clive's dime. Clive disappears leaving only a note and a few hundred marks for Sally and Chris to share. Chris and

Sally have a few couple's rows. A visit from Sally's mother necessitates that the two pretend to be engaged. The play's final scene reveals that Sally has met a man with whom she plans to go to South America. The two promise to write. The play ends with the implication that Sally will go on her South American adventure and that Chris will immortalize her in his prose.

Before the opening, Al Hirschfield published a now iconic image of the performance in the *New York Times* (see Fig. 1).<sup>20</sup> Hirschfield's line drawing depicts Harris and Prince in the original production. Prince as Christopher leans expectantly toward Harris's Sally, who holds an elegant cigarette holder in her long, spindly fingers and extends a glass (presumably) of prairie oysters, Sally's favorite dish, past Prince. Hirschfield's drawing, published as a sneak preview to the performance would have been understood by readers of the *Times*, who were familiar with Hirschfield's famous caricatures, as capturing the play's quintessence. It offers its viewers a picture of decadence, luxury, and refinement emphasized by Hirschfield's clean and swooping lines. The graceful curvature and precision of Hirschfield's drawing accentuates the sense of whimsy in the characters' lives. Hirschfield's Sally and Chris each stare into the others' eyes—Sally with a faux-stern expression as if to tease Chris, who looks altogether giddy, with playful reproach. The pictured characters are each consumed by the other without acknowledgement of his or her surroundings. Though rendered with detail, the environment—in this case, the handsomely dressed apartment—only serves to frame Sally and Chris. On the page, the characters' surroundings are literally peripheral, with the central pictorial focus of the image on Sally and Chris, paralleling the action of the stage-play, with its almost exclusive focus on the protagonists and their personal dilemmas and *not* on the political turmoil surrounding them. Viewers of Hirschfield's drawing have a better view of Chris's eyes than of Sally's. Therefore,

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<sup>20</sup> Al Hirschfield, "The Openings," *New York Times* (New York), Nov. 25, 1951.

Chris's line of focus draws us to Sally, revealing at once Sally's centrality to the story and Chris's enthusiastic support of her priority.



Figure 1. Al Hirschfeld's line-drawing from *New York Times*, November 25, 1951.

The picture conveys nothing of Berlin politics in the 1930s; this could be *any* nicely decorated apartment with an elegant woman and an eager man sitting together on a chaise longue. Only the caption below the image reveals its context: "Julie Harris and William Prince head the cast of 'I Am a Camera,' John van Druten's play based on stories by Christopher Isherwood, opening Wednesday night at the Empire Theatre. They appear as young English residents of a rooming house in Berlin in 1930. Miss Harris portrays a strumpet and Mr. Prince a

frustrated author.”<sup>21</sup> Very little of the larger socio-political context, therefore, is provided. The readers of the nation’s leading newspaper were given highly redacted (as it were) information about the play, from which we can infer little more than a sense of time and place: “English residents,” “rooming house,” “Berlin in 1930.” Each phrase tersely reveals a single element: first, that the play’s characters are members of a certain class, English ex-patriots living in Berlin; second, that they do not live luxuriously despite appearances; and third, that the play coincides with the rise of the Third Reich. The troubling politics of the play are barely touched on. The dominant idea first expressed by the image and then confirmed by its caption, the play’s focus is on “the strumpet” and the “frustrated author” who observes her.

The composition of Hirschfield’s drawing directs our attention toward the central characters of Van Druten’s play and their relationship, a move that itself parallels the focus of *I Am a Camera*—a focus that, as we know, troubled some critics who craved more overt political engagement. Before the play’s opening, Van Druten himself commented on his play’s limited perspective in an article for the times that coincided with the opening. In response to a description of *I Am a Camera* as a “mood play,” Van Druten elaborated on the concept, first citing other types of plays such as “human plays,” “strong plays,” “plot plays,” “farces,” “high comedies,” and more, culminating in a description of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* as the first “mood play.” He then defined the “mood play” as a play that lacks “plot or definitive messages” and that focuses on the relationships of the people involved. He related this idea to the “camera eye” of his play that helped him create “one portrait, taken camera-wise, of life in Berlin in 1930 and of the handful of people selected as its protagonists.”<sup>22</sup> Van Druten’s analysis of the “mood

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<sup>21</sup> Hirschfield, “The Openings.”

<sup>22</sup> John Van Druten, “Mood of the Moment: The Mood Play, The Difference, Discussing the Mood of the Moment,” *New York Times* (New York), Nov. 25, 1951, 121.

play” foreshadowed criticism that he would receive after his play’s opening, which took issue with the play’s lack of firm message, clear plot, and direct engagement with the rise of Nazism. Van Druten emphasized that “mood plays” “did not build to any specific climax; there was no organized gathering of forces; ultimately, the essential thing was the mood in which they were played. If that went over, if the audience shared it and was moved by it then the author had made the impression he desired.”<sup>23</sup> Van Druten writes of an experience that Aristotle would call catharsis. In his the mood play, Van Druten draws sympathetic portraits of human beings intended to “move” the audience. He suggests that plays like his should resonate with the audience to the degree that audience members leave the theatre changed, having undergone an experience. In this sense, the action of the “mood play” presumably does not occur on the stage, but within each audience member.

Both Hirschfield’s line drawing and Van Druten’s article, “Mood of the Moment,” tacitly acknowledged and anticipated criticism that the play was not political enough. Critic Phillip Hope-Wallace in *The Manchester Guardian* closely echoed the verdicts that Van Druten’s “mood play,” when he described *I Am a Camera* as a “half fiction, half reality” that ultimately “has no moral, makes no point, or even a gesture of summing up.”<sup>24</sup> But Hope-Wallace’s critique suggested harsher judgment on the “mood” than was evident in Van Druten’s definition of the term. This political objection is by now familiar since Isherwood was criticized for what some saw as his soft disavowal of Nazism while conversely praised for his stories’ relentlessly free-spirited characters. As we have seen, neither claim is quite true; that Isherwood’s politics are potently present, but of a subtler and more nuanced character than that

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<sup>23</sup> Van Druten, “Mood of the Moment.”

<sup>24</sup> Phillip Hope-Wallace, “‘I Am a Camera’ Isherwood’s Berlin at the New Theatre,” *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester), Mar. 13, 1954, 3.



which Isherwood's critics sought or could even detect. In this chapter, I will show how the politics of Van Druten's adaptation mirrors the complex and subtle political stance of Isherwood's original stories—and how it received comparable criticism.

In a review of *I Am a Camera*'s opening night, the influential critic Brooks Atkinson described the play as an “impromptu acting piece,” arguing that the value of the piece lies in the actors' performances rather than the substance of the play.<sup>25</sup> Though Atkinson praised Van Druten's direction and acknowledged certain features of his writing, he decided that the play itself reveals nothing of historical or social significance. In a follow-up review, published just over a week later, Atkinson somewhat redundantly praised Van Druten's comic skill, but ultimately criticized the playwright's choice to “underpla[y] the politics.”<sup>26</sup> Another critic, (“W.L.W.”) parroted Atkinson's sentiment in response to a 1955 UK touring production of *I Am a Camera*, writing that the production “all but obliterates the grey hysteria of the background of Germany going mad with fear and hatred.”<sup>27</sup> Each critic I have cited makes certain assumptions about the politics in Van Druten's work. Hope-Wallace assumes that the moral inclination of the playwright should be obvious to the audience member and that a good play will indeed include an obvious political or “moral” bent. Atkinson assumes that political theater need be suitably serious and, again, explicit in order to appropriately serve its content. And, W.L.W. assumes that Van Druten's focus (—his characters—) undermines the greater political whole (—their surroundings.) By definition, Van Druten's mood play resists these assumptions because it concerns itself quite pointedly with character, relationship, and “mood” without staging a cogent moral thesis. Rather, Van Druten informs us that the mood play is successful when it affects an

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<sup>25</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “At the Theatre,” *New York Times* (New York), Nov. 29, 1951, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “‘I Am a Camera’: Julie Harris in a Play John van Druten has Made from Isherwood's Stories,” *New York Times* (New York), Dec. 9, 1951, 127.

<sup>27</sup> W. L.W. “‘I am a Camera,’” *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester)], Nov. 22, 1955, 14.

audience member—that tone or (even less stable) feeling realizes change within an individual observer. This need not be grand, or forceful to be potent. As with Isherwood’s work, Van Druten’s is intimately political and entirely human.

Van Druten communicates the ethos of the “mood play” in the first line of *I Am a Camera*. Spoken aloud by Christopher as he reads from a manuscript, the play’s first line reads: “In the last few days, there has been a lot of Nazi rioting in the streets, here in Berlin. They are getting bolder, more arrogant. (*He stops.*) No, that’s all wrong. That’s not the right way to start. It’s sheer journalism. I must explain who it is who is telling all this” (*IAC* 9-10). The speaker, Christopher Isherwood, goes on then to reveal facts of his protagonist “a typical beachcomber of the big city” and then to share facts of his life as a struggling writer who longs to “have achieved true greatness” (*IAC* 10). Here Van Druten gives his audience a fleeting sense of the world that surrounds his character, swiftly establishing the fact that the Nazi presence in Berlin is growing. The speaker—still unnamed, Chris—is not one of “the[m],” giving the audience a sense of time, place, and politics in few words. A series of possible double-entendres makes this opening moment significant. For instance, although Chris’s “No, that’s all wrong” actually refers to his writing, the comment gives the momentary impression that the increasing boldness and arrogance of the Nazis is what’s “all wrong”—that Nazism itself, indeed is “all wrong.” This fleeting ambiguity suggests further that Chris does not ally himself with Nazi politics. Furthermore, Chris’s frustrated outburst parallels, on a smaller, individual scale, the “mood of the moment”—one of overwhelming and dangerous discontent.

But most important is the meta-theatrical double-entendre at work here. Both Van Druten and Chris seem to be deciding in this opening line that—that is, a journalistic record of the rise of the Nazis—is “not the right way to start.” Chris refers to his manuscript; Van Druten

refers to his play. Both playwright and character shift focus to their respective protagonists, allowing the people of the story to reveal themselves to their audiences, suggesting that the choice to foreground human experience tells a richer story than one that is concerned with atmosphere alone—that’s “sheer journalism.”

In a Note to Producers that precedes the body of the text in the 1983 edition of *I Am a Camera*, Van Druten addresses this criticism of his play:

That the play is plotless, at any rate in the old-fashioned sense, I agree to. But I have done my best work always without them [plots]. And they seem to be to be growing less and less necessary in the theatre... In its place, two other things seem to have become necessary—character and mood... The mood of the play—the establishment for the audience of what it felt like to be living in Berlin in 1930, and the kind of life and people that one met there, then—is its most important quality. (*IAC* 5)

Van Druten here parallels Isherwood’s focus on the people that populate the city they occupy. The playwright suggests that his focus on character and mood allows him to shape the story of time and place as it is inflected by some of its people rather than by political story of Nazism. The characters Van Druten portrays reveal the Berlin that they experience. It follows that the Berlin of which Van Druten writes is the Berlin that belongs to Sally and Chris and to which Sally and Chris belong. By extension, Van Druten’s politics are rooted not in his portrayal of Berlin’s “grey hysteria” (to borrow W.L.W.’s phrase) but in the complex and sympathetic presentations of a perceptive gay man and of a plucky young woman.

As I mentioned in my introduction, one might (and I did) characterize Sally and Chris’s relationship as unique. To be more specific, I mean that their relationship is one that is unique when considered in its context: the public sphere of the 1950s. Their curious exploits and the intensity of the feelings that each expresses to the other contribute to that uniqueness, but fail to earn the appellation ‘unique’ on their own. “At the end,” Van Druten continues in his Note,

“Chris and Sally discover that they are deeply fond of each other, that they love each other (though not in the way that stage lovers usually find each other)” (*IAC* 6). The particular uniqueness of the protagonists’ relationship comes first from Sally’s overt sexuality and candid discussion of it, as well as from the platonic comfort they share alongside mutual surprise—or the appearance of mutual surprise—that their relationship is neither sexual nor romantic. The platonic nature of their “unusual” relationship is worth exploring. Van Druten acknowledges this fact in the parlance of his time, bypassing explicit reference to sexual orientation. Instead, he rather understatedly addresses the love between a man and a woman who are not *in* love, which he mentions only parenthetically—the parenthesis relegating heterosexual desire to the status of a casual and yet interesting aside. Therefore Van Druten’s parenthetical, which explains that Sally and Chris’s “unusual” love that differs from that of “stage lovers,” underplays the fact it contains. To read their relationship as “unusual” or unique becomes a code for the fact that their relationship is not sexual. Through the nonchalance of his syntax, Van Druten hints at this code without undue emphasis.

According to Van Druten, Sally and Chris’s “unusual” story is a love story that is not romantic. That their relationship is purely platonic suggests that the character Christopher Isherwood is gay, though (as in Isherwood’s text) that is not explicitly stated. Van Druten elaborates later in his Note to Producers that Chris “is deeply fond of [Sally], but he is never physically attracted to her, nor does he find her romantic. It is essential to establish this in the first scene” (*IAC* 7). Here, Van Druten explicitly addresses physical and romantic attraction, without the equivocation of his “unusual” parenthetical. The playwright acknowledges the hetero-normative expectations of his time in the way he addresses the assumption that Chris would, typically, be attracted to Sally. Undoing that assumption is what makes the

communication of their friendship “essential.” Notably any mention of Sally’s sexual or romantic feelings toward Chris is absent. This indicates that Chris’s preferences (and not Sally’s) shape the platonic nature of his relationship to Sally. Van Druten communicates that sexual and romantic orientation are fundamental characteristics of the characters he has written without saying as much. In other words, he acknowledges queerness by implication. The atmosphere of the 1950s presumably necessitated the ambiguous reference to homosexuality that Van Druten employs. As a result, Chris’s sexual-orientation, though “essential” according to the playwright, remains only implied.

What follows is the first would-be flirtatious interaction between Sally and Christopher in the play’s first scene that Van Druten warns against misrepresenting:

SALLY. Do you ever smoke any of Fritz’s cigarettes? (*Takes holder from her handbag, fits cigarette into it and lights it.*) They’re absolutely devastating. I’m sure they’re full of opium, or something. They always make me feel terribly sensual.

CHRISTOPHER. (*Handing her the glass.*) Here you are. (*Leaves the gin bottle on the tea table.*) (IAC 16)

Sally’s language is coquettish. Intensifiers (“absolutely,” “terribly”) and absolutes (“always”) enhance her seductive language (“devastating,” “feel,” “sensual”). Her focus on the cigarette, which demonstrates that her show of sensuality is a type of performance, is itself almost meta-theatrical: it recalls the way in which drama teacher might suggest that a student adopt an “activity” that splits the focus of the monologue she performs between the text and that activity, imbuing her performance with a lived-in quality that allows for authentic moments of discovery. Sally comes to this understanding intuitively. As Sally fiddles with her cigarette, her slight distraction enhances her show of worldly magnetism. Focused on the cigarette, she seems as though she is unconcerned with Christopher’s reaction while she engages with him invitingly. She is at once charmingly attentive and blithe. Her apparent eagerness for sexual conversation

stands in contrast to her effort to appear cool. Christopher, on the other hand, ignores Sally's carefully cultivated sensuality completely. He offers her a drink and pays her dithering no attention. Christopher's matter-of-fact reaction sets a precedent for the way in which both characters will engage with sex when together—Sally performs sexual prowess while Christopher observes her unperturbed and not at all aroused.

The exchange that follows reveals the essence of Sally and Chris's relationship to sex and to each other. Having moved into Chris's apartment, where Chris sleeps in the apartment across the hall, Sally remarks that the two can commiserate:

SALLY. And you're going to be right across the hall. I took a look at the room. It's not very nice. But you can use this any time you like, you know, and then I'm low—or you are. (*Rises.*) We can just sob on each other's bosoms. (*Sally and Christopher meet in front of the couch. He gives her a drink.*) I say, Fräulein Schneider's got a big one, hasn't she? Like an opera singer, or a woman in the music halls who can make hers jump. (*Crossing to table L.*) Can Fräulein Schneider do that?

CHRISTOPHER. We might train her.

SALLY. (*Looking at the paper on the table.*) Chapter One. Are you writing a novel?

CHRISTOPHER. Starting one. (*Moves across to R. end of couch and sits lighting cigarette.*)

SALLY. (*Reading.*) "I am a Camera, with its shutter open, quite passive." Do you mean this is a story written by a camera?

CHRISTOPHER. (*Laughing.*) No, it's written by me. I'm the camera.

SALLY. How do you mean?

CHRISTOPHER. I'm the one who see s it all. I don't take part. I don't really even think. I just sort of photograph it. Ask questions, maybe. How long have you been in Germany?

SALLY. About two months. (*IAC 24*)

Here, Sally displays playful curiosity about sexually suggestive anatomy that resembles that of a child. She speaks as if she were gossiping to an adolescent friend, the two comrades in naughtiness. Her burgeoning sexuality stands in contrast with her imaginative play and the cartoonish images she constructs. For Sally, a large bosom brings up images of a comically large "opera singer" or burlesque dancer, rather than sexually explicit images. Sally forges a

connection between sexual conversation and humor, revealing her innocence. Chris is neither shocked nor offended by Sally's remarks. Instead, he responds with a quip. His clever retort lacks innuendo. He need not say more than he does: four words convey his meaning, revealing his keen sense of humor and by extension his intellect. His retort is clean like his prose. Chris and Sally enjoy platonic comfort. Chris understands Sally as she is and Sally understands Chris as he is. Together, they are perfectly content. Neither character finds the bosom arousing. There is no hint of sexual flirtation between the two in this exchange. If we accept the premise that Chris is gay, then he is unable to express his sexual interest in this scene or any. The pervasive homophobia in their respective eras silences both Christopher the character and Van Druten the playwright. Instead, Chris demonstrates a sort of mandatory non-sexuality throughout the play that is exemplified in this scene. Furthermore, his unwitting non-sexuality parallels his role as a camera: he sees all, but does not take part.

Sally's sexuality, on the other hand, is elaborately and (one can assume) purposefully amplified. Sally eagerly baits conversational partners with sexually suggestive language. In the first scene of *I Am a Camera*, Sally and Christopher witness the early courtship of their friends Fritz Wendel and Natalia Landauer—a poor German Jew who hides his Judaism and a wealthy Jewish heiress respectively. In response to Fritz's offer to walk her home, Natalie quotes a line of Faust in German that Christopher translates to English: "I am not a virgin, and I am not beautiful, and I can go home alone." Fritz replies, "Oh, but that is not true. None of it is true. Not in this case." Sally chimes in "(*Eagerly.*) You mean you think Fräulein Landauer *is* a virgin? How do you know?" (23) The italics of Sally's "*is*" sit on the page like a body in motion moving from contraction to release. The manner in which her enthusiasm for the topic of sex is marked on the page mirrors the movements of the act that beguiles her. Sally's enthusiasm for sex, sexual

conversation, and gossip is buoyant and lively. It springs off the page and imbues her character with youthful vitality and daring impropriety.

The co-existence of childish exuberance and sexual excitement might be surprising, however Van Druten himself relates the two ostensibly opposed attitudes as they are united within Sally.

In his "Note," Van Druten remarked that

Sally is a little girl, that is true; she has as one critic remarked, one foot in the nursery and one in the stews of Berlin. Both sides of her have to be shown. The nursery is marked for her by the teddy bear and the picture of Kitten's Awakening (both inventions of my own); the other side is marked by her flagrant conversation, and her total absence of any moral values on the subject of sex. (*IAC* 6)

Within and beyond the play, characters and critics censure Sally Bowles for her sexual promiscuity and for her show of it. According to U.S. film censors, *I Am a Camera* "exploit[ed] 'promiscuity without punishment.'"<sup>28</sup> However, Sally's identity is not as simplistic as her naysayers imagine. Her sexual fixation emerges in response to a fundamental existential tension between childhood and adulthood. Toward the end of the play Sally tells Chris that she has found a new lover and declares proudly, 'I've never been kissed by a beard before, I thought it would be awful. But it isn't. It's quite exciting.'" (*IAC* 83). Sally demonstrates that her childlike curiosity melds with sexual expression. Sally's performance of sexuality and her actual sexual experimentation is a product of growing up. As her self-image develops, she engages in experiments of the self. She tests boundaries and tries on a range of lifestyles and attitudes in order to deduce which fits her best. She is a little girl playing dress-up, each costume corresponding to a type of woman she thinks she might like to be. For example, just after her illegal abortion, Sally muses with perverse nonchalance,

You know, Chris, in some ways now I wish I had had that kid. The last day or two, I've been sort of feeling what it would be like to be a mother...I'd put it to

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<sup>28</sup> "U.S. Censors Ban British Film of 'I Am a Camera,'" *Daily Mail* (London), Aug. 12, 1955, 3.



bed at nights, I'd go out and make love to filthy old men to get money to pay for its clothes and food...I wouldn't think of myself at all. Just it. It must be wonderful never to think of yourself, just of someone else. I suppose that's what people mean by religion. Do you think I could be a nun, Chris? I think I rather could. All pale and pious, singing sort of faint and lovely hymns all day long. (IAC 41)

In a few short sentences, Sally tries on motherhood, sex work, and a nun's habit. None of the costumes she tries on reflect Sally as she is; rather they reveal her girlish fantasies about who and how she could be. Sally is not herself a vamp or a strumpet—archetypal figures in their own right. She is a human being playing at and playing up tropes. Paradoxically, her confidence expresses her insecurity, yearning to discover her adult identity through her portrayal of archetypes.

In a review of the 1954 West End production of *I Am a Camera* starring Dorothy Tutin, Ivor Brown, writing for *The Observer*, criticized Sally for inhabiting those tropes with such intense focus that he ignored the rest of the play. "It is wrong," Brown begins his review, "to make the worse cause seem the better; this can hardly be denied—except by lawyers and actors."<sup>29</sup> This introductory comment conveys a tone of moral judgment on which he brings to *I Am a Camera* as a whole. Brown places the play within the category of "the worse" and finds that *I Am a Camera* intends to purposefully confuse "the worse" with "the better." Brown's review seems to take issue not only with the artist but also with an uncritical audience. He continues that, "we are now in a period as tolerant as that of the Restoration and, when the artist is skillful, to enjoy all is to pardon all."<sup>30</sup> This suggests that an artist's prowess fools an audience into approving of immoral content. Brown's primary complaint is not with the aesthetic comparison between the Restoration and the 1950s, but rather with the ethical one. In Brown's

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<sup>29</sup> Ivor Brown, "Bed of Roses," *The Observer*, Mar. 14, 1954, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, "Bed of Roses."

view, both eras are comparably and troublingly “tolerant.” Brown problematizes “enjoy[ment]” of particular kinds of art because it leads to tacit endorsement of that art especially when performed persuasively by a talented artist. Brown’s separation of the aesthetic from the ethical is important because it highlights that Brown does not criticize the skill or effect of the play; rather he argues that the play is too skillful for its own good.

Brown continues with a critique that focuses squarely on Sally, revealing at once his specific prejudice as well as suggesting the effect that Van Druten’s focus on Sally had: that is, to distract from Christopher and to forestall discussion of his character.

Here is a picture, in Berlin, 1930, of a little English prostitute, a promiscuous slut, a liar, a go-getter, without the vaguest concept of decent conduct. The idea, presumably, is that the camera does not lie and does not praise or blame: it records. But in this case it is not true, for the production by Mr. Van Druten and the performance by Dorothy Tutin makes the lens rose-tinted. Here is a rosebud presentation of the trollop who is taking the primrose path, by way of careless lechery and an illegal operation, to a probably miserable and disgusting end.<sup>31</sup>

Here Brown ignores his role as a *theatre* critic in order to advance a critique Sally’s ethics—and, only by extension, of the ethics of the play. The reviewer’s sole mention of artistic value comes in his assessment of Van Druten and Tutin whose artistry we can assume he considers fine only because of the degree to which he censures their ability to carry off indecent content. The language Brown employs to describe Sally includes: “little,” “prostitute,” “promiscuous,” “slut,” “liar,” “go-getter”—a characteristic, it’s worth noting, that is considered a virtue in a man—“trollop,” “careless,” “lecher[ous],” “probably miserable,” and finally “disgusting.” In his belittling of Sally we can detect a strong self-righteous indignation. Brown’s heated language betrays a distinct emotionality in reaction to Sally’s behavior and choices. The last line of this passage, in which he assumes that a “miserable and disgusting end” will follow Sally’s “illegal

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<sup>31</sup> Brown, “Bed of Roses.”

operation,” suggests, indeed, that he hopes she will suffer an “end” such as that. That such a criticism could presumably be advanced in a major paper without expectation of controversy suggests that his attitude was pervasive at the time.

Van Druten even scripts dialogue for Sally in which she is able to rebut potential critics who might fault her for her promiscuity. At odds with her childlike attitude toward sex, Sally demonstrates an empowered self-actualization with regard to sexual activity. She recalls a scene that occurred offstage just before her entrance in which she has “a most frantic row with [her] landlady” (*IAC* 16)—one that necessitates her needing to move apartments. This event brings her to Faulein Schneider’s boarding house. As she tells her story, she observes that “I suppose in a way I may be a bit of tart... I mean, in a nice way—but one doesn’t like to be called that. Just because I brought a man home with me last night. And, anyway, I’m terribly in love with him” (17). Here, he makes a compelling and thoughtful argument against ‘slut-shaming’ long before the contemporary term was coined. Her first gesture is to reclaim the term “tart” (at least in part). She might like the idea that she intends her manner of dress to sexually excite men because of her admitted fondness for sensuality, but she also clearly disavows the moral judgment that comes with the term. She would rather find “nice[ness]” in being a tart; a niceness that the public around her clearly doesn’t associate with the term. Furthermore, she protests that spending the night with a man is not sufficient grounds for language intended to shame her. Phrased like a concession—“And, anyway”—she adds “I’m terribly in love with him.” She concludes her case with a reference to that she loves for the man she brought home—as if her love were necessary to justify her actions. The implication is that love alone can mitigate her incriminating behavior. Only in the syntax that surrounds her admission of love does the prudishness of the 1950s permeate Sally’s appeal for sexual liberation.

In the same November 29, 1951 article in which he calls *I Am a Camera* an “impromptu acting piece,” Brooks Atkinson characterized Sally Bowles with more nuance and more compassion than would Ivor Brown in 1954, while acknowledging Sally’s cloudy morals. Here Atkinson writes that, as she is portrayed by Julie Harris, Sally Bowles is “a glib, brassy, and temperamental—all cleverness, all sophistication.”<sup>32</sup> Atkinson seems to give Sally Bowles more credit than even Van Druten does. He observes in her the kind of worldly knowledge and corresponding behavior that Sally Bowles yearns to have. Apparently Ms. Harris’s performance was persuasive enough to convince even the most astute audience member of Sally’s actual “sophistication.” Atkinson’s language even gives Sally intelligence where Brown assumes she is a willing idiot. Atkinson’s characterization of Sally as “glib, brassy, and temperamental” highlights a few of her abrasive and even unpleasant qualities, but still imbues her with autonomy, strength, and smarts. To be glib is to be at once dismissive but also to be bright. To be brassy is to be grating but also to be vocal. To be temperamental is to be volatile but also to be purposefully dynamic. Certainly Atkinson’s words are not chosen solely to communicate Sally’s virtues, but they also do not isolate her vices. His criticism is fair and measured. Atkinson continues that *I Am a Camera* “is fundamentally the character sketch of an effervescent, amoral English girl who is living a Bohemian life in Berlin.”<sup>33</sup> “Amoral” is what, of course, betrays a judgment of Sally. But, Atkinson still describes her as “amoral” rather than immoral, characterizing Sally as unscrupulous rather than malevolent.

In his assessment of *I Am a Camera* beyond his initial focus on Sally Bowles, Atkinson writes that, “on the whole, Mr. Isherwood’s camera”—the character, not the writer—“shows

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<sup>32</sup> Atkinson, “At the Theatre.”

<sup>33</sup> Atkinson, “At the Theatre.”

nothing more than the harum-scarum antics of a couple of immensely likable English people, fooling around... That is why it is best to accept “I Am a Camera” as an acting piece... In view of the high quality of the workmanship, is it ungrateful to wish that ‘I Am a Camera’ had more to say in the theatre? Or that the photography were a little sharper with a wider perspective?”<sup>34</sup>

Atkinson’s praise of the fine acting he observed in Van Druten’s play reflects the playwright’s desired focus on mood and character. However, he observes frivolity alone in those characters and in that mood. He calls the content of the play “harum-scarum antics” and “fooling around.”

In the December 9, 1951 article on *I Am a Camera* that followed his review, Atkinson reconsidered his conclusion that to ask for more of the play would be ungrateful:

To report in 1951 that two English young people were not greatly disturbed in 1930 by the outbreak of Nazism in Berlin is a valid point and no doubt absolutely true. But it is impossible for the rest of us to be that detached now. And if a playwright sets his drama in Berlin in 1930 he is under implied obligation to make dramatic use of time and place.

Being funny is not enough; the need is for irony. Although Mr. van Druten has skillfully recorded the comic insignificance of the lives of his chief characters, he has not dramatized it by giving their aimless existence much perspective.<sup>35</sup>

Given time to expound upon his first take of Van Druten’s new play, Atkinson returned a week later with criticism that reflects criticism of Isherwood’s *The Berlin Stories* in the 30s and 40s. At stake in criticism of both the Van Druten adaptation and of Isherwood’s original stories is the authors’ duty to be faithful to truth and to present the political implications of Nazism with the appropriate degree of detail and solemnity. Atkinson takes the era in which he writes into account; “To report in 1951,” places a particular weight on Van Druten that did not apply to Isherwood. Van Druten must retell a painful story to an audience that has lived through the ordeal and studied it in history. Burdened with harrowing personal histories and the public pain

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<sup>34</sup> Atkinson, “‘I Am a Camera.’”

<sup>35</sup> Atkinson, “‘I Am a Camera.’”

of a nation still grieving, Van Druten's audience is unable "to be that detached now." Van Druten's use of humor without a "perspective" beyond his characters that would ground them or hold a mirror to their folly displeases Atkinson, making the playwright seem almost flippant in his portrayal of those horrible years. Yet, Atkinson's argument, in assuming that Van Druten's characters are "comically insignificant," does Chris, Sally, Fritz, Natalia, and Fräulein Schneider a disservice. Atkinson suggests that to focus on these characters is to focus on a story that is fundamentally "comically insignificant" when—as was the case with Isherwood's stories—in reality it is merely a different story than the one he expects or desires.

Nevertheless criticism of Van Druten's play failed to acknowledge the potential political significance of those stories. In a review for London's *Sunday Times*, Douglas Glass ignored plot altogether and focuses solely on the career and demeanor of the up-and-coming actress, Dorothy Tutin who was set to take over the role of Sally Bowles. In great detail he describes Tutin's "turned-up nose" and "provocative... air of saucy alertness." The actress having had "flirt[ed] with a musical career."<sup>36</sup> The language he uses to describe the actress portraying Sally Bowles's exudes sensuality and ignores substance. Glass's article reminds us that for many audience members Sally exists only as an object of girlish sexuality. Were one to read Glass's criticism alone, one might assume that *I Am a Camera* is a light-hearted flirtation more than a play. Returning to Phillip Hope-Wallace's criticism of *I Am a Camera* in *The Manchester Guardian* in 1954, the critic similarly ignored the potency of the stories and individuals that Van Druten features. He writes that, "All these people may be said to have something happen to them. But they are mere extras. The material, which is light but curiously durable theatrically considered is spun almost entirely out of the sad, silly, declassed Sally, her lies, her cheap courage, her

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Glass, "Rising Star," *Sunday Times* (London), Mar. 7, 1954, 3.

inconsequence, and her fecklessness.”<sup>37</sup> Once again criticism of the Van Druten adaptation comes down to rebuke of Sally Bowles’s morals. The rest of the play is ignored, disregarded as “mere extras.” Hope-Wallace deduces that “the material” of the play arises solely as a result of Sally’s misadventures. This assessment does wrong not only to Sally, but also to her cohort, to Van Druten’s rich cast of characters. Hope-Wallace finds the substance and plot so lacking that he wonders how they might have constituted a play.

The appraisal that the Van Druten adaptation is without a plot is a curious one because it is fundamentally untrue—and that Van Druten agrees with that claim at least in part is even more curious. The ubiquity of this claim implies that there might be something within that plot that both playwright and critic would have preferred to ignore. And indeed, both Van Druten and his critics amplified Sally’s overt sensuality while ignoring Christopher’s libido, asserting merely that Sally and Chris’s relationship is “unusual.” As a consequence of this skewed focus neither character is able to develop. Impeded by the narrow view that is necessarily applied to Van Druten’s protagonists, reviewers respond with criticism that the play is somehow lacking. The claim that the play lacks plot or fails to present the appropriate political focus is a kind of misdirection; in fact, the play presents characters that demand those who witness with them to alter their perspectives in order to engage with them completely. The shift the play necessitates is uncomfortable and therefore easily ignored. This attitude paradoxically makes sex unmentionable while standing at thematic center of the play. One could label this perspective bigoted or lazy, both might be apt; however, more precisely it arises as a result of the limits of its time. Van Druten’s adaptation wrestles with those limits.

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<sup>37</sup> Hope-Wallace, “I Am a Camera.”

The film version of *I Am a Camera*, directed by Henry Cornelius, takes the impulse to ignore what's going on too far. As necessitated by the British Board of Film Censors, the 1955 film version of the play by the same name sacrifices moral complexity and thus complexity altogether in order to privilege modesty.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, after a year-long battle with the BBFC, Cornelius's film version of *I Am a Camera* opened in October of 1955 with an X rating. The film starred the original Sally Bowles, Julie Harris, alongside Laurence Harvey as Christopher Isherwood.<sup>39</sup> Working for the BBFC, Gerald Sharpe wrote that, "While most of the objectionable dialogue from the play has gone, "so has the good moral tone together with the strong feeling of sympathy for Sally.""<sup>40</sup>

Cornelius's *I Am a Camera*, with a screenplay by John Collier, contains a familiar cast of characters—Christopher Isherwood, Sally Bowles, Fritz Wendel, Natalia Landauer, Fraulein Schneider, and Clive Mortimer, with the addition of Sally's momentary fiancé Pierre—but takes a different shape. Beginning with a literary party in London that Christopher begrudgingly attends, the film features Christopher in voice-over bemoaning that, "A gaggle of female journalists was evidence from which I gathered that some lady's murky memoirs was being foisted on the public... However, it's only civil on such occasions to learn at least the name of the unfortunate author. I could hardly believe my eyes." Christopher picks up the book. Upon glancing at the cover he utters no longer in voice over, "Sally Bowles." (*I Am a Camera* 01:57-02:24). Cornelius cuts to a close-up shot of the book's cover that features a saucy cartoon lady and the title "The Lady Goes on Hoping." Voice-over of Sally's memorable laugh is heard. Prompted by his discovery Christopher looks out the window pensively and the film becomes

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<sup>38</sup> Tony Aldgate, "I Am a Camera': Film and Theatre Censorship in 1950s Britain," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 3, Nov. 1999, 425-38.

<sup>39</sup> *I Am a Camera*, Screenplay by John Collier, Directed by Henry Cornelius, Remus Films, 1955.

<sup>40</sup> Aldgate, "Film and Theatre Censorship."



one long flashback. Christopher's clichéd pose of yearning out the window epitomizes the film's reliance on easy tropes and later farce to tell its story. In his article, "'I Am a Camera': Film and Theatre Censorship in 1950s Britain," Tony Aldgate postulates that this is the result of pressure from film censors.

In this version of Isherwood's stories, Sally and Chris are decidedly more than friends. During the film, they cavort around Berlin with the city's Bohemian types and order too many cocktails. Christopher starts a fight with a crowd of Nazis. Sally becomes pregnant presumably with his child. Christopher proposes and Sally refuses. Chris sells a book to pay for her abortion. Fickle Sally changes her mind and decides to marry Chris and keep their baby who she has named Theodore. That is, until Sally reveals that the pregnancy was all a big miscalculation—a result of her bad arithmetic—and that she is moving to Paris for her film career. The genuine drama of Van Druten's play is represented in Cornelius's film; but played for comedy, that drama is made ridiculous and trivial. The film ends back at the literary party in London. Sally and Chris reunite and Chris offers her a place in her spare room. As the screen fades to black, we hear Sally's distinctive laugh.

In a cleverly titled article, "Over-Exposed" written for the *Sunday Times*, Dylis Powell reviewed the film version of Van Druten's play after it premiered with much difficulty in 1955.<sup>41</sup> In her review, Powell acknowledged the risqué quality of Van Druten's play, which she claims to have found delightful even as the British public awaits the film version of the play amid rumors that American film audiences had not reacted positively to its release. She revealed her surprise at discovering the levity of the film adaptation, the "general intensions" of which she describes as "hilarious" considering the personal and political "sinister rumblings" of Isherwood's stories.

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<sup>41</sup> Dylis Powell, "Over-Exposed," *Sunday Times* (London), Oct. 16, 1955, 7.

She muses about the novelist's feelings as he watches adaptations of his story transform "the watchful ironic affection of the original... to burlesque." She continues with the strong assertion that she has "been defending the right of the adapter to adapt... but not when the result is emetic" as she argues is the case with this film. To totalize Powell's appraisal of the film, its farcical nature fails to capture any of Isherwood's tonal gradation that communicated his meaning. The failure of the film demonstrates the problem of misrepresenting Van Druten's characters; the slapstick enforced on them in the film does not become them.

Critical response suggests that the film version of *I Am a Camera* augments the play's selective silence by exaggerating frivolity in place of difficult content. Penelope Houston for *The Manchester Guardian* extends Powell's thinking. She states that in this film version, she misses "Sherwood's [*sic*]... sharp" and "penetrating" depiction of "pre-Hitler Berlin." She argues that in privileging "fast, wild farce," the film fails to "[establish] a time or a place" or a sense of the disaster that is to come. She concludes her review arguing that the film had failed to recreate the attitudes of the 1930s. "Deprived of their context in time," she continues, "Herr Issyvoo, conventionally the introspective young writer, and Sally Bowles, unconventionally the amoral waif, surrender a part of their own identities, [and] exist merely in the terms of a somewhat shabby comedy."<sup>42</sup> The film adaptation accentuates the ways in which Van Druten's play and his critics were already reducing Sally and Chris to existing archetypes. Houston argues that Christopher and Sally only sacrifice a "part of their identities," but I would argue that confined to tropes, Sally and Chris lose their humanity because they are stripped of nuance.

Though exaggerated in the film, the choice to ignore or to disproportionately amplify certain characteristics of Sally and Chris is first advanced by Van Druten—unwitting though that

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<sup>42</sup> Powell, "Over-Exposed."

choice may have been—and by reviews of his work. The film enhances what Van Druten already does, which is to accentuate or underplay certain features of his characters to make his play agreeable to an audience of his era. This type of misrepresentation is subtler and therefore harder to identify than that which occurs in the film. The film attempts to fit the same characters into the framework of a “comedy,” a framework they resist because they were molded for drama. Van Druten’s play similarly attempts to force categorical definition upon his characters so that they become less than they are.

I return now to a discussion of sexual politics within the play. The play implies, and Van Druten explicitly demands, that Chris and Sally must be understood to be mere friends. They are living together, but not sleeping together. An intimate relationship between a man and woman in which there is no sexual relationship reads as a sort of code for Christopher’s gayness. A reviewer for *The Manchester Guardian*, N.S. wrote that, “this affair is just a little embarrassing in its brother-and-sisterly appeal and in its assumption that the dedicated artist is either a bit above or a bit below the right true end of love.”<sup>43</sup> N.S. seems to boil Chris and Sally’s lack of sexual chemistry down to the former’s artistry. Though unspoken in the play, the real-life Isherwood’s homosexuality was a widely known fact. Moreover, his namesake in *The Berlin Stories* also explicitly outs himself in the text as I mentioned in my previous chapter. Where in *The Berlin Stories* gayness and gay culture is nuanced in its subtlety while still potently present, in *I Am a Camera* gayness exists only in code. The absence of gayness in the play parallels the absence of gayness as a term in the play’s critical reception. And yet despite the silence that surrounds one type of sexuality in *I Am a Camera*, a great deal of noise surrounds the other. Sally’s sexuality, in sharp contrast to Chris’s, is over-the-top and almost too obvious.

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<sup>43</sup> N.S., “I Am A Camera,” *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester), Sept. 17, 1953, 3.

Furthermore, the conversations that surround Sally's sexuality within and in response to the play necessarily drown out any discussion of Chris's.

In a 1955 review for *The Manchester Guardian*, N.S. writes that "the aim" of *I Am a Camera* is "to concentrate on upon the impact of a single character. It is Sally Bowles's play."<sup>44</sup> The effect of Van Druten's framing of Sally and Christopher beside and against each other is potently clear in N.S.'s review. Sally wholly overshadows her partner. N.S.'s comment suggests that the intense focus on Sally enacts a kind of erasure upon Christopher. When N.S. acknowledges Christopher it is only to say that he "soliloquizes himself into a permanently frustrated mood of creation."<sup>45</sup> N.S. reduces Christopher to his creative mind. Christopher's artistry here can be read as another code for homosexuality. Confined to internal conflict, Christopher is understood as an outsider. Like the Peter Wilkinson character from Isherwood's "On Reugen Island: Summer 1931," Van Druten's Christopher character is replaced by his thinking head. N.S. ignores the fact that Christopher might be plagued by another kind of frustration altogether—and by his society's reaction to that frustration.

The code of "uniqueness" that surrounds Sally and Chris's relationship does not actually suggest that Chris is not sexual as it might seem, but rather that they are not sexual *together*. Van Druten's approach to his portrayal of each character's sexuality positions them as opposites. Sally is sexually active, but innocent while Chris is sexually inactive, but worldly. As such, Sally and Chris are inversions of each other, but they also less obviously reflect each other. In the same way that Sally is made to perform sexuality, Christopher is made to perform non-sexuality. They both perform a version of themselves that they think will allow them to get by, which is

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<sup>44</sup> N.S., "Manchester Opera House "I Am a Camera," *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester), Mar. 22, 1955, 5.

<sup>45</sup> N.S., "Manchester Opera House."

itself a kind of meta-theatre. Van Druten infantilizes both characters by dressing Sally as a little girl in a tart's clothing and removing Christopher from the sexual domain altogether. Sally is taken to be a child while Chris is almost pre-sexual as if to disqualify both from the arena of sexual politics. The attempt to deny both characters entrance into that arena stages before an audience the culture of evasion and silence that surrounds what would have been considered considered 'deviant' sexual practice: pre-marital and gay sex. Both characters represent types of outlaw sexuality. Whereas Isherwood uses complex portrayals of gay characters to imply a political stance, Van Druten conceals Chris's sexuality within the culture of silence that surrounds homosexuality in the 1950s and invests Isherwood's mode of political engagement in his presentation of Sally's sexuality.

## 1960s & 70s: “Come Out” to the Cabaret, Old Chum

### THE MUSICAL (1966)

*A vamp.* It’s familiar. It references a polka, but inverts its two-one rhythm, giving it the syncopated quality of jazz. This song is brassier than its predecessors. The repeated musical phrase gives us a sense of time and place: Western Europe; the jazz era; somewhere that reflects and refracts the world outside it; that upsets established modes of being; that comments upon them with cheek; and that shifts the paradigm toward fun. A man made up like puppeteer’s dummy welcomes us coyly. He is the Master of Ceremonies—Emcee for short. A doe eyed, Judy Garland type (even more-so in the next decade) in a tilted bower hat and silk pajamas accompanies him, followed by a train of Kit Kat Boys and Girls dressed in art deco underwear. This is the Kit Kat Klub.<sup>46</sup>

*Cabaret*, a musical version of Isherwood’s tales with a book by Joe Masteroff, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, and direction by Harold Prince, opened on Broadway on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1966 at the Broadhurst Theater. *Cabaret*’s script immediately implicates the audience. A note that follows the setting—“Berlin, Germany,” “1929-1930. Before the start of the Third Reich”—reads: “There is no curtain. As the audience enters the theatre, the stage is bare and dark. Street lamps on both sides of the stage recede dimly into the distance. A large mirror hanging center stage reflects the auditorium, thus allowing the audience to see itself. A spiral staircase is on the left side of the proscenium arch” (Masteroff). The lack of a curtain indicates that the Broadhurst has itself turned into the Kit Kat Klub. The audience on that street

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<sup>46</sup> "'Wilkommen' - Cabaret (Original Broadway Production, 1966)." Video file, 4:49. YouTube. Posted by Hapology Kloof, June 14, 2013. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kghMESXA9HU>.

in New York in 1966 will be transported to a whole-in-the-wall club in Berlin that roared thirty-six years earlier. The curtain's absence dissolves the space assumed between performers and audience, absorbing theatergoers into the Bohemian fold. A mirror facing the audience reminds us that we are witnesses to the injustices we will watch onstage—even making us complicit. Trapped in our seats by theatrical convention, we are forced to observe our own inaction. Given the famous ethical conundrum familiar from the history of World War II and the holocaust, the mirror problematizes the act of witnessing. By forcing us to look at ourselves, the mirror does not allow us the pretense of being passive witnesses. Instead, the audience parallels the great moral failing of those who observed and ignored Nazism in an act of cowardice and self-preservation. The use of the mirror is one of the most striking examples of how stylization in this staging serves a political end. Street lamps remind us that we are in a city that is “reced[ing]” like the “dim” light. Masteroff's choice to use lighting to point the audience toward the “distance,” pulls them at once toward a distant past—that of Weimar Berlin—and a near future—the rise of the Third Reich. Foreboding looms in “dim,” “distant” light. Standing in contrast to the street lamps' naturalism is the spiral staircase situated “on the left side of the proscenium arch.” The staircase and the manner of its placement represent the Kit Kat Klub as well as theatrical convention. Before it even begins, *Cabaret's* script establishes the coexistence and juxtaposition of naturalism within a stylized, musical world.

Masteroff, Kander, and Ebb's musical constantly negotiates the balance between naturalism and stylization. Much of the criticism that had surrounded adaptations of Isherwood's work prior to *Cabaret* problematized the adaptors' choice to privilege focus on the main characters' personal lives above the Nazi threat. Ultimately the existing debate posed the question for *Cabaret's* creators: How should one attend to historical context without disturbing

the “mood play”? The 1966 musical tries to solve the criticism that demands that the “mood play” should be fitted into its historical context by splitting the difference between the rise of totalitarianism and the lives of its main characters. *Cabaret* attempts this equilibrium with the introduction of Jewish characters to the musical’s sub-plot, with the decadent frame of the Kit Kat Klub as a form of social, political, and dramaturgical commentary, and with the musical genre itself.

Traditionally musical theater seamlessly integrates musical numbers into dramatic scenes. These musical numbers are not set apart from the scenes; they are contoured to the existing dramatic landscape. Characters sing unselfconsciously and almost always without awareness that they are singing. They sing in order to progress the plot and to express emotion that cannot be conveyed in words alone. As a result, musical singing is highly stylized and removed from naturalism. Kander and Ebb use this convention of musical theater in order to synthesize their focus on character and historical context. Stylized musical numbers clearly refer to specific historical moments: for example, the singing of “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” an imitation of a Nazi anthem written for the musical by Kander and Ebb, a Jewish songwriting team.

Some context is required to make sense of the following analysis. Cliff Bradshaw, an American writer, has found lodging with Fraulein Schneider, an elderly German landlady, as he toys with his novel and gives English lessons to native Berliners. This character is familiar, most closely resembling the Christopher Isherwood character of previous adaptations, only this time he is American and definitely straight. At Schneider’s boarding house, he meets Sally Bowles, a young English singer at the Kit Kat Klub, with whom he enters a sexual and romantic relationship. He also meets Fraulein Kost, a German sex worker who disguises her line of work with a series of comical gags. One of Cliff’s students, Ernst Ludwig, involves Cliff in a



mysterious and financially lucrative package delivery enterprise that seems to relate vaguely to Ernst's politics. Cliff asks that Ernst not reveal too much lest it be disagreeable or even incriminating. Having returned from Paris after delivering a package for Ernst, Cliff learns that Fraulein Schneider is engaged to be married to their endearing, older Jewish neighbor, Herr Schultz. Sally and Chris persuade Schultz and Schneider to throw an engagement party to celebrate their coming union.

The 1966 musical, which confines queerness to the Emcee and the Kit Kat Klub, is vastly more hetero-normative than *The Berlin Stories*. The musical fundamentally alters the relationship between Sally and Chris, now Cliff Bradshaw. Where it was unimaginable in Isherwood's text and explicitly denied by Van Druten, Cliff Bradshaw and Sally Bowles are romantically involved in the musical. Cliff might even be the father of Sally's aborted baby. Written for the "Drama mailbag section of the *New York Times*, an anonymous reader writes "Even though Sally and Chris lived together, they were not romantically or sexually involved with each other and he was an almost unwilling—if fascinated—witness to her kooky misadventures. He was emphatically not the father of her aborted child."<sup>47</sup> The musical's departure from this fact of the novel and of the play has the effect of removing queerness from the main narrative altogether. The reader continues, "In introducing an intimate relationship between these characters, Mr. Masteroff has achieved the incredible feat of turning the irresistible Sally into a selfish brat and the abortion...not just unsympathetic but offensive."<sup>48</sup> The anonymous writer focuses her discussion of the effect of the relationship on Sally Bowles and not on Cliff Bradshaw, illustrating that to her mind the fault of the relationship and the burden of pregnancy lies with the woman. That the

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<sup>47</sup> "Is Jill Hawthorn to Blame?" *New York Times* (New York), Dec. 11, 1966, 166.

<sup>48</sup> "Jill Hawthorn," *New York Times*.

writer focuses on the effect of the relationship on Sally demonstrates her unwillingness, inability, or simply failure to acknowledge the effect it has on queer representation in the text. This is indicative of the era in which she writes. The musical adapts the subplot originated in *The Berlin Stories* and drawn in finer detail in *I Am a Camera* that centers Fritz Wendel and Natalia Landauer's romance with the story of Herr Schultz and Fräulein Schneider's. The musical replaces the taboo of queer love with focus on love that reaches across ethnic lines. The effect is to move anti-Semitism to the center of the musical, when it had been more peripheral in previous adaptations.

I return now to my discussion of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me." A group of Nazis interrupt the engagement party led by Ernst Ludwig with a swastika armband. The shocking presence of Nazi imagery reveals Ernst Ludwig's political leanings. Targeted harassment (anti-Semitism directed toward Herr Schultz) disguised as a show of bravado makes way for the singing of the Nazi-anthem. In a moment of synoptic narrative, the song represents at once the present moment, the engagement party, and the rapid rise of Nazism in Berlin that surrounds the main characters. We perceive the rise of the Third Reich through rich melody that alludes to a nostalgic past and with lyrics that refer to reclaiming greatness:

The branch of the linden is leafy and green  
 The Rhine gives its gold to the sea  
 But somewhere a glory awaits unseen  
 Tomorrow belongs to me. (Masteroff, 1.13.72)

As the small group of Nazi intruders encourage their friends to join them, any semblance of gentleness that the song might have possessed disappears and becomes imposing. With the lyrics "Arise, Arise," (1.13.72) Fraulein Kost, who has joined Ernst and his Nazi cohort in singing, encourages the rest of the party to join their song. The stage direction that describes this action reads, "The guests join the singing—their voices growing louder and louder, even rather

frightening. Only FRAULEIN SCHNEIDER, HERR SCHULTZ, CLIFF and SALLY remain outside the circle” (1.13.72). The haunting quality of the voices that grow increasingly “louder” and become “frightening” demonstrates the terror of atrocity that is to come. Each additional voice adds to the national threat. This representation of a violent public is enacted within the private sphere. Despite the intimidation of the sound and images featured onstage, the song adopts a surprising elegiac quality. Though the lyrics celebrate the rise of a nationalist order, the sadness of witnessing the “outsid[ers]” in the context of synoptic narrative reminds the audience of the lives that will be lost and of the lives already lost as result of this particular brutality.

Masteroff, Kander, and Ebb blend naturalism and stylization in order to stage the popularization of Nazism. Naturalism comes with Ernst Ludwig’s entrance and with the abrupt presence of Nazism on stage in small numbers. The number of actors who will accompany Ernst can vary, but Ernst and his crew of Nazi thugs represent darkening political attitudes on a personal level. Once Masteroff, Kander, and Ebb have rooted the rise of totalitarianism in reality (on the individual scale), they illustrate the Nazi’s growing numbers with music—high stylization. This blend of two artistic methodologies, naturalism and stylization, allows for the portrayal of the gradual development of political turmoil into crimes against humanity to occur onstage. The re-telling of the years-long atrocity is expressed potently onstage through the compression inherent to synoptic narrative. This degree of remove from reality allows for the song to exist metaphorically so that it represents lived events with fewer bodies and fewer voices than in reality. However, the power and conviction of those bodies and voices exhibit with striking verisimilitude the strength and evil that they represent.

The irony of the choice to blend naturalism and stylization is that there is no attempt to present events documentarily—with strict adherence to historical fact. Naturalism is often

equated with “truth.” However, stylization in this instance positions itself more closely to historical fact. Writing for the *New York Times*, the critic Dan Sullivan posited that, “the contrast” between “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” and the rest of *Cabaret*’s jazz score “makes clear, as no history book could, the initial appeal of the Nazi movement. Mr. Kander deserves a prize for historic perception and artistic sensitivity in his refusal to bring on his villains with the standard, brutal newsreel march.”<sup>49</sup> The constraints of theater as a medium restrict the naturalistic portrayal of the rise of the Third Reich on a public scale. Such an endeavor would require a piece of long-form, endurance theater: a piece that lasted years and that required so many actors that it is virtually inconceivable. Stylization is necessary to solve this problem of scale. The choice made by Kander, which Sullivan praised, is to use music to convey this truth in a manner that is original, avoiding hackneyed tropes. In order to get at the “truth” of the historical moment, the burden of “truthful” representation, which was the chief concern of moralistic critics that predate *Cabaret*, is entirely lifted and replaced by stylization.

A few of the musical numbers, however, are diegetic—songs that are self-consciously presented as musical numbers performed by and for the characters within the larger narrative. An example of a familiar diegetic musical number is Captain Von Trapp’s singing of “Eidelweiss” in *The Sound of Music*; Von Trapp knows that he is singing in front of an audience of his family, who are aware that they are witnessing a performance. (With this we may contrast the young Maria’s performance of “The Hills Are Alive” in the same musical, in which the musical number flows “naturally” from her emotional state atop the mountain.) The musical numbers performed at the Kit Kat Klub are self-conscious performances. Klub performers do not sing to move the

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<sup>49</sup> Dan Sullivan, “Recordings: Two from Broadway,” *New York Times* (New York), Dec. 18, 1966, X25.

plot forward, but to entertain their audience and to elicit a response from it. The show's first number, "Willkommen," which is sung directly to the (presumably multilingual) audience is a good example in *Cabaret* of the diegetic song. Throughout, the Emcee and the ensemble behind him engage with the audience in a number of languages, using the second person in each:

Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome  
 Fremde, Etranger, Stranger  
 Glücklich zu sehen  
 Je suis enchanté  
 Happy to see you  
 Bleibe, reste, stay  
 Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome  
 Im Cabaret, au Cabaret, to Cabaret! (1.1.1)

Each line of the song is repeated three times: first in German, then in French, and finally in English. "Willkommen" welcomes its international audience directly. The effect of repetition in translation is to enhance the singers' enthusiasm and to democratize "Willkommen" for a broader audience. Despite the exoteric gesture that makes the song understandable to many, the use of the second person pronoun "you" addresses the individual. The song's invitation to participate is intimate. The Emcee goes on to directly address questions to the audience: "Wie geht's? Comment ca va? Do you feel good?," "So—life is disappointing?," and "You don't believe me?" (1.1.1-2). Interrogative direct address suggests that the speaker genuinely seeks a response from his listener. While the manner of address is particularized, the content of the questions are general and could be (read: should be) universally applied to all audience members. The balance the song strikes between universally shared and personal experience signals that the Kit Kat Klub is at once focused on the individual and aware of itself in a global context. With the subtle establishment of this conceit, the Klub is able to involve itself in all things private and political.

Diegetic musical numbers create within the Kit Kat Klub a stylized vehicle for the political surround. Because diegetic musical numbers can operate within naturalism, one might assume that they are exclusively naturalistic. However, in *Cabaret* even the diegetic musical numbers possess a degree of stylization because they comment on the lives of the main characters outside the club. The Emcee in particular exemplifies and contributes to the sense of the Klub's extraordinary awareness of realities beyond its walls. He sings frequently in reaction to events outside the Klub that immediately precede his songs, imbuing him with omniscience that sets him apart from the musical's other characters. At the beginning of Act 2, Fraulein Schneider reveals her fears about the growing Nazi threat to Herr Schultz:

Schneider: I saw that one can no longer dismiss the Nazis. Because suddenly they are my friends and neighbors. And how many others? And—if so—is it possible they will come to power?"

Schultz: And you will be married to a Jew.

Schneider: I need my license to rent my rooms! If they take it away... (2.2.3)

Schultz assures her that their fondness for each other should not be sacrificed to the threat of Nazism. "Governments come. Governments go" he insists, "How much longer can we wait?" (2.2.3). Schultz's reply is at once reassuring and heartbreaking understood in historical context. His optimism is futile and his faith is ill conceived. The Emcee knows this.

Immediately after Schultz's affecting scene with Schneider, the Emcee "enters, walking hand-in-hand with a gorilla. The gorilla is really rather attractive—as gorillas go. She wears a chic little skirt and carries a handbag" (2.3.5). The implication here is that the gorilla is the Emcee's beloved. Because of the placement of this image in the musical's structure, the Emcee's relationship we have just seen in the scene before. The stage directions are cute and tongue-in-cheek. The authorial voice resembles free-indirect discourse, adopting the amused and mocking tone of someone in on the joke. While the stage directions convey humor, they also betray

prejudice revealed by the unspoken comparison being made. The Emcee, who performs puppy love, shares in that meanness. He sings the song “If You Could See Her” to his coy and girlish gorilla. Innocently, the Emcee begins,

I know what you’re thinking—  
 You wonder why I chose her  
 Out of all the ladies in the world.  
 That’s just a first impression—  
 What good’s a first impression?  
 If you knew her like I do  
 It would change your point of view.  
 If you could see her through my eyes,  
 You wouldn’t wonder at all.  
 If you could see her through my eyes,  
 I guarantee you would fall like I did. (2.3.5)

The song is written like a quaint vaudeville number. Its melody is simple and doting. Its tune is consistent, even a bit predictable except for a few end phrases, “like I do,” that give the song charming momentum. He continues,

I understand your objection,  
 I grant you the problem’s not small.  
 But if you could see her through my eyes,  
 ... She wouldn’t look Jewish at all! (2.3.6)

The song’s final line is haunting. It cements the prejudice that is implied by the song’s position within the play. “If You Could See Her” participates in anti-Semitism. But considered on a meta-textual level, the song, which appears to make a mockery of Jews, also makes a mockery of anti-Semites. The song itself is a joke and the Emcee who sings it is made-up like a clown. Moreover, the lyrics of the song encourage open-mindedness in the face of a universally discouraged relationship. The final line, which could be read hatefully, might also serve to remind the audience how ready it is to laugh at blatant discrimination when bigotry is framed as joke. The inflection of the final line depends on the characterization of the Emcee. Writing for London’s *Times*, Irving Wardle observed that the “leering master of ceremonies... pathetic at the beginning

takes on the menace of a death's head, as he performs a *pas de deux* with a gorilla."<sup>50</sup> Wardle's response suggests that the 1968 West End production, starring a young Judi Dench as Sally Bowles and Barry Dennen as the Emcee, uses the song's ominous undertones in order to encourage the impression of the Emcee as a devious fellow. Relying on the script alone, however, the Emcee's precise attitude toward Jews and anti-Semites remains ambiguous. This ambiguity creates interpretive space for both the actor playing the role (Dennen in the UK, and Joel Grey on Broadway) and the audience watching him to define the Emcee's attitude. Nevertheless, the Emcee's apparent omniscience roots him firmly in the role of the club master and relates him suspiciously, even eerily, to the events that unfold outside the club.

Though the Emcee's primary mode of editorial commentary is song, it is not his only method. He also inserts himself in unexpected places. At the conclusion of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me,"

the EMCEE appears at the top of the spiral stairs—puffing on a cigar. He takes in the scene: FRAULEIN SCHNEIDER and CLIFF watching the singers with great concern—HERR SCHULTZ and SALLY laughing, unaware of what is happening. As the EMCEE descends the stairs the fruit shop vanishes. The people on stage freeze against a black background. The EMCEE slowly crosses the stage—looking at everyone. Then he turns to the audience. He shrugs, he smiles, and exits. (1.13.73)

The Emcee seems unaffected by and yet scrupulous in his consideration of what he witnesses. His attention to his cigar, his shrug, and finally his smile stand in contrast to his slow and careful cross as he "look[s] at everyone." His role as the only moving figure in this tableaux is to observe and to pass judgment. As the Master of Ceremonies, his behaviors suggest to the audience how we might or should react. And yet, we are unsure whether he is a malevolent or benevolent presence as he moves through space and changes its pitch with his reaction to it.

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<sup>50</sup> Irving Wardle, "Broadway View of Berlin," *Times* (London, UK), Feb. 29, 1968, 15.



Perhaps as a result of his omniscience, or maybe in conjunction with it, he has the power to shape what he sees after he has seen it. *Cabaret*'s script does not impose a strict interpretive lens in relation to how the Emcee should be played, but rather privileges ambiguity by revealing constant contradictions within the Emcee.

The Emcee is signaled as other both by his ever-watching eye and the power he has to manipulate and comment upon the circumstances of the musical. Much like the code of unusualness that Van Druten establishes in *I Am a Camera* as a signal for Christopher's homosexuality, the Emcee, coded as other, represents queerness, which is otherwise unrepresented in the musical. The Emcee is never explicitly referred to within the queer community. (Although, in the 1993 UK revival and the 1998 Broadway revival, the Emcee, portrayed by Alan Cumming, reveals that he wears a yellow star and a pink triangle in the musical's conclusion, indicating that he is Jewish and gay. Silence precedes the heartbreaking button at the end of the finale in which the Emcee sings "Auf wiedersehen / A bientot." With a mischievous grin Cumming removes his leather jacket in a final strip tease that exposes his striped pajamas, his identifying badges, and his horrible fate.)<sup>51</sup> Though his sexual orientation is never explicitly addressed, he is unambiguously sexual. Lines like the following from his song "Two Ladies" reveal this:

EMCEE:	We switch partners daily To play as we please.
LADIES	Twosie beats onesie, But nothing beats threes.
EMCEE:	I sleep in the middle.
FIRST LADY:	I'm left.
SECOND LADY:	And I'm right.

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<sup>51</sup> "Alan Cumming: Cabaret Ending." Video file, 5:17. YouTube. Posted by Myzaichev, December 3, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2ETsQ-DveY>.

EMCEE:                   But there's room on the bottom if you drop in some night.  
(1.7.38)

Because he is not explicitly identified as queer but as unequivocally sexual, he is a figure of sexual ambiguity. The ambiguity of his sexual orientation encourages its playful expression. (His gender expression is similarly unfettered by constraints of masculinity or femininity. He dances somewhere in between fashioning himself in stage make-up and in masculine dress.) Some of his first lines include “In here life is beautiful—the girls are beautiful—even the orchestra is beautiful!” (1.1.1). This line plays on hetero-normative assumptions. The Emcee extends his assumed attraction to the girls to the “beautiful orchestra” that might be composed of players of any gender. We understand the Emcee to be a figure of democratization. He shares himself with everyone and invites everyone to share themselves with him: “Meine Damen *und* Herren—Mesdames *et* Messieurs—Ladies *and* Gentlemen!” (1.1.1). As a figure of unself-conscious licentiousness and joyful play, the Emcee delights sexual expression as he toys with social norms that relate to performance and identity.

To feature such a character might be considered a boon to the LGBTQ community—especially in the 1960s—however, despite the fact that the Emcee relishes what makes him other, he is still coded as *other*, setting him apart from the rest of the musical. The character description written for him as he walks onstage to begin the show reads: “He is a bizarre little figure—much lipstick, much rouge, patent-leather hair parted in the middle. He walks toward the foot lights and greets the audience” (1.1.1). The stage directions clearly allude to the Emcee’s otherness; he is “bizarre.” Despite his strangeness, his small stature establishes with a physical cue that he is non-threatening. (Much like Arthur Norris of Isherwood’s stories.) The description of his excessive make-up resembles that of a doll, suggesting that he is an emblem of the club’s unreality or stylization. His “patent-leather” hair with its glossy-finish suggests artifice—highly

manicured to the degree of resembling plastic. He is stylized in order to create a cultivated and purposeful persona. The extent of the Emcee's stylization, however, is also dehumanizing. In his review of London's 1968 production, Wardle wrote that the Emcee resembles "a subtly deformed Grosz cartoon, with a twisted rosebud mouth, rouged cheeks, and an ill-fitting toupee."<sup>52</sup> Wardle's diction intimates that the Emcee's stylization is almost disfiguring. The Emcee is a living caricature.

Somewhat confusingly, the Emcee—the only figure of queerness within the text—possesses an unparalleled omniscience that allows him to comment on the world beyond him. The musical might suggest that the Emcee's omniscience represents that the subversive power of marginalized groups. By the same token, however, if we understand the Emcee's power to be cruel, which we might, then the musical mistakenly and disappointingly connects cloudy morals if not corruption to queer representation. Unquestionably, the Emcee represents "decadence" in the text. In Isherwood's stories that "decadence" was also connected to gay culture, while in Van Druten's it accompanied the lavishness and eccentricity of Sally, Chris, and their gang. The musical creates a space for otherness but also distances itself from that otherness by making the Emcee a sort of implicit freak-show.

The Emcee's ambiguity, otherness, and haunting omniscience furnish critical interpretations—like Irving Wardle's—that he is nefarious. In a review titled, "The Theatre: 'Cabaret' Opens at the Broadhurst," theater critic Walter Kerr wrote that *Cabaret's* "marionette's eye view of a time and place in our lives that was brassy, wanton, carefree and doomed to crumble is brilliantly conceived."<sup>53</sup> Kerr's riff on Isherwood's camera eye makes direct reference

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<sup>52</sup> Irving Wardle, "Broadway View of Berlin."

<sup>53</sup> Walter Kerr, "The Theater: 'Cabaret' Opens at the Broadhurst," *New York Times* (New York), Nov. 21, 1966, 62.

to the Emcee's oddity and underscores the power of his commentary. Kerr's assessment of the play demonstrates that the audience understands the story through his perspective. Moreover, Kerr subtly connects the Emcee's debauchery—his “carefree” “wanton[ess]” that colors the musical's atmosphere—to the dissolve of society. In other words, the Emcee epitomizes *Cabaret's* “decadence.” Kerr's word “marionette” succinctly captures a question that is fundamental to *Cabaret*: Who is the puppeteer and who is the dummy? A marionette on strings cannot manipulate itself. The Emcee influences and reacts to his world, while his world influences and reacts to him. “The story line,” Kerr continues, “embrace[s] everything from Jew baiting to abortion. But it has elected to wrap its arms around all that was troubling and all that was intolerable with a demonic grin, an insidious slink, and... painted on charm.”<sup>54</sup> Kerr's description of the story line as that which “wraps its arms around all that was troubling” contains adjectives that more aptly describe the Emcee than any other character in the musical or the story line. Kerr's string of descriptors reads almost like a metonymic portrayal of the Emcee: “grin,” “slink,” and “charm.” That charm is “painted on” makes direct reference to the Emcee's make-up. As he is characterized here, the Emcee is encroaching, leering, and cunning. Kerr's interpretation taints the Emcee with menace.

Seen through this lens, the Emcee becomes an untrustworthy entertainer. Kerr's evaluation substantiates my instinct that the musical suggests, at least in part, that we should be suspicious of the Emcee. But can he be held accountable for the events that unfold? A puppet, that is an extension of its puppeteer, cannot act alone. Kerr writes that, “Mr. Grey is cheerful, charming, soulless and conspiratorially wicked... He is the gleeful puppet of pretended joy, sin

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<sup>54</sup> Kerr, “The Theatre.”

on a string.”<sup>55</sup> Kerr’s analysis depicts the Emcee as false and empty like a puppet, but not as innocent. “No matter what is happening during the evening, he is available to make light of it, make sport of it, make macabre gaiety of it.”<sup>56</sup> If anything the Emcee is reliable. Kerr’s use of anaphora syntactically parallels the Emcee’s consistent choice to make “light” of all that is dark. In other words, the Emcee can and does act. Ultimately, Kerr’s characterization of Joel Grey’s Emcee recognizes him as other and directs that otherness toward “wickedn[ess].” While this is at once a reflection of the Emcee and of *Cabaret*, it is also a reflection of the audience member that so interprets him.

In another letter addressed to the editor of the *New York Times*, Rose Alexander posed many critical questions to adaptors of Isherwood’s work: “Why a musical in the year 1966 concerning pre-Nazi Germany?... Is Cabaret nostalgic? Or are we being brilliantly warned that perhaps it might be time for us to learn from the past? What about the Swastika and anti-Semitism here at home?”<sup>57</sup> The anonymous author addresses “thoughtless theater-go[ers]” who ignore the musical’s resonances in her time and addresses the musical’s closeness to the politics of her era with a bitter, sarcastic tone. She then adopts the voice of one of those theatergoers, arguing that fascism could not again “rea[r] its head” in Germany. “Nonsense. We brought them to economic prosperity. They’re on our side now... It couldn’t happen. [And] not here. Not in America. After all, we celebrate Christmas as a national holiday.”<sup>58</sup> Alexander’s facetiousness gets at the inclination she perceives in her society to ignore the growing threat of fascism in order to promote an idealized idea of life in America. Her bitter irony skewers that vision.

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<sup>55</sup> Kerr, “The Theatre.”

<sup>56</sup> Kerr, “The Theatre.”

<sup>57</sup> Rose, Alexander, “Is Jill Hawthorn to Blame?” *New York Times* (New York), Dec. 11, 1966, 166.

<sup>58</sup> Alexander, “Jill Hawthorn.”

Though it does not directly reference political movements of the 1960s like the Civil Rights Movement or Second-Wave Feminism, Atkinson's review of *Cabaret*, which implies a parallel between Germany in 1930 and the United States in 1966, advises readers that the musical articulates a stance against hate and discrimination fit for 1960s America.

#### THE FILM (1972)

In 1969, W.H. Auden—Christopher Isherwood's friend with whom he lapped up 1930s Berlin and later immigrated to the United States—published a poem titled "I Am Not a Camera" ostensibly in response to Isherwood's famous line that "I am a camera" (*TBS* 207) and to the series of adaptations it spurred. Despite the direct contradiction to Isherwood's claim that Auden's title suggests, the thesis of his poem corroborates the theory of Isherwood's implicitly political prose that I have posited. I argue that Isherwood uses the pose of an objective camera in order to distract readers from the politics implicit to his perspective. In his poem, Auden writes "To call our sight Vision / implies that, to us, / all objects are subjects."<sup>59</sup> Auden suggests that to adopt the pose of a camera is "To call our sight Vision." The poet delineates "sight from" "Vision," calling into question the distinction he observes between them. A capital letter invests "Vision" with the quality of a proper noun as it might be capitalized in an early modern text. "Vision" has a weight beyond "sight," suggesting that "sight" implies only the physical sense while "Vision" connotes heightened perception. "Vision," which contains sight, reaches beyond that ability into the future, while also conveying a particularly vivid or apt mental picture of the present. In other words "sight" understood as "Vision," changes the thing perceived. Auden suggests that camera "Vision" changes that thing from "object" to "subject[t]." As an "object" a

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<sup>59</sup> W.H. Auden, "I Am Not a Camera," *Auden's Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson, New York: Vintage, 1991, 840.

thing perceived is entirely passive, whereas “subject”-ness imbues it with the capacity for action. Moreover, within the grammatical metaphor Auden constructs, to see something as a “subject” suggests that it parallels the part of speech upon which the rest of the sentence is dependent. In other words, the “subject” is at the center of things and the camera focuses that center.

Auden’s first stanza reflects Isherwood’s prose in that both demonstrate the implicit subjectivity of the camera eye. The camera frames and determines subject-ness as well as subjectivity. The culture of the of the late 60s and early 70s not only allows, but also forces Auden to acknowledge that subjectivity where Isherwood could not and did not explicitly. In a November 15, 1971 interview at Swarthmore College, Auden explains that to his mind “the two most wicked inventions are the internal combustion engine and the camera.” When asked why he thought the camera was evil, Auden replied,

It turns all fact into fiction to begin with. People see movies of people being burned up in Vietnam. It is just like a movie. They don't react anymore. The camera is all right with comic subjects, but sorrow and suffering and grief it must degrade. In ordinary life, suppose you see someone suffering or grieving. Either you try to help, if you can do something, or you look the other way. Automatically with a photograph you can't do anything because you are not there and it just becomes an object of voyeurism. TV is good for games because you probably can see a tennis match better than if you are there, but for reality I think it is awful and I think it corrupts you.<sup>60</sup>

When considered as a literary device, the camera-eye “turns all fact into fiction” as a product of perspective. To tell a story from one perspective will be different than to tell it from any other.

This is an obvious claim, but it is also the claim that most simply contradicts Isherwood’s pose as an objective camera that he uses to distract his readers from his politics. However, as I addressed in my earlier chapter, it is the camera eye that frames his politics. Unlike Isherwood, Auden does

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<sup>60</sup> Auden, W.H. "An Hour of Questions and Answers with Aude: Part Six: Detective Fiction, Movies, Manuscripts, Freud, Drugs." *W.H. Auden at Swarthmore*, Swarthmore College Libraries, 15 Nov. 1971, [www.swarthmore.edu/library/auden/QandA\\_pt6.html](http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/auden/QandA_pt6.html). Accessed 21 Apr. 2019. Interview.

not view the camera as a literary device alone, but as a corrupt technology. Outside of literature, Auden sees the camera as sinister. What troubles Auden most about the camera is its production of life as facsimile. The image that a camera produces is close to life, but is not life. The camera shapes what it sees to fit it into its frame, altering it constitutionally. The detrimental effect of the false closeness to life that Auden perceives is that the camera desensitizes the viewer to the images it captures, precluding necessary human action first within the camera's frame and then in real life. A stanza of his 1969 poem buttresses that claim: "On the screen we can only / witness human behavior: / Choice is for camera-crews."<sup>61</sup> Auden's poetry suggests that the camera forces its own passivity upon the viewer. Viewers are left to "witness;" only "camera-crews" can act. Auden's reference to Vietnam in his interview demonstrates that the camera is politically implicated. However, unlike Auden whose response suggests that the camera deters political action, Isherwood's camera, which stands in for his perspective, is itself a form of political action. What then is the legacy of political action for decedents of Isherwood's political camera in an increasingly technologically savvy, even oversaturated generation during the Vietnam era—the 60s and 70s?

Auden's skepticism responds directly to the pervasiveness of film technology in the years that surround the Vietnam War. In 1971, the camera cannot be just a metaphor as it is for Isherwood. It carries real world implications. Grounds for Auden's rejection of the loathed camera are that it cannot be used to realize social change or to act against the injustices it captures. Paradoxically, this suggests that in the era of the all-pervasive camera, the camera *must* realize social change and act against injustice in order to be morally sound as a technology and as an artistic medium.

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<sup>61</sup> Auden, W.H. "I Am Not a Camera." *Auden's Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson, Vintage, 1991, p. 840.



Released just one year after W.H. Auden's interview and three years after his poem, the final adaptation of Isherwood's novel, the film *Cabaret* written by Jay Allen, directed and re-imagined by Bob Fosse, was released on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1972. A review of *Cabaret* published the next day summarizes the film well:

[Sally] is now an American (Liza Minnelli), while her young man, Brian (Michael York), is now British. There is another girl, a Jewish Berlin department-store heiress (Marissa Berenson), and a man for her (Fritz Wepper). In the midst of everything there appears a handsome German baron (Helmut Griem), who seduces both Sally and Brian and then drops them... The master of sexual ambiguity, and the master of motifs is again Joel Grey, master of ceremonies at the Kit Kat Klub, the cellar cabaret where Sally sings and dances, and where everything, even the rise of the Third Reich, is "beautiful."<sup>62</sup>

The film preserves much of the original's story arc, including the return of Fritz Wendel and Natalia Landauer (portrayed by Fritz Wepper and Marissa Berenson). Although he isn't called Christopher on screen, the film's secondary protagonist, Brian, bears resemblances to the literary Isherwood. He is a young, brooding British writer whose sexual orientation is ambiguous though definitely queer. The 'German baron,' Maximilian von Heune, though of a different name and nationality looks a lot like Clive, the moneyed American, in the play. The film integrates plot, theme, and motif from all three major iterations of the story that precede it: novel, play, and musical. Despite the similarities to the original and adaptations that pre-date it, Fosse's film is a work of its own.

The film is aware of itself as a camera and of that camera's innate relationship to politics; in Fosse's *Cabaret* the image isn't just an image, it has a social obligation. The opening sequence of the film places the camera in a particularly self-conscious pose. It faces what looks like distorted mirror in black and white. Undistinguishable figures move across the fun-house mirror.

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<sup>62</sup> Roger Greenspun, "Liza Minnelli Stirs a Lively 'Cabaret,'" *New York Times* (New York), Feb. 14, 1972, 22.

The image presented to the audience illuminates the themes of reflection and refraction central to *Cabaret*'s musical and film versions. Moreover, the reflective surface looks back at the camera. Overtop this image are the sounds of a jazz band warming up. As the image fades to color the roll of a snare drum is heard. In color, fuzzy and contorted images of audience members take shape on the reflective surface. In a moment of perturbed stillness, the Emcee looks straight into the mirror. Fosse introduces his audience to the Emcee's inherent darkness before we see his light. The intimately eerie shot is brief. The camera shifts so we see him outside of the mirror's contorting frame through Fosse's camera alone. His expression changes: a disarming smile. He welcomes us in close-up.

Underneath the Emcee's opening dialogue, Fosse cuts to Brian Roberts leaning out of a train window as her arrives in Berlin. The camera cuts back to the Emcee, when he declares, "I am your host!" and continues his song. With a few seconds of footage, Fosse brings the outside world into the Klub and allows the Emcee to declare himself its ringmaster. As the song continues, Fosse shifts between "Willkommen" on the Kit Kat Klub stage and scenes of Brian settling in Berlin. Later, Fosse parallels the long-take tracking shots that he uses in the Klub with tracking shots outside the Klub. As Sally Bowles walks Brian through Fräulein Schneider's boarding house and later through the streets of Berlin, the camera rocks subtly to suggest walking and follows them like documentary footage. The effect is to integrate both worlds and also to remove a degree of polish from the film's camera-work. These people, though they feign luxuriousness, aren't fancy. The camera captures and reflects that. Through associative montage or crosscutting, two worlds become one that is bizarrely stitched together.

In a particularly effective example of Fosse's politically minded crosscutting, he moves between shots of Nazi's assaulting a Klub patron and shots from inside the Klub. Fosse features

the patron in the scene just before. The patron escorts a disruptive Nazi officer out of the Klub in a single long-take shot. In contrast to that long-take shot, Fosse's jump cuts are jarring in their violence. As the Nazis assault the Klub patron, Klub performers dressed in lederhosen and led by the Emcee dance to traditional German music. Their dance includes body percussion. As Fosse jumps between the assault and the percussive dance, he synchronizes the Nazi's punches with the beats of the music, so that deadly blows punctuate the first and third beat of each musical phrase. As the audience erupts in applause, Fosse cuts to a shot of the man's lifeless and bloodied body on the floor of a dark alley. Both the scene of violence and of the Klub's stage are shot in close-up. Fosse films Klub performances with a focus on the soloists', Sally or the Emcee's, faces. The camera frame mimics the frame of the proscenium arch, giving the film a theatrical quality despite its stylistic departure from a still shot of a stage. When the camera moves panning shots of Klub performances are often frenzied and difficult to follow, evoking chaos. The extreme stylization of the Kit Kat Klub musical numbers reads like a reaction against the claim that the camera acts as a blank, observing record. Instead Fosse's camera creates friction against the naturalism of the entirely music-less dramatic scenes outside the Klub with the musical Klub's unnaturalness.

"Willkommen" exemplifies Fosse's persuasive use of the camera in order to pursue a political end: the film's first musical number immediately establishes the Kit Kat Klub as a queer space. When the Emcee declares, that "In here, life is beautiful—the girls are beautiful," he cuts to a close-up shot of a trans woman in a wig cap with make-up caked on her face, slipping on a voluminous blonde wig. Fosse's choreography and camera work intimate that the Kit Kat Klub is also a sexual space. Deep-focus shots capture layers of moving bodies with little attention to their faces. They are scantily dressed to expose skin—with a mixture of brassiere tops and

tuxedo vests—and overly made-up, regardless of gender. Much of the choreography involves slow and subtle thrusting of the pelvis, directing the viewer’s eye toward it. Fosse’s choreography usually involves the movement of one section of the body at a time so that the observer is able to devote considerable focus to each inch of the dancers’ physiques. Fosse enhances his choreography’s use of isolation with long panning shots that scrutinize individual body parts and that are unconcerned with capturing the whole figure. The dancers’ faces are blank, not to distract from their bodies. Fosse favors shots of the Emcee’s face that are low to the ground and captured in between dancers’ legs. As the camera moves across the line of dancers, it scans flanks, legs, and arms, creating the quality of an artistically rendered orgy. The Kit Kat Klub links queerness to sexual expression; the implication is that anyone in the Klub is free to love or lust after anyone else. Upon meeting Brian inside the Kit Kat Klub, Sally’s “oldest friend in Berlin,” the “divine playboy,” Fritz Wendel, verbalizes this. He encourages Brian not to worry, because he and Sally “do not sleep on each other” (*Cabaret* 16:00-17:04). Fritz’s text, which makes a joke of his malapropism, illustrates that those in the Klub are assumed to have a sexual relationship. That the sexuality and queerness of the Kit Kat Klub is emphasized in the 1972 adaptation is unsurprising given that its filming coincides with growing sexual liberation.

Along with Sally Bowles, the trans woman who Fosse features in the opening sequence helps to ease Brian into the Kit Kat Klub’s liberated sphere. Brian, pictured in profile peeing at a urinal, is surprised when he catches a glimpse of the woman standing to pee next to him. He stands there, wide-eyed and nonplussed, working hard not to look at her. As he walk away from the urinal, she turns to look at him. She gives him a knowing and encouraging nod. He returns her gesture of kindness. The tension of unfamiliarity gives way to mutual trust and shared ease.

The intimate exchange between strangers, reads as an acknowledgement and appreciation of each other's queer identities.

The exchange emboldens Brian so that when Sally, frustrated by his rejection of her advances, baits him saying, "Maybe you just don't sleep with girls?" he is free to say, "Alright, if you insist, I do not sleep with girls." He continues, "No, no, let me be absolutely accurate. I've gone through the motions of sleeping with girls exactly three times—all of them disastrous. The word for my sex life now is nil. Or as you Americans would say plenty of nuttin'" (*Cabaret* 28:40-29:39). Sally is unsurprised by Brian's lack of attraction to women. What surprises her is his reluctance to tell her. Her attitude reiterates the ordinariness of non-cis-het identities in Berlin of the late 20s and early 30s years before that language had been coined. Fondly Sally replies, "Well why didn't you tell me in the first place? Look Brian you're absolutely my best friend. And friends are much harder to find than lovers" (*Cabaret* 29:56-30:08). The two shake on it. The small gesture, though understated, represents a powerful symbol of acceptance and love that defies the taboo that surrounded (and surrounds) queer identities. In 1972 sexual politics are explicit and therefore can be politically persuasive. The exchange between Fosse's Sally and Brian preserves something of Christopher and Sally's relationship in the first two adaptations. However, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Fosse is able to embrace and celebrate Sally and (in this adaptation) Brian's relationship without code.

Their platonic relationship is short lived, however. As the film progresses they do enter into a sexual relationship—one that surprises both of them. A wealthy Germany baron, Maximilian von Heune, who fancies the couple complicates their heterosexual relationship. Maximilian grows fond of Sally *and* Brian, treating them to expensive dinners, goods, and trips. The Emcee interrupts this story line to sing two songs as commentary: first, an original song to

the film “Money, Money,” which acknowledges that money like Maximilian’s does in fact “mak[e] the world go round,” (*Cabaret* 57:15-57:18) the second is “Two Ladies,” the same from the musical. “Two Ladies” foreshadows the poly-amorous sexual relationship that the three will enjoy. This relationship is suggested through moments of physical touch, intimate eye contact, flirtatious laughter, and one close-up shot that contains all their faces as though they are all about to kiss. Fosse never features sexual activity onscreen. Instead, a sexual relationship among all three is only implied until Sally and Brian begin a heated argument about Maximilian. Feeling wounded herself Sally intends to hurt Brian. She dares him to reveal his distaste for Maximilian: “Look why don’t you just come out with it. You can’t stand Maximilian because he’s everything that you’re not...He’s rich and he knows about life. And he doesn’t read about it books. He’s suave and he’s divinely sexy and he really appreciates a woman.” Brian slams on the windowsill and yells, “Screw Maximilian!” Coolly, as if she knows just what to say, Sally replies, “I do.” Shot in close-up Brian looks perplexed and then amused, chuckling to himself. The camera pans to Sally; her face exposes disappointment that she attempts to hide. When the camera returns to Brian, he counters, “So do I” (*Cabaret* 1:25:23-1:26:35).

An explicit admission of bisexuality is clearly unimaginable for Van Druten and assuredly dangerous for Isherwood. Fosse and screenwriter, Jay Allen, invite their audience to understand Brian, the Christopher figure, to be a transgressive figure like Sally. Even Sally looks shocked as the camera moves in toward her enormous eyes, made even bigger by her surprise. Looking forlorn she replies, “You two bastards.” As Brian storms out he protests, “Two. Two? Shouldn’t that be three?” (*Cabaret* 1:26:54-1:27:07). Brian’s language, which he uses to hold Sally accountable for her own behavior, demonstrates that he confidently owns his act of sexual

rebellion alongside hers. Sally's apparent shock confirms that Brian has outpaced her intrepid spirit.

The film develops the myriad attitudes toward queerness and sexual politics first posited by the adaptations that precede it. The 1972 film corrects the mistake of the 1966 musical that paints an ambiguously sympathetic verging on unsympathetic portrayal of queerness. The musical's folly is to isolate queerness within the Emcee who the musical characterizes as maliciously other. The film maintains the Emcee as a radical other. Like in the musical, he is always watching, he comments on what he observes, he is definitively sexual though his sexuality is undefined, and he is figured as a clown. However, the film *does* sympathetically restore the once coded and silenced sexual otherness of both Sally Bowles and the Christopher Isherwood figure, Brian Roberts. Just after admitting his bisexuality aloud for the first time onscreen, Brian continues that act of defiant self-acceptance with one of political resistance. He storms onto the streets of Berlin in order to challenge a pair of Nazis. They leave his face badly bruised and his wrist broken. The film realizes the physical threat that admitting one's gayness posed to the body; a threat that Isherwood first proposed in his novel. Moreover, the events of the film invert Isherwood's choice to ally Nazism with homophobia. Fosse and Allen unite pro-gay politics with anti-Nazi sentiment. In other words, the film of *Cabaret* makes explicit Isherwood's implicit politics.

Immediately following the film's release, Roger Greenspun wrote an article for the *New York Times* titled "Liza Minnelli Stirs a Lively 'Cabaret.'" Greenspun contextualizes the film of *Cabaret* as the latest in a series of adaptations of Isherwood's work. The article's title, which calls special attention to Liza Minnelli who portrays Sally Bowles in the film, parallels the critic's focus on Sally's strength and longevity. Greenspun writes that,

Christopher Isherwood's divinely decadent and infinitely appealing English girl adrift in Berlin in the early 1930s Sally Bowles... has gone from fiction to theater ("I Am a Camera") and thence to film, then back to theater, a Broadway musical, and now again to film... Sally has fared best at first, in Isherwood's lovely, minor 'Berlin Stories,' and at last, in Bob Fosse's new movie version of the musical "Cabaret."<sup>63</sup>

Greenspun's characterization of Sally is familiar. According to Greenspun, she is luxurious, charming, and untethered as she wanders pre-war Berlin. This sounds like the Sally we have read about in books and seen performed on stage. That Greenspun claims that she "fare[s] best" in the original and then in Fosse's film intimates that the film preserves something of the novel's Sally—though Greenspun evades naming that quality specifically. One parallel that Greenspun identifies between the novel and the film is "the theme of sick sexual ambiguity that runs through the film as a kind of working motif."<sup>64</sup> Both the film and the novel feature taboo sexual practice, though taboo, like everything else that relates to Isherwood's stories, has evolved with the times. Greenspun's "sick" betrays a moral judgment reminiscent of the attitude that would accompany discussion of gayness in Isherwood's day. However, Greenspun writes decades after Isherwood: explicit knowledge and discussion of bisexuality and "sexual ambiguity" accompanies the word "sick." Greenspun continues that, "Brian's bisexuality now has as much as Sally's accidental pregnancy to do with moving the plot." What was intricately and strategically laced into the novel in order to preserve its deniability for an unequivocally homophobic readership of the 1930s and 40s has become central to the film's re-telling of a similar story for an audience in the 1970s. Despite prevailing taboo, bisexuality in the 1970s was not obfuscated by the impenetrable silence that surrounded it in Isherwood's era and even more so in Van Druten's.

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<sup>63</sup> Greenspun, "Liza Minelli Stirs."

<sup>64</sup> Greenspun, "Liza Minelli Stirs."



Greenspun praises almost every feature of *Cabaret*, which he describes as “not so much a movie musical but a movie with a lot of music in it.” Greenspun pairs his analysis of the musical and nonmusical parts of the film with discussion of the “juxtaposition of private lives and public history inherent in the scheme of the ‘Berlin Stories.’”<sup>65</sup> Both observations highlight the centrality of dichotomy in the film: inside and outside, musical and drama. Isherwood’s novel and Van Druten’s play both underline the danger of manifesting the main characters’ private lives on a public scale. The film does just that by staging the characters’ internal lives and desires on the Kit Kat Klub’s stage, with special attention to Sally as she sings in close-up. The stage of the Kit Kat Klub where the musical acts occur allows for the safe expression of intimacies that might be legitimately dangerous were they expressed beyond the Klub’s walls. “Since everything has to do with everything else,” Greenspun continues “and the Cabaret is always commenting on the life outside it, the film sometimes looks like an essay in significant crosscutting, or associative montage. Occasionally this fails; more often it works.”<sup>66</sup> Greenspun illuminates Fosse’s politically aware camera. That this cabaret specifically and cabaret as an art form in general “is always commenting on the life outside it” illustrates that it is an apt (even ready-made) vessel for political commentary.

Crosscutting and associative montage feature seemingly disparate images or sequences of film in order to highlight shared thematic content. Fosse uses these filmic conventions in order to implicate the camera politically. He draws the separate worlds of inside and outside the Klub’s walls together. The collision of nonmusical film with club acts creates a space (that is both physical and temporal) for musical reflection on the scenes beside it. As I have demonstrated, sometimes the musical acts highlight particular ironies, other times they voice what is left unsaid,

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<sup>65</sup> Greenspun, “Liza Minelli Stirs.”

<sup>66</sup> Greenspun, “Liza Minelli Stirs.”

and still other times they act as a sort of editorial commentary. Fosse's crosscutting illustrates the implicit subjectivity of the camera's frame. Greenspun offers that the film "gains a good deal from its willingness to isolate its musical stage—even to observe it from behind the heads of a shadowy audience in the foreground—so that...we return... to a sense of theater."<sup>67</sup> Here again is another example of Fosse's framing within a single deep-focus shot. Deep-focus allows Fosse to capture several layers of the space—foreground, middle ground, and background—within the camera's frame at once. Contained in that united space, stylized chaos can be observed in one long-take shot, creating an unexpected calm. The presence of an onscreen audience creates for the actual audience the illusion that they are watching a play. It is not too dramatic or false for its circumstances. The heightened drama of musical theater still retains a degree of reality because viewers understand it to be a performance.

Music expresses what words alone cannot through melody. Fosse frames that melody in order to tell a particular story. Still, the characters are aware that they are singing, so we are not suspicious of their musicality in a non-musical world. Instead, we observe the fall of Berlin to the Nazis from within the flimsy shelter of Klub and its stage. However, set apart from the Berlin streets through crosscutting that stage possesses a bit of magic. On camera, Fosse transforms the mundane into the sublime. Greenspun describes the Klub's stage as "a space defined only by... gesture and a few colored lights" that is "simpl[y]... an evocation of both the power and fragility of movie performance so beautiful that I can think of nothing to do but give thanks."<sup>68</sup> Simple movement and minimal light create the beauty of which Greenspun writes. In a marriage of theatrical and film traditions, Fosse captures the emotional resonance of musical theater with the intimate texture of film. Fosse counters W.H. Auden's theory of the camera's fundamental

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<sup>67</sup> Greenspun, "Liza Minelli Stirs."

<sup>68</sup> Greenspun, "Liza Minelli Stirs."

failing: that it deters political action. Rather, Fosse's camera is deliberate in its political engagement and serves a moral end: the integration of two worlds, personal and public, haunted by the shadow of the Third Reich. What Greenspun calls "an essay in significant crosscutting, or associative montage" is also the legacy of Isherwood's politics captured on film.

To call the film of *Cabaret* un-political seems a hard accusation to make—and yet, someone made it. The *Times* featured another, less enthusiastic critic of Fosse's work: Stephen Farber, the author of an article titled "'Cabaret' May Shock Kansas..."<sup>69</sup> Writing for his New York audience, Farber is skeptical of the film's ability to shock—a jaded stance that reflects the newly emboldened sexual freedom of the early 1970s. If anything, Fosse's *Cabaret* left that critic wanting more. In this sense, Farber was continuing the legacy of theater criticism that argues the adaptations of Isherwood's works were not political enough, or political in the right way. The irony is that Farber wanted more and better queer and female representation in the film, whereas critics of previous adaptations had wanted none at all. Farber's desire to have queerness and femininity fully and richly represented is admirable; and yet, curiously, he fails to see when that the queer and female representation he so desires is actually achieved in Fosse's film.

Farber's criticism centers on three elements that, he believes, were fatally oversimplified in the film: its female protagonist, the relationship between the "decadence" of 1930s Berlin and totalitarianism, and sexual expression. At the core of Farber's response to *Cabaret* is his questioning of what he sees as the film's central theme—the political and social disintegration of Germany in the 1930s as a case of "innocence perverted," which he detects in the film's presentation of the rise of the Third Reich and of characters exploring unconventional sexual practice. Writing at the height of the sexual revolution, which he calls America's "new sexual

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen Farber, "'Cabaret' May Shock Kansas..." *New York Times* (New York), Feb. 20, 1972, D1.

freedom,” Farber regrets the absence of sex on screen and argues that *Cabaret* “deserves to be called the first adult film musical.” Farber articulates that the film is trapping Sally Bowles within “a routine love story with a moralistic conclusion” by “limit[ing] her choices to domesticity or degradation.”<sup>70</sup> To him, this represents a failure to “accept the challenge of a truly liberated heroine.” Where Farber regrets *Cabaret*’s “conventional resolutions” despite an unconventional approach, Ivor Brown in 1954 had critiqued the film adaptation of *I Am a Camera* for its unconventionally risqué content. Just as Brown both reflected and reacted to the popular moral attitudes of his decade, Farber reflects and reacts to the liberated early 1970s. Unlike Brown, Farber calls for a complex portrayal of women and of sexuality in art.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the fact that their arguments seem diametrically opposed, they arise out of a similar tension. Both critics argue for a particular social attitude that they feel should have been articulated in the work under review. And yet, although Farber argues against the “moralistic conclusion” of Fosse’s *Cabaret*, his argument is itself a kind of moralism disguised as hedonism. Where Brown desires modesty, Farber yearns for sexual and female liberation: but each imposes his own vision of “morality” on the work. Farber’s political leaning directs his critical focus just as Brown’s had done.

Farber’s political stance colors and even clouds his criticism, so that he is unable to enthusiastically appreciate sections of the film that he perceives to be successful. In fact, precisely those successes enhance his disappointment. He determines that the rest of the film is incommensurate to what he sees as the film’s particularly effective moments. Farber writes that, “There is one moment when the film actually seems to equal to the intimidating demands of the

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<sup>70</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>71</sup> I developed these ideas in a mid term paper for Philosophy of the Arts, Gary Hagberg, Spring 2019.

subject: the singing of ‘Tomorrow Belongs To Me’ in a Bavarian beer garden, led by a beautiful blond Hitler youth, becomes, without warning, a terrifying prophecy of the barbarism ahead, and a profoundly disturbing unforgettable image.”<sup>72</sup>

Farber writes of the sequence, shot in close-up, in which one-by-one, beer garden patrons add their voices to the singing of the Nazi anthem. Fosse’s focus is on people. Narrowing the camera’s frame, he scrutinizes their faces: those gnarled by age and those wide-eyed and young. Hate, shot in close-up on the human face, is imposing in its ubiquity and tense in throats, jaws, and foreheads that belt notes of bigotry. Fosse’s close-ups illustrate that hate does not discriminate. Fosse demonstrates in microcosm—a grotesquely idyllic beer garden—the rise of the Third Reich. The song itself stands in for Nazi ascent. In the film, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” is the only moment of singing outside of the Kit Kat Klub. Because the characters are aware that they are singing, it is not technically a moment of integrated musical theater. However, the song blurs the line between musical theater and dramatic conventions because the song moves the plot forward as a symbol for action that occurs off-screen. Farber continues, “Not many movies have a sequence as powerful as that, but the occasional brilliance of ‘Cabaret’ only intensifies the disappointment we feel by the end of the film. For it fails to explore the most interesting possibilities of its theme and characterizations.”<sup>73</sup> Farber’s admiration of this sequence serves to accentuate his displeasure by comparison. He writes in order to persuade his readers that *Cabaret* fails to actualize its potential because of its particular content and unexplored possibilities and is paradoxically made worse by its successes.

By Farber’s account, a quality of Fosse’s crosscutting seems to ally his camera lens with conservatism that is the root cause of all the film’s faults. He identifies the origin of these faults

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<sup>72</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>73</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

as the false causal relationship that he believes the crosscutting applies to German club culture of the 1930s, which includes the sexual experimentation, and the rise totalitarianism in Germany. He reads Fosse's film as suggesting that the former leads to the latter. He warns that what Fosse frames as a causal relationship is actually a correlation—that the two are symptomatic of “social disorder and disillusionment”—and that this misapprehension is damaging. Farber calls Fosse's crosscutting “very effective but very specious.”<sup>74</sup> Farber's sentiment runs parallel to the implications of Auden's 1969 poem, which faults a misleading camera. For the camera to be righteous, it must carefully cultivate precise and pointed meaning. Extending the directional metaphor, Farber's criticism has to do with Fosse's style of pointing as well as with what he points at. Farber acknowledges that the implications of Fosse's camera work are weighty and powerful. To Farber's mind, however, they misdirect viewers in order to uphold outdated values.

Farber is ultimately concerned with the instructive conservatism that he observes as a direct result of Fosse's camera work and point of focus. He continues that,

“Cabaret” may even be read as a cautionary tale for today, a warning that contemporary America, because of its new sexual freedom, is a sick society, comparable to Weimar German... a society on the brink of some kind of horrible apocalypse. The only link between America and Germany in this regard is that many of the people attending the sex shows and porno movies today, like those who frequented the Berlin cabarets, are respectable middle aged people still wracked by guilt and sneaking out for a glimpse of forbidden pleasures. The hypocrisy, not the sexual explicitness is what makes these shows seem dirty... “Cabaret” makes no distinction between sexual experimentation and... hypocritical voyeurism.<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to Greenspun, who believes that the audience helps to establish an atmosphere of theatricality within the shots of club acts, Farber finds the audience directly responsible for the “cautionary” comparison to 1970s America that he problematizes. His observation is well

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<sup>74</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>75</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

reasoned, but is certainly fine grained. In searching for details to confirm a pre-existing bias, Farber finds a middle-aged audience. The core of his argument resides on the presence of faint wrinkles on extras. His phrase “the only link” even acknowledges that the basis for this comparison is flimsy. I believe Farber’s fastidiousness, his hyper-focus on detail, has led him to misread *Cabaret*. His attention to the audience at the Kit Kat Klub gives too much weight to a group that is quite literally and purposefully peripheral to the story and assumes their centrality. Sure, they represent voyeurism—they constitute an audience at a sex club.

Despite Farber’s occasional over-zealousness, his scrutiny of sexual politics in *Cabaret* arises out of a commendable desire to be sympathetic to marginalized people in the film who he feels are unfairly portrayed—an aim close to Isherwood’s own. Farber asks, “Must the wealthy, promiscuous bisexual baron... be presented as epitomizing the corruption of Germany?”<sup>76</sup> Farber’s question reiterates on a smaller scale the causal relationship imposed upon the “decadence”<sup>77</sup> of 1930s Berlin and the growing threat of Nazism. Maximilian von Heune, “the wealthy, promiscuous bisexual baron,” is characterized as a bisexual casanova who seduces both Sally and Brian. Farber reads this seduction as a kind of “corruption.” Farber regrets that Maximilian epitomizes the hedonism on which *Cabaret* blames the fall of Weimar German. According to Farber, this false equivalency distorts the vibrant intellectual and social scene of Berlin’s sub-culture as well as the abject monstrosity of Nazism. Without saying as much, the implication is that bisexuality is a kind of evil perversion. Farber takes issue with Maximilian as a symbol of the corruption innate in rejecting heteronormativity—a link that, if I saw it in Fosse’s *Cabaret*, I would also find offensive.

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<sup>76</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>77</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

Farber makes an astute claim when he illuminates that as figures of political and social transgression, the protagonists are limited by their connection to each other. Farber calls Sally Bowles a “true sexual revolutionary—searching for a completely honest approach to life that, in a less conventional film, would have been seen as a sign of health, not sickness.”<sup>78</sup> The appellation Farber gives to Sally demonstrates his desire to see a figure of liberated womanhood and liberated sexuality united in one character. The film, he argues, transforms her virtue—her quest for honesty—into a vice. What Farber perceives as the film’s “conventional[ity]” is also what determines Sally toward “sicknes” and prevents her from being that “true sexual revolutionary.” Sally’s sexual exploration is unproblematic; the circumstances that confine her are. Farber expands this line of inquiry, illuminating a recurrent theme in adaptations of Isherwood’s work. The Christopher character is understood in only in relation and reaction to Sally. Farber writes that, “The Isherwood character has become an English university student... who won’t admit to any exhilaration. With an amoral heroine, the filmmakers must have felt obliged to provide an incorruptible hero.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Van Druten’s adaptation, Brian is allowed to express his queerness. Though much to Farber’s dismay, this occurs off-screen and only in reference. Farber attributes Brian’s shyness to Sally’s sexual openness. Brian cannot be enthusiastically bisexual—or even enthusiastically sexual—if Sally is allowed to be. For Farber, despite its pretence of sexual freedom, the film does not go far enough.

Farber summarizes his primary qualm with the film: “Director Bob Fosse, like his upright hero, seems slightly frightened to acknowledge the glamour of decadence. He confuse that with being soft on fascism.”<sup>80</sup> Farber’s criticism is that Fosse fails to imbue “decadence” with

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<sup>78</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>79</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>80</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”



legitimate allure. In other words, he believes that in allying “decadence” with hedonism alone, Fosse oversimplifies and misrepresents the attraction of “decadence.” Farber acknowledges the myriad artists and thinkers coming out of the thirties who enjoyed the decadence of Berlin in that era because of its fecund intellectual, artistic, and social life.<sup>81</sup> Farber’s criticism of Fosse resembles my argument about Isherwood’s contemporaneous critics. Critics of Isherwood found that Isherwood’s focus on Bohemian characters distracted from the explicit anti-Nazi sentiment that they desired. I argue that it is exactly his choice to feature those characters that cements his anti-Nazism. To put it in Farber’s terms, Isherwood’s portrayal of the cohort that populates *The Berlin Stories* illuminates “the glamour of decadence” with all its idiosyncratic richness and complexity—and rightly so. Farber’s sentiment suggests that Fosse does not do Isherwood’s “decadence” justice. To Farber’s eye, Fosse, like critics of Isherwood, “confuses” a complex focus on Berlin’s non-conformists “with being soft on Fascism,” inverting the problem of Isherwood’s politics for a new decade. Farber understands Isherwood’s portrait of marginalized people as a type of critical resistance that Fosse fails to accomplish in his film.

Though I disagree with many of Farber’s criticisms of the film, I agree with his moral positioning. Moreover, Farber’s politics reveal a shift toward liberalism in society that is unequalled by critical responses to any other adaptation of Isherwood’s work. His writing also highlights the greater social awareness of the practical obstacles in place of shooting and producing a film: both photographically and institutionally.

Above all else, Farber calls for precision in film; he demands that Fosse clarifies his message for an increasingly cinematographically literate society. Farber calls *Cabaret* “an

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<sup>81</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

honorable try... given the impossible contradictions inherent in a project like ‘Cabaret.’”<sup>82</sup>

Farber reveals that his concern is not solely the thematic “contradictions”—something like the centrality of dichotomy that I touched upon earlier—but more so the structural obstacles in place of producing such a piece. Farber writes that,

the future of two big companies [was] riding on the film [so that] compromises and evasions seem practically inevitable... Since the studios will do anything to avoid a restricted rating on such an expensive film, the creative people are circumscribed from the outset. It is questionable whether the story of Sally Bowles, the cheerful amateur whore celebrating the decline of the West, can be honestly told with the restraint demanded in unrestricted films.<sup>83</sup>

Farber’s criticism draws a parallel between the institutional censors in place during Fosse’s time and the social censors of Isherwood’s time, both shaping the creative work of artists who might be otherwise unconcerned with this type of restriction. Farber’s analysis suggests that restriction, “restraint,” and limitation are not tactics of storytelling purposefully implemented by the artist. Farber reads restraint as a product institutional “circumscri[ption]” and *not* a desired product of their art—with this assessment he at once dismisses Fosse and his collaborators artistically while giving them ethical credit.

In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* written just a month after Fosse’s *Cabaret* was released, reader and New York City native, Pat Smith shared her enthusiasm for Fosse’s trenchant camera work as well as her disapproval of Stephen Farber’s criticism. She opposed Farber’s cynical attitude toward restriction in the film. She wrote to the editor,

What Bob Fosse accomplished will be talked about long after Farber has ceased being a critic—the fact that “Cabaret is a breakthrough in style and content for a musical film. What “Oklahoma!” did for musical theater, so “Cabaret has done for film. Fosse deliberately set very severe limits on his work—the confines of a narrow stage—and then proceeded to create near-miracles of camera work, lighting, and performance. He gives us a whole milieu in just one sweep of the

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<sup>82</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

<sup>83</sup> Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock.”

camera, busily searching out nuances of both the audience and the performers. His camera is truly an “eye.”<sup>84</sup>

Smith pays special attention to the ways the constraints of Fosse’s camera “eye” such as his “narrow stage” help him tell an effective story. Smith notices the “severe limits” Fosse imposes on a technical level. Fosse uses film technique to parallel the “severe limits” of Isherwood’s severely intolerant society. Fosse makes his film while societal attitudes shift and slowly broaden. In the 1970s to be a gay man or a sexually promiscuous woman, though still dangerous, was not as dangerous as it was in the early 1930s—Isherwood’s era and the time of the film’s setting. The taboo content of Isherwood’s stories required him to circumvent judgment with careful writing. Fosse’s camera work evokes the narrow-mindedness that Isherwood worked against on a narrow visual plain. Fosse’s tight visual landscape mirrors at once the obstacle to Isherwood’s work as well as the technical and artistic fluency Isherwood used to surmount that obstacle.

Smith points out how Fosse’s camera-work, which focuses on the finer-grain details of the film’s characters, paints a broad and revealing picture of the 1930s Berlin. Smith calls this “a whole milieu in just one sweep of the camera, busily searching out nuances of both the audience and the performers.”<sup>85</sup> Like Isherwood and Van Druten before him, Fosse’s focus is people. He captures their revealing intricacies with “near-miracles of camera work, lighting, and performance.” Attention to detail is at the core of all three artists’ (Isherwood, Van Druten, and Fosse’s) work. Smith brings out in Fosse’s work precisely Isherwood’s legacy of weaving difficult thematic content into the structure of his story with gracefulness and ease of style.

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<sup>84</sup> Pat Smith, “Breakthrough.” *New York Times* (New York), Mar. 19, 1972, D35.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, “Breakthrough.”

Smith's sharp observations demonstrate the fact that in 1972 the audience for Fosse's re-telling of Isherwood's story is now photographically and cinematographically literate. Society has evolved around Isherwood and his camera so that a layperson can credibly analyze film and produce a well-informed critique of the art form. It is exactly Pat Smith's technological literacy—a result of the democratization of the camera—that enables her to comment on Fosse's work and to determine that his work accomplishes great feats in storytelling. Moreover, the democratization of the camera and the knowledgeable audience it produced demanded that any and all camera work must cultivate meaning purposefully and thoughtfully. Smith's take suggests that in 1972, Isherwood's pose of an objective camera can no longer stand and that Fosse's *Cabaret* meets this new cinematic standard.

### Finale Ultimo

Given my dedication to one man's major work and the mountain of artistic and critical responses it spurred (including my own on both counts), it seems fair to allow that man, Christopher Isherwood, to speak for himself—to present a rebuttal of sorts in which Isherwood may address his many fans and critics with the benefit of hindsight. After all, Christopher Isherwood can conclude this project far better than I. In his 1976 autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood wrote in the third person that,

This phrase, *I am a camera*... taken out of its context... was to label Christopher himself as one of those eternal outsiders who watched the passing parade of life lukewarm-bloodedly, with wistful impotence. From that time on, whenever he published a book, there would always be some critic who would quote it, praising Mr. Isherwood for his sharp camera eye, but blaming him for not daring to get out of his focal depth and become humanly involved with his sitters.  
(CAHK 58)

Isherwood writes of the effect of his iconic phrase upon the perception of Christopher Isherwood first as a character, then as a writer, and finally as a man. He takes specific issue with riffs on the phrase when it is “taken out of context.” The author implies that the phrase “I am a camera” is in context and therefore can be appropriately understood only when one reads it at the top of the second paragraph that sits on the 207<sup>th</sup> page of *The Berlin Stories*.

Just after a paragraph that details what the still unnamed narrator can see “from [his] window” and just before a description of the events that will unfold “at eight o’clock [on that] evening” in Berlin, we read the now-famous sentence: “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (*TBS* 207). The prose that surrounds his sentence reflects the moment in which it is written. It is an almost verb-less string of images that reads as though the narrator, who we do not yet know to be the fictional Isherwood, is taking sparse notes on what he

sees outside his window. Isherwood's simple and attentive prose makes sense of his apparent concern with fit and with the present tense. Isherwood implies that the phrase not only exists but also *belongs* where he has put it—and nowhere else.

It follows that to apply the phrase to the author, Christopher Isherwood, instead of to the fictional narrator at this moment in his diary is to consider the phrase “out of context.”

Isherwood recognizes that his camera metaphor has led readers, who praise his skills of observation, to criticize his role as an idle observer by the same token. As Isherwood paints it, his critics seem to argue that his role should not be merely to observe events and people but to *engage* with them. Though this criticism might be appropriately applied to his protagonist, Isherwood voices his frustration when it is applied to its author, with whom they are only fictionally acquainted. Perhaps prompting Isherwood to write *Christopher and His Kind* as a more rigorously honest or at least explicit version of events. Of course, I can only speculate on his motivations for writing (and am therefore engaging in exactly the kind of commentary that Isherwood would caution me to avoid). However, though Isherwood voices frustration with what he suggests is hackneyed feedback, he acknowledges that he has invited this exact praise and criticism—and by extension my entire Senior Project—with his photographic turn of phrase.

Isherwood wrote in a 1954 preface to *The Berlin Stories*, published after he had found safe and sunny residence in Santa Monica, California, “Watching my past being thus reinterpreted, revised and transformed by all these talented people upon the stage, I said to myself: ‘I am no longer an individual. I am collaboration. I am in the public domain’” (*TBS* xvi). Isherwood's ostensibly objective “camera” eye has discouraged scrupulous attention to historical fact. It has invited other artists to look through its “open... shutter” (*TBS* 207) so they too can explore its perspective and shape it with their looking. The camera left “recording” (*TBS* 207)

since Isherwood's day has proven to be an inestimable record of political evolution and of triumphs (and some disappointments) in storytelling. Others' meditations on Isherwood, the man and the symbol, have made him a source of debate and commentary among myriad critics. Isherwood replaces his camera: redefining himself as "collaboration." For a man himself to become another's art is perhaps the most daring application of metaphor to life within the literary and theatrical traditions. Isherwood revises his claim that, "I am a camera," as if to say that because "I have been, you must be."

## AN EVENING AT THE KIT KAT KLUB

*Darkness to light. The EMCEE. A vamp.  
“Willkommen” will be a moment of  
awakening to a new space. We are no longer  
in a theater, but in the Kit Kat Klub. The  
audience will be introduced to their new  
role as the Kit Kat Klub Patrons.*

EMCEE

WILLKOMMEN! BIENVENUE! WELCOME!  
FREMDE, ÉTRANGER, STRANGER  
GLÜCKLICH ZU SEHEN  
JE SUIS ENCHANTÉ  
HAPPY TO SEE YOU  
BLEIBE, RESTE, STAY  
WILLKOMMEN! BIENVENUE! WELCOME!  
IM CABARET, AU CABARET, TO CABARET!

Meine damen und herren — mes dames et messieurs — ladies and gentlemen! Guten abend—  
bon soir — good evening! Wie geht's? Comment sa va? Do you feel good? Ich bin eur  
confrencier — je suis votre compère — I am your host!

ALL

UND SAGEN —  
WILLKOMMEN! BIENVENUE! WELCOME!  
IM CABARET, AU CABARET, TO CABARET!

EMCEE

Leave your troubles outside! So—life is disappointing? Forget it! In here life is beautiful—the  
dancers are beautiful, the servers are beautiful —even the orchestra is beautiful

*KIT KAT PERFORMERS (KKPs) come out  
with tables, mocktails, programs, and flirt  
with the audience.*

And now— presenting the cabaret performers!

*KKPs in processional.*

Each and everyone a virgin. You don't believe me? Well, do not take my word for it. Go ahead.  
Ask them! Outside it is winter, but in here it is so hot—every night we battle to keep the  
performers from taking off all their clothing, so don't go away, who knows, tonight we may lose  
the battle!

ALL

WIR SAGEN —  
WILLKOMMEN, BIENVENUE, WELCOME  
IM CABARET, AU CABARET, TO CABARET!



EMCEE

We are here to serve you—

ALL

BLEIBE, RESTE, STAY  
WILLKOMMEN,  
BIENVENUE, WELCOME  
IM CABARET, AU CABARET  
WIR SAGEN

*(Whispered)* WILLKOMMEN, BIENVENUE, WELCOME  
FREMDE, ETRANGER, STRANGER  
GLÜCKLICH ZU SEHEN  
JE SUIS ENCHANTÉ

KKP

Enchanté, Madame!

ALL

HAPPY TO SEE YOU  
BLIEBE, RESTE, STAY  
WIR SAGEN

WILLKOMMEN,  
BIENVENUE, WELCOME  
IM CABARET, AU CABARET, TO CABARET!

EMCEE

Meine damen und herren — Mesdames et Messieurs — Ladies and Gentlemen — Please hold your applause. We only have a bit of time until midnight and the New Year,

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1929. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

The Kit Kat Klub is proud to present a young lady all the way from England. She is so beautiful, so talented, so charming that I have asked her to marry me! But there is one thing standing in my way: my wife! I give you: the toast of Mayfair—Fraulein Sally Bowles.

*Orchestra claps, audience claps, everyone is clapping. Empty stage.*

SALLY

*(Coming on stage)* Am I terribly late darling?

EMCEE

No, you are beautifully on time.

SALLY

Have you got anything? I suppose I couldn't have a whisky and soda, couldn't I? I'm simply dead.

EMCEE

Darling, we've got to keep going.

SALLY

I suppose not then. That's alright, I'll manage. Darlings! Something awful's come up.

*This is the cue for a call and response. The  
KKPs run onstage and join SALLY.*

EMCEE & KKPS

What could it be, Sally?

SALLY

Guess whom I met on the stairs?

EMCEE & KKPS

Who?

SALLY

Mummy.

EMCEE & KKPS

What mummy?

SALLY

Mine.

EMCEE & KKPS

I thought she was in London.

SALLY

She was. Some call of mine upset her. I suppose I did sound a bit drunk. (*Amused by herself*) I'm keen to drink like a man now and again. Anyway, she jumped to conclusions, and into an aeroplane. (*HA! from KKPs*) Only, help me keep her happy. She does send me money and she isn't easy. Please, darling. Please!

MAMA THINKS I'M LIVING IN A CONVENT,  
A SECLUDED LITTLE CONVENT  
IN THE SOUTHERN PART OF FRANCE.  
MAMA DOESN'T EVEN HAVE AN INKLING  
THAT I'M WORKING IN A NIGHTCLUB  
IN A PAIR OF LACEY PANTS.

SO PLEASE, SIR, IF YOU RUN INTO MY MAMA,  
DON'T REVEAL MY INDISCRETION —  
GIVE A WORKING GIRL A CHANCE.

KKPS

HUSH UP

SALLY

DON'T TELL MAMA.

KKPS

SHUSH UP

SALLY

DON'T TELL MAMA

KKPS

DON'T TELL MAMA WHATEVER YOU DO.

SALLY

IF YOU HAD A SECRET,  
YOU BET I COULD KEEP IT.

KKPS

I WOULD NEVER TELL ON YOU.  
YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO GET ME IN A PICKLE

SALLY

AND HAVE HER GO AND CUT ME OFF WITHOUT A NICKEL,

ALL

SO LET'S TRUST ONE ANOTHER.  
KEEP THIS FROM MY MOTHER,  
THOUGH I'M STILL AS PURE AS MOUNTAIN SNOW.

SALLY

YOU CAN TELL MY UNCLE, HERE AND NOW  
CAUSE HE'S MY AGENT ANYHOW

KKPS

BUT DON'T TELL MAMA WHAT YOU KNOW

SALLY

YOU CAN TELL MY GRANDMA, SUITS ME FINE,  
JUST YESTERDAY SHE JOINED THE LINE.

ALL

BUT DON'T TELL MAMA WHAT YOU KNOW.

SALLY

YOU CAN TELL MY BROTHER, THAT AIN'T GRIM,  
'CAUSE IF HE SQUEALS ON ME, I'LL SQUEAL ON HIM.

ALL

BUT DON'T TELL MAMA, BITTE,  
DON'T TELL MAMA, PLEASE, SIR,  
DON'T TELL MAMA WHAT YOU KNOW!  
SSSH! SSSH!

SALLY

IF YOU SEE MY MUMMY, MUM'S THE WORD!

*As SALLY is singing she notices a man reading, CLIFF BRADSHAW, sitting at table with a telephone downstage. She performs the song to him. She walks to a*

*table with a telephone across from CLIFF's. She picks up the telephone. His rings. His reading is disturbed. He answers.*

CLIFF

Hello?

SALLY

You're English!

CLIFF

American.

SALLY

But you speak English—and you speak it beautifully. Will you just keep talking please? It can be your New Year's gift to me.

*A KIT KAT PERFORMER crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1930. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

CLIFF

Alright. Let me think. *"I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear... Ah - what is it that comes next... oh yes... "Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else."* I'm afraid that's all I've got. My name's Cliff Bradshaw. I'm from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Do you know where that is?

SALLY

Such a beautiful language.

*A stern, severely Germanic sits down SALLY'S table expectantly. The man is ERNST LUDWIG.*

CLIFF

Can I come to your table?

SALLY

*(Eyeing the man.)* I don't think so—

*The man puts out SALLY's cigarette.*

In fact, I rather doubt it.

*SALLY's hangs up. CLIFF stands to approach SALLY in protest. He walks toward her, book in hand.*

ERNST

Heil. *(Eyeing CLIFF's thick book in his upstage hand.)* Was hast du da?

CLIFF

*(Lifting the book in view of the audience to acknowledge it—it is Mein Kampf)* Oh I don't speak German.

ERNST

Oh an American. I see you read our great Führer's work. What do you think?

CLIFF

Well, I thought I should know *something* of German politics. Seemed like a good place to start.

ERNST

No, no. It is very good. You see. Very good. (*Extending his hand*) Herr Ludwig.

CLIFF

(*ERNST doesn't let go of CLIFF's hand*) Bradshaw. Cliff Bradshaw.

ERNST

I can tell a good man when I see one. Herr Bradshaw.

CLIFF

(*Pulls away. Beat. Looks down at Mein Kampf.*) So, you're preparing for war?

ERNST

Excuse me. That's quite wrong. The Führer does not want war. Our program stands for peace, with honor. All the same, war can be fine you know. Think of the ancient Greeks.

CLIFF

What was fine about them?

SALLY

Come on, now. Let's don't with all this boring chitter chatter. This is no place to talk politics. In my view, nowhere is! The night is young, the girls are gorgeous, and the spirits are so heady I'm speaking in clichés. Let's be a bit mad! It's heaps more fun.

ERNST

(*With a nod*) I wish you will enjoy your time in Berlin. And most Happy New Year.

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1931. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year. ERNST exits as music picks up.*

SALLY

Why don't you sit with me so I can tell you a secret. (*To CLIFF*) That's the man I slept with last night. He makes love marvellously. (*CLIFF chokes on his drink. SALLY's quite pleased at this.*) Careful, darling. You'll make a mess.

CLIFF

So uh, have you been working here long?

SALLY

Oh, ages! Ever since I arrived in Berlin. I came here with the most marvelous gold-digger you can imagine. I absolutely adore her.

CLIFF

Does she work here too?

SALLY

God, no! She ran off with some banker.

CLIFF

And left you here alone? That was pretty rotten of her.

SALLY

Oh I don't know... Everyone's got to look after themselves. I expect in her place, I'd have done the same. Any how, I'm alright. I'm good at getting along alone.

CLIFF

How old are you, Sally?

SALLY

Nineteen.

CLIFF

Good god! I thought you were twenty-five!

SALLY

I know. Everyone does.

EMCEE

Outside, the lights of hell are shining brightly this evening! In here, those lights are mere decoration. Fraulein Bowles, you're not getting caught up with this wicked fellow? You're wasting time and time is money and money is well, absolutely everything.

SALLY

*(To the EMCEE)* Not in this market, darling. *(To Cliff)* I think you'll like this one—it's very German, rather on the nose if you know what I mean.

EMCEE

Introducing the Berlin boy himself! He's a real penny pincher, but with a voice like that who can blame him? You know what they say, the bigger the nose the wider the range. A round of applause for our favorite little Meiser Herr Schultz!

*The actor we have known as ERNST transforms into a young KIT KAT BOY, SCHULTZ. He runs on stage to join the EMCEE. Reichsmarks fall from the ceiling.*

SCHULTZ & EMCEE

MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND  
THE WORLD GO AROUND  
THE WORLD GO AROUND

ALL

MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND  
IT MAKES THE WORLD GO 'ROUND

SCHULTZ

A MARK, A YEN A BUCK, OR A POUND  
A BUCK OR A POUND  
A BUCK OR A POUND

EMCEE

A MARK, A YEN  
A BUCK OR A POUND

SCHULTZ & EMCEE

IS ALL THAT MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND  
THAT CLINKING CLANKING SOUND

ALL

CAN MAKE THE WORLD GO 'ROUND

MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY MONEY

SCHULTZ

IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE RICH,  
AND YOU FEEL LIKE A NIGHT'S  
ENTERTAINMENT,  
YOU CAN PAY FOR A GAY ESCAPEDE

EMCEE

MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY

MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY

EMCEE

IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE RICH,  
AND ALONE, AND YOU NEED A COMPANION  
YOU CAN RING-TING-A-LING FOR THE MAID

SCHULTZ

MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY

SCHULTZ

IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE  
RICH AND YOU FIND YOU ARE  
LEFT BY YOUR LOVER, THOUGH YOU  
MOAN AND YOU GROAN QUITE A LOT  
YOU TAKE IT ON THE CHIN, CALL A CAB, AND BEGIN  
TO RECOVER ON A

EMCEE

MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY  
MONEY MONEY MONEY  
MONEY

SCHULTZ & EMCEE

FOURTEEN - CARAT YACHT

SALLY

WHAT?

SCHULTZ & EMCEE

MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND  
THE WORLD GO AROUND  
THE WORLD GO AROUND

ALL

MONEY MAKES THE WORLD GO 'ROUND  
OF THAT WE CAN BE SURE. (*Raspberry*)

BOTH

ON BEING POOR.

EMCEE

Meine damen und herren; und mensche und schmuck—tonight we celebrate the New Year—

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1932. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

—with one another. The world outside is moving so quickly. In here, we like to take it slow so that we can enjoy our glorious little hole in Berlin. One might call it a glory hole. He he he!

*Music plays under action as Klub patrons mingle. SCHULTZ approaches the table.*

SALLY

Bravo, sweet!

SCHULTZ

Thank you, Sally (*Acknowledging CLIFF*) You're ignoring your latest gentleman caller. Have you been hiding him from me?

SALLY

Oh, right. Cliff! I'd like to introduce you to my favorite little mensch.

SCHULTZ

Very good, Sally. You're learning.

CLIFF

(*Extending his hand*) Cliff Bradshaw.

SCHULTZ

So formal! (*Shaking hands*) Schultz.

*SCHULTZ sits between SALLY and CLIFF and slips his hand on each of their thighs.*

SCHULTZ

Well aren't you a pretty pair.

*CLIFF is uncomfortable. SCHULTZ adjusts his behavior accordingly. SALLY doesn't notice that anything's gone on.*



SALLY

Really, darling? I barely slept last night. I've got a marvelous new lover. Do I shock you boys when I talk like that?

SCHULTZ

*(Chuckling)* Not at all. If you want to know, it bores me.

SALLY

You're always laughing at me. Do you think I'm the most ghastly idiot?

SCHULTZ

No, Sally. I don't think you are an idiot. People I like always make me want to laugh at them. I don't know why.

SALLY

Then you do *like* me, darling.

SCHULTZ

Yes, Sally. I do like you. But when are you going to stop acting like an underage femme fatale? You are about as fatale as an after dinner mint.

SALLY

Clever. You sound just like my Papa. Mummy let that sort of talk go, but I'm not at all like her. You speak to me like that and I may start hate you.

SCHULTZ

You asked. I answered.

SALLY

Schultz, you really can be the most dreadful bugger, you know that.

SCHULTZ

*(Glowing)* When I'm in the right mood. Just the other day I had the most beautiful boy in—

CLIFF

I seem to have stumbled into a private moment.

SALLY

Don't be stupid, Cliff.

SCHULTZ

*(To CLIFF)* You give yourself away, Herr Bradshaw. *(To SALLY)* He's too much shame for the two of us, Sally. Very well, new topic. I have been getting fan letters.

SALLY

You haven't.

SCHULTZ

I have. Look.

*SCHULTZ pulls out a few letters and hands them to SALLY. Her gleeful expression changes.*

SALLY

Oh, darling. That's horrible.

*SALLY shows CLIFF.*

CLIFF

Surely, you'll tell the police.

SCHULTZ

Nein. My existence is not of such importance to me or to others that forces of the law should be called to protect it. *(Beat.)* Stop that, Sally.

SALLY

What now?

SCHULTZ

You look at me like my mother.

EMCEE

Recently, I've noticed that we've all become a little tighter. A little more tense. The world outside has squeezed its way in. I don't know how they discovered us. This is one kind of a penetration I didn't prepare for. Hello, officers.

*EMCEE nods at two or three OFFICERS, clad in apparel that signals Nazi. The Nazi presence in the Klub is growing.*

OFFICERS

Heil.

EMCEE

*(The EMCEE shifts character, they are both Nazi and Jew.)* Heil. *(The EMCEE shifts once more returning to their expected form.)* You've caught me off guard. I'm stiff with surprise. Is anyone else feeling a little titillated? *(A tepid response.)* Ah, I can sense your unease. But it's no fun being scared. We just have a few new friends to play with. It's time to unclench! The only way out is through. Trust me. Let me diagnose you. Coat please! *(Someone tosses them a white coat.)* Stethoscope! *(Someone tosses them a stethoscope.)* You can't have vergnügen—

PERFORMER 1

Plaisier!

PERFORMER 2

Pleasure!

EMCEE

—until you relax. *(To the OFFICERS)* Boys, that includes you. I think you may learn a thing or two about the importance of release. Don't forget, the bar is still open! Indulge a little. Why not? It is New Year's Eve.

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1933. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

Let the liver do its job. Let it digest, absorb, and process your woes. That's our profession after all. We are here to entertain. Now this next act is all about *men*—

*Cheers from the audience. SALLY groans with disgust as she finishes her drink and heads to the bar to refill.*

EMCEE

The year is 1933. The month May. The city Berlin.

*Two KIT KAT PERFORMERS walk on stage dressed as fat, rich businessmen. They carry newspapers and little cups of coffee. They pull tables and chairs up to the stage. This is a moment of absurdity, extremely comedic.*

PERFORMER 1

You didn't read the papers this morning? There was a bit about Bernhard Landauer.

PERFORMER 2

Is that the son? Or maybe the nephew.

PERFORMER 1

Whoever is he is, he's dead.

*They laugh gregariously.*

PERFORMER 1

Heart failure. That's what the newspapers said.

PERFORMER 2

Heart failure! If you ask me anyone's heart is liable to fail, if it gets a bullet inside it.

*They laugh gregariously.*

PERFORMER 1

Concentration camps. They get them in there, make them sign things away... Then their hearts fail.

*They laugh gregariously. Two KKP's carrying bowler hat and smoking jacket, dress EMCEE quickly. EMCEE walks five steps to join the businessmen on stage. Puffs cigarette.*

EMCEE

I don't like it. It's bad for trade.

*They laugh gregariously. The same two KKP's have run across backstage to opposite wing. They enter exhausted, from the wing. They remove EMCEE's hat and coat. PERFORMER 1 & 2 and EMCEE bow, cheers from crowd. SCHULTZ is not laughing.*

Did he say Bernhard?  
SCHULTZ

(*Cracking up*) I think so.  
CLIFF

I know him. (*Pause.*) I knew him.  
SCHULTZ

/What?  
CLIFF

*EMCEE laughs. Puff Cigarette.*

SALLY  
/That's enough. You're all so gloomy. It'll all work out. It's only politics and what that's got to do with us?

SCHULTZ  
(*To CLIFF*) I remember having seen him once or twice here. He was my friend.

SALLY  
(*Cross to SCHULTZ*) Schultzy, darling, cheer up. The night is still quite young, and it's almost the New Year!

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1934. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

Anyway, I prefer the lighter ditties to all this sort of talk. That's what we all come here for!

CLIFF  
Sally, give the man some space.

SCHULTZ  
No, no, she's right, Cliff. This is the way of things.

CLIFF  
You've had a shock, Schultz, you can—

SCHULTZ  
I've too many skeletons in my closet to get upset about every one of them. It's fine. It's grand in fact. If I play my cards right, I may even snag midnight kiss from some unsuspecting chap.

SALLY  
How marvellous!

SCHULTZ  
Sally, you know what would really lift my spirits?

SALLY  
No, what?

SCHULTZ  
If we sang together.

SALLY  
Oh you swine. If you insist.

CLIFF

*(Sitting back down. Relenting)* I think in the middle ages people must have felt this way when they believed they had sold their souls to devil.

SCHULTZ

Ha! That's the only way to live.

SALLY

*(To SCHULTZ)* Isn't there something in the Bible about "take no thought for the 'morrow"?

SCHULTZ

Ah yes, my favorite verse. The Book of Sodomites Chapter 5, Verse 22, I believe.

SALLY

You really are mad you know. *(To CLIFF.)* Cliff, you needn't stay if you'd rather go.

CLIFF

I'll stay. I've done it now. I'm lost.

SCHULTZ

Well, I know exactly where I am and I want to forget it. Where the hell is that champagne?

EMCEE

I've got it right here!

SCHULTZ

Well, let's have it! This is the end of one life—

EMCEE

—and the beginning of another! A toast to the New Year.

*EMCEE picks up the line as he takes their glasses.*

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1935. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

*Intro for CABARET begins.*

Meine damen und herren, Herr Schultz und Fräulein Sally Bowles!

SCHULTZ

WHAT GOOD IS SITTING ALONE IN YOUR ROOM

SALLY

COME HERE THE MUSIC PLAY  
LIFE IS A CABARET, OLD CHUM

SCHULTZ

COME TO THE CABARET  
PUT DOWN THE KNITTING  
THE BOOK AND THE BROOM

IT'S TIME FOR A  
HOLIDAY  
LIFE IS A CABARET, OLD CHUM  
COME TO THE CABARET  
COME TASTE THE WINE  
COME HERE THE BAND  
COME BLOW YOUR  
HORN START CELEBRATING  
RIGHT THIS WAY YOUR TABLE'S WAITING

SALLY

SALLY & SCHULTZ

SALLY

SCHULTZ

SALLY

SALLY & SCHULTZ

*The duo is interrupted when a Nazi  
OFFICER throws a glass at him that misses  
SCHULTZ and shatters on the floor.  
SCHULTZ is thrown but continues singing*

NO USE PERMITTING SOME  
PROFIT OF DOOM  
TO WIPE EVERY SMILE AWAY

SCHULTZ

SALLY & SCHULTZ

*Several OFFICERS interrupt band, ripping  
up their music. Everyone is frozen.*

Playtime is over.

OFFICER 1

SALLY

Now boys, let's don't be rude. We all have better manners than that. Sweet, are you alright?

*OFFICERS aside; hyper-masculine joking.  
SALLY puts her arms on SCHULTZ  
shoulders.*

Don't touch me. (*SALLY recoils. Softer.*) Please. (*To the audience, easing tensions*) Everyone's a critic.

SCHULTZ

*SALLY and SCHULTZ chuckle with the  
audience. They walk off together to recover,  
followed by OFFICERS.*

Fraulein, you and I are old acquaintances by now.

OFFICER 1

SALLY

Are we? You surprise me, offrizier.

OFFICER 1

This fraternizing is not advisable.

SALLY

I'm afraid I couldn't guess what you might mean.

SCHULTZ

I'm afraid *I* could, Sally.

OFFICER 1

For your own welfare, Fraulein. I cannot put it too strongly.

SALLY

That's very kind of you, but I promise, I'm faring quite well. Especially with the company I keep. Thank you.

OFFICER 2

He is not a German.

SALLY

Neither am I.

SCHULTZ

I do not wish to cause any more trouble tonight. It's almost the New Year.

*A KKP crosses the stage carrying a sign that reads 1936. Klub patrons cheer with cries of Happy New Year.*

OFFICER 2

He is not a German.

CLIFF

He's as German as any of you!

OFFICER 2

He is only a Jew.

CLIFF

*(Escalating)* How dare you! Got to hell!

SCHULTZ

Herr Bradshaw it is nothing. Let it be.

CLIFF

*(To the OFFICERS)* What's wrong with you?

SCHULTZ

Auf Wiedersehen, offriziers. Danke. Ich werde gehen.

*SCHULTZ stands to leave. OFFICERS block him.*

Excuse me, I do not feel so well. I should go back.

OFFICER 1

You are not leaving so early?

SCHULTZ

I do not find the party so amusing.

OFFICER 1

Oh but it is just the beginning. We will make it amusing.

*OFFICERS close in around SCHULTZ. An OFFICER pushes SCHULTZ. SCHULTZ tries to leave.*

CLIFF

Hey! Stop that!

*The men assault SCHULTZ. SALLY and the crowd of men become two focal points of one tragic ellipse.*

SALLY

*(Seudo ad-libbed)* Stop that! You're going to hurt him. Cliff, do something! *(She runs over to the band.)* Won't you play something please?

*SALLY is unable to earn anyone's attention. Determined, she sings a capella. As she sings, she is overcome by a surprising grief, a grief that disgusts her. Her singing isn't pretty. In fact, it's quite bad. The action that follows will reach a state of physical and sonic cacophony.*

I USED TO HAVE A GIRLFRIEND KNOWN AS ELSIE  
WITH WHOM I SHARED FOUR SORDID ROOMS IN CHELSEA

*In a desperate bid to distract, SALLY begins to strip. As she strips and sings, she ad libs lines like, "Stop it, you're hurting him," "Why aren't you looking at me?," "Look at me!," "Love me!"*

SHE WASN'T WHAT YOU'D CALL A BUSHING FLOWER

*SALLY runs to KKP's and audience of pleading for the other players help. Everyone laughs.*

*CLIFF tries to step in. He said the is outnumbered. He gives up. CLIFF surrenders. He exits.*



Cliff, where are you going? None of this is funny!

*The cacophony comes to an abrupt end.  
Disquieting stillness.*

EMCEE

This evening is the dress rehearsal of a disaster. It is like the last night of an epoch. (To SALLY)  
Take care of yourself.

*The EMCEE exits through the audience.*

*END OF 'PLAY' // BEGINNING OF  
'MUSICAL'*

*SALLY watches the EMCEE leave. She pulls  
herself together and joins the laughing  
KKPs.*

*While this is happening the boys—the  
OFFICERS who are really boys—sit around  
smoking and drinking. ERNST begins to  
sing. The others join until everyone onstage  
is singing. A Nazi Anthem begins.*

ERNST

THE SUN ON THE MEADOW IS SUMMERY WARM  
THE STAG IN THE FOREST RUNS FREE

ERNST & SOLOIST

BUT GATHER TOGETHER TO GREET THE STORM  
TOMORROW BELONGS TO ME

ALL

THE BRANCH OF THE LINDEN IS LEAFY AND  
GREEN  
THE RHINE GIVES ITS GOLD TO THE SEA

SOLOIST

OH BEAUTIFUL FOR SPACIOUS  
FOR AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN

BASE, TENOR, ALTO, MEZZO

BUT SOON SAYS A WHISPER "ARISE, ARISE"

TOMORROW BELONGS TO ME

SOLOIST & SOPRANOS

FOR PURPLE MOUNTAIN  
MAJESTIES  
ABOVE THE FRUITED PLAIN

ALL

OH FATHERLAND, FATHERLAND, SHOW US  
THE SIGN  
YOUR CHILDREN HAVE WAITED TO SEE

SOLOIST

AMERICA, AMERICA  
GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON  
THEE  
AND CROWNED THY GOOD  
WITH BROTHERHOOD  
FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

THE MORNING WILL COME WHEN THE WORLD  
IS MINE  
TOMORROW BELONGS TO ME

*Black out. Lights up. No curtain call.*

## A Berlin Diary, Spring 2018-9: An Explanatory Note

### PART I: A BRIGHT IDEA

My parents made me do theater camp because I was a shy kid. They thought it would be good for me. I didn't. They were right.

Before I was a theater kid, I was a musical theater kid. Musicals have brought me joy in abundance throughout my life. For this reason, I've focused my joint project in the Literature and Theater and Performance departments around the musical, the play, and the novel as literary forms. I knew I needed to work with a text that had both literary and theatrical dimensions and also that offered me something that I could shape into a shorter piece in order to meet the requirements of a Theater and Performance senior project—that the piece be 25 minutes. The musical *Cabaret* presented itself as a viable source text. Upon further investigation, I discovered that *Cabaret* was based on a play that was based on a novel born from one man's lived experience—ample literary and theatrical material. Much of my experience as a playwright has been in adaptation, so I thought it fit that I should adapt Kander and Ebb's musical, *Cabaret*, John Van Druten's play, *I Am a Camera*, and Christopher Isherwood's novel, *The Berlin Stories* for my senior project. (And what self-respecting actor wouldn't jump at the chance to play Sally Bowles?)

In order to create a full and considered adaptation of *Cabaret*, I felt that I must research adaptation (and those adaptations that proceed my own) thoroughly in order to make my own informed discoveries. By the same token, I needed to create my own adaptation of Mr. Isherwood's story for my contemporary reality in order to fully understand the relationship between an adaptation and the socio-political culture out of which each arose, so that I could

write about that relationship. For this project, I wore many hats: literary analyst and critic, dramaturge (and by extension historian), actor, playwright, and producer.

I began my senior project with a flurry of ideas, a vague familiarity with the musical, and with a superficial, Wikipedia-based knowledge of John Van Druten's play and Christopher Isherwood's stories. Thus, my first task was to read, reread, and reread my source texts. This how I spent my summer. Around this time my senior project partner in the Theater & Performance department and director of our show, Elise Alexander, and I toyed with various ideas of adaptations. We considered framing an adaptation for today within our contemporary moment. For example, we thought we might begin with text or video from Kirstjen Nielsen's press conference admitting to the existence of tender age shelters. This idea felt particularly relevant to my life. I am of Mexican and Jewish-Egyptian decent. Many of my immediate relatives came to the United States as refugees from Egypt, having been exiled by Naser in the 1950s. A few of my relatives were imprisoned. As a result, my second cousin was separated from her father as an infant. My mother is the eldest relative on my maternal side of the family to be born in the United States. I am also second generation Mexican-American. My great grandparents fled Mexico with their eight young children, seeking a better life in El Paso, Texas and later Los Angeles, California. Despite my personal connections and outrage toward the despicable tender age shelters, we decided that to include this in our piece would be confusing and only thematically related to the content of our source texts, despite its devastating importance. We briefly thought that we might include Jewish and Mexican Catholic religious services in our adaptation, but then decided against it.

In trying to democratize the story we will tell, we might appear to be making comparisons among atrocities—something that cannot and should not be done. We do not wish

to appropriate anyone's story, but rather to tell this one, and hope that it is universal in its specificity.

Upon culling the text of *Cabaret* for moments that might be relevant to our senior project, I had the idea that we should produce *An Evening at the Kit Kat Klub*, loosely based on Act 1, Scene 13 of the musical. This is the engagement party scene in which Nazis harass Herr Schultz, an older Jewish man, who is betrothed to Fraulein Schneider, a non-Jewish German woman, in an ethnically and religiously mixed marriage. We thought that we would write a script in which we transformed the Luma Theater into the Kit Kat Klub that a growing Nazi presence would disrupt. At first we included six of Kander and Ebb's songs, "Willkommen," "Don't Tell Mama," "Two Ladies," "Meeskite," and "Cabaret," and "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" as our basic structure. Eventually the Klub, with its familiar faces, would be overcome by the rise of Nazism. We thought that we would end the piece with "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," a Nazi anthem written for the musical, and transform the platform onstage into a train heading toward Auschwitz. The Emcee would fall as a snare drum sounds. Black out. Silence. A soundscape would be heard, starting with audio from the 2016 election and including clips that detail the rise of tribalism in the United States as well as the resistance. This would become a cacophony and then again silence. Lights up.

In order to avoid the heavy-hand that frequently weighs down political theater, we opted for a subtler approach. We have maintained the original idea of the script's structure and principal characters, Sally Bowles, Emcee, Cliff Bradshaw, and Shultz. The language of our script is an amalgamation of text from Isherwood's novel, from Van Druten's play, and much of our own writing, all constituting a play that parallels the structure of Kander and Ebb's 1968 musical, but that is altogether different. The characters themselves differ slightly from the

musical. The Emcee remains very much the same, while Sally Bowles reads much more closely to Isherwood's depiction of her than any other author's. Cliff and Schultz bear various resemblances to the Christopher Isherwood, Clive, Klaus, and Fritz characters found in Isherwood's novel and Van Druten's play. Unlike Herr Schultz—the character of the 1966 musical from whom we have borrowed Schultz's name and who is an older Jewish man unrelated to the Klub—our Schultz is a young bisexual, Jewish Kit Kat performer.

The script details the rise of Nazism in Berlin throughout the 1930s, starting on New Years Eve 1928 and ending on New Years Eve 1935—approximately the years Christopher Isherwood lived in Berlin. Time, in the play, operates on two levels. The world outside moves much faster than inside the Klub. The play occurs on one night, New Year's Eve inside the Kit Kat Klub, but years pass outside each time a character says the words, "New Year." A Kit Kat Performer with a sign that shows the year will cross the stage, mimicking a wrestling match. The Kit Kat Klub patrons will cheer with cries of Happy New Year and then all promptly forget that a year has passed each time one does. The intention behind this choice is to further emphasize the unreality of time and space of the Kit Kat Klub, to illustrate quick passage of time outside the Klub in comparison to the slow churn of time inside the Klub, and to usher along rising tensions from the outside as they infiltrate the Klub.

At this stage, we determined that our adaptation was not a conventional musical; it is a play with songs. That is, until the final number. All the numbers before the finale are diegetic. Kit Kat Performers (KKPs) sing to make a living and to entertain an audience of which they are perfectly aware. The final song, which is the only moment of true musical theater, would be "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" inter-spliced with "America the Beautiful." This is not a part of the Cabaret act. It would follow the assault of Schultz by a number of Nazi officers. At the end of

the song, we had imagined the Nazis capturing the Emcee. Black out. Lights up. No curtain call. (We soon revised this ending as well.)

When we set out to write *Sally*, we hoped to create the picture of a young woman in deep denial about her personal and social responsibilities, who was unconcerned with and untroubled by love. In our play, she is a romantic, but not a romantic lead. After writing our first draft of the script, we discovered that we had altogether ignored Schultz. We had the idea that we would double cast the roles of Ernst Ludwig, a Nazi officer, and Schultz. However, in our first draft, Schultz appeared only to be assaulted at the end. He was a plot device and not a person. We were disappointed in our poor attempt at Jewish representation and hoped to correct that failing. In our later versions, we have written him as a fuller, more complex character.

We decided to cast the Emcee non-traditionally, deciding that white man (as the role is traditionally portrayed) could not play the Emcee because he no longer resembles the “everyman” figure that we hoped our more sympathetic version of the Emcee would be. We decided that the ability to take on the persona of all members of society (for example, Nazi and Jew) would accompany the Emcee’s omniscience in the musical and film versions of this story. So much of our piece is about resisting the hetero-normative, white patriarchy, in order to celebrate one’s otherness. At this stage we also decided not to include Nazi symbolism in our play. We found that the use of symbols such as swastikas and the visage of Adolf Hitler is an effective tool to elicit response from the audience, but that it is also exploitative of historical trauma. Instead, we designed our own symbols to parallel these images. For example, instead of the Swastika, we will include an eagle that may remind the audience of either the Nazi eagle or the American bald eagle.

## PART II: WRITING IS RE-WRITING... AND A WHOLE LOT OF SINGING

The audition and casting process cemented our decision to double cast the same actor as Ernst Ludwig and Schultz as we had written the role in the script. Jake Stiel gave the strongest audition for both roles. As two young Jewish women, Elise and I wanted to cast a Jewish actor, which Jake is, to adopt the roles of Ernst and Schultz so that he could participate in the telling of a history of our people who were brutally silenced. This is accentuated by the play's final scene. As Nazis assault Schultz, he transforms back into Ernst Ludwig who begins to sing a Nazi anthem. The assault, the song, and the absence of a body illustrates the subsumption of the oppressed by the oppressor. On a macro level, however that gesture demonstrates the erasure of one people by another (Jews by Nazis), while also subverting that erasure by having a Jewish actor speak and sing the words of Jewish story tellers in the unraveling of this story.

At this stage of the writing processes, we revised the final scene to include the simultaneous occurrence of Schultz's assault and Sally's desperation to earn the attention of her Nazi audience through a pathetic strip tease. In an effort to save her friend, Sally attempts to sing for them, but is unable to pull the focus of the Klub to her. Left with no other devices, Sally uses her body to distract. Routinely Sally has used her body in an effort to advance her career. She uses sex to manipulate and allocate power where she can. However, her singing now is not pretty and her dancing is not skillful; it is as messy and pathetic as she is. Ultimately, she is left alone in silence—Schultz has disappeared and become Ernst Ludwig. We hoped to create visual and sonic chaos in order to sharpen the marked stillness and absence that follows.

The rehearsal process began with music, which I led, accompanied by one of our pianists, Tristan Geary or J Merck (who played drums for the show). The vocal arrangements consisted of



four and five part harmonies that our cast learned with facility and ease. My favorite of these arrangements was and is mash-up of “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” and “America the Beautiful.” The song began with a few voices that culminated in a loud and ornate chorale version of both songs sung over each other. In the original arrangement a burst of music would end abruptly when the ensemble would drop out, leaving one single voice, that of a young girl, to repeat the final refrain of “America the Beautiful.” Then piano would drop out so that the girl is heard singing a capella: “From sea to shining sea.” Black out. For the actual performance we ended with the forceful chorale arrangement without the soloists repeated refrain so that the inclusion of “America the Beautiful” would be heard only in the shadows of the other voices. Elise seriously considered keeping the solo, but decided against it for many reasons. First, she felt it would have been heavy handed, grounding the end of the piece in the present moment rather than the past. She sought to preserve the dual space created by overlaying the two songs. Ending in the overlay rather than in “America the Beautiful” exclusively would leave the audience with a reminder that this is a story told in parallel and allusion to the present and not *during* the present. Her choice was well reasoned and artistically sound, but were I directing I would have elected to include the solo. This would preserve the poignancy of the single, childlike voice so that the audience could hear what Stephen Farber called “innocence perverted”<sup>86</sup> through our soloist, Faith Williams’s, ethereal singing.

The opportunity to act in this piece and work closely with the director was unlike any rehearsal process I had previously enjoyed. Constant communication has helped me tackle the challenge of working on a character I have written and that is based on an iconic character steeped in history and deeply connected to the theatrical tradition. Elise suggested that I find

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Farber, “‘Cabaret’ May Shock Kansas...” *New York Times* (New York), Feb. 20, 1972, D1.

Sally's vulnerability by playing up the archetype of the vamp. Sally never stops performing. She uses charm and sex as weapons. As much as she romanticizes suffering, which leads her to the streets of Berlin and eventually to the Kit Kat Klub. It this period of my journey into the role, I believed that no one had ever been or would ever be as easily bored as Sally Bowles. I had pulled much of my character work from Isherwood's novel and from Van Druten's play. As much fun as Sally was to play, I had difficulty mustering compassion for her as a young woman who feigns struggle when she need not and uses others in order to better herself. My path toward finding compassion for hopefully brought much-needed vulnerability and an inherent loneliness to Sally. I found her tragic: her naïve willingness to exploit her own body as well as her unshakable belief that she is contributed to my impression of her as such. Despite her best effort to pass as a cosmopolitan twenty-something, Sally is just a nineteen-year-old girl who has been neglected and who craves attention. She seeks adventure and adoration above all else and in her desperate quest for home she finds it (the Kit Kat Klub) shattered by the Third Reich. Though I hesitate to relate the rise of Nazism to Sally's personal losses, for fear that it may seem flippant, I find that it is necessary because to Sally even the world's greatest tragedies revolve around her.

### PART III: THE PLAY'S THE THING

The final version of our play has very much the same shape as other versions of this story. Sally Bowles is at the story's center framed by two men—in our version Schultz, a young Jewish Kit Kat Klub performer, and Cliff Bradshaw, a young American writer. Schultz and Sally are the story's flawed protagonists for whom the audience should root. Schultz more closely resembles Christopher Isherwood character than Cliff Bradshaw who shares a family name with him. Like the musical and film versions of this story, a Master of Ceremonies effectively narrates

the events of the evening, ushering the story along and with careful attention to the passage of time and the obliviousness of his cohort. Like the 1972 film, all songs are diegetic, taking place on the Kit Kat Klub stage as part of the nightclub act and not as integrated musical theater. Unlike the film, our play is not a coming of age story. It is a story of one night that spans many years and that uses performance to showcase how people confront and ignore physical and emotional violence. The effect of crosscutting in the 1972 film associates the decadence of the Kit Kat Klub and the careless frivolity of the people within it with the rise of the Third Reich. Without the filmic device that Fosse uses expertly, we used the narrative structure, moments of frivolity and joyful excess frequently interrupted by rising Nazi tensions with the idea of accomplishing the same feat. The final moment of our piece, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me/America the Beautiful” is a definitively theatrical ending that capitalizes on the theatrical stylization to tell the story. It is a synoptic moment in which past and present are combined to directly address the common themes between our present cultural and political crisis and the action that has just occurred on onstage without offering a pointed instructive message to the audience.

We strayed slightly from our original idea of a structure that was based on the six songs from Kander and Ebb’s 1966 musical that we had previously selected. We kept “Willkommen,” “Don’t Tell Mama,” “Cabaret,” and “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” Despite its beauty and the vocal strength of the actor singing it, we cut “Meeskite.” We found that the song only provided expositional information about the character that is significant but redundant: that he is Jewish and that he is mocked for it. We replaced “Two Ladies” with “Money, Money” written by Kander and Ebb for Liza Minelli and Joel Grey in the 1972 film. Instead of Sally and the Emcee singing “Money, Money” as in the film, the Emcee will sing it with Schultz. Paired with an

introduction that uses Jewish stereotypes to demonstrate the normalization of anti-Semitism as a comic device even among friends, “Money, Money” will parody the racist stereotype of relating Jews to money in order to problematize that stereotype. Moreover, though “Two Ladies” normalizes polyamory and non-heteronormative relationships, which is an important topic globally, we feel that the Bard community generally embraces and celebrates these kinds of human connection. Instead, we included “Money, Money” to highlight issues of privilege and the entitlement that are not often addressed within but that are pertinent to the Bard Community specifically. Because *An Evening at the Kit Kat Klub* encourages audiences to consider its community, we thought it best to bring the issue of economic privilege and disadvantage into the conversation within the Bard community and allow other moments of the play to speak to queer celebration.

The script includes Nazis interrupting Sally and Schultz as they sing “Cabaret” by throwing a glass. The glass would miss Schultz and shatter on the floor, subtly alluding to the devastation kristallnacht (in English, the Night of Broken Glass) when on November 9 and 10, 1938 (which would occur after the dates of our play) Nazis vandalized Jewish homes and businesses, taking nearly one hundred Jewish lives. Though it is unlikely audiences would recognize this metaphorical, historical allusion, the shock of the shattering glass foreshadows the coming violence within the Klub, which will be tangibly felt by the audience. We have kept this stage direction, but could not include it in our staged production because of technical constraints and safety concerns.

In the final draft, we incorporated qualities of Christopher Isherwood as he is characterized throughout his autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind*, in Schultz. The explicitness with which he addresses his sex life as well as his pleasure at his own naughtiness is

borrowed from Christopher as Isherwood (the author) imagines him yet again. Some of his additional dialogue is also borrowed from the character of Bernhard Landauer, who is referenced in the stylized, High Comedy section of the script, which satirizes the non-Jewish upper class in 1930s Berlin. The relationship between Schultz and Sally is meant to resemble the relationship between Christopher and Sally in the novel and play; they are to have a sibling-like intimacy and comfort around each other. Although Schultz makes a pass at Sally, she barely notices it, emphasizing either the ease of touch between them or the fact that a male advance through physical touch is unremarkable to Sally. Like Brian Roberts in the 1972 film of *Cabaret*, Schultz is bisexual. Though this choice resembles the character from the film, it is not based on it, but rather was written into the script after a choice made by the actor. Schultz's self-effacing wit is a product of his evident intelligence. His willingness to submit to humiliation without protest suggests a history of mistreatment and poor self-image.

Cliff Bradshaw as we have characterized him is fairly unchanged the version of him in the 1966 musical. Though unlike Cliff of the 1966 musical, our Cliff does not sing; in fact he is the only character that does not perform at all. Cliff serves as figure against which other characters may be compared. To be clear, he is not a pillar of sound moral judgment or even of a particular brand of realism, but rather is just a man who exists and observes much like the audience, without the omniscience of the Emcee. We wanted Cliff to resemble the audience so that he would hold a mirror to the audience in the way that a literal mirror did on the *Cabaret* stage.

Sally still resembles her novelistic rendition most closely than any other depiction of her. In this final version of the script, we have attempted to add softness to her character despite her tendency to put on airs and feign a tough exterior. The revelation of age, nineteen, seemed the

gentlest and most concise scene from the novel to earn her sympathy from the audience. It affords her an opportunity to divulge her private innocence and her childlike whimsy within decidedly neither childlike nor innocent circumstances. Though there are many qualities of Sally's that are unsympathetic, Sally's youth makes her aloneness more poignant and her loyalty to her community at the Klub more ferocious.

In his final form, the Emcee also resembles the character as we have seen him before on stage and film, although he is played by a woman. This is not, however, a case of a female actress playing a male part. Rather the choice arises out of the firm gender roles of the era, the Emcee's role as a leader within the Klub, as well as comfortable gender expression for the Emcee who enjoys androgyny. The Emcee is not a man and identifies more closely with female identity, though his gender is fluid. His gender is not strictly male or female. The choice to preserve male pronouns came from the actor's thoughtful character work. (We have now edited our script to include they/them/theirs pronouns in order to be more inclusive on the page.) One of the primary singing characters, he exists as a function of the play's stylization that in ushers the story along and comments on it as it proceeds. He possesses a godlike knowledge of the affairs of the Klub and observes all of the action that occurs on and around his stage intimately. He appears to stalk the Klub's inhabitants. The Emcee's choice to declare the scene a disaster and to exit the theater through the audience marks the conclusion of the play. With the departure of the Emcee, the play ends and the musical begins. The singing of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me/America the Beautiful" transforms the play into an integrated musical.

As I have alluded to in my paragraph on Cliff Bradshaw, the line between performance and non-performance is firm. Elise supported this choice in the script by having all KKPs including Sally, Schultz, and the Emcee explore a Commedia dell'arte stock character through

whom to express their character. For Sally I masqueraded Zanni as well as a feminine and sensual version Il Capitano. Il Capitano represented Sally's performative affectations while Zanni embodied her inner child—in temper tantrums and in sweetness. Elise's idea was to use clown in order to enhance the stylized unreality of the stage and to set it apart from the moments off-stage that are to be acted in a quotidian realism. Polarity—as it is emphasized by the distinction between inside and outside, Nazi and Jew, us and them, etc.—is central to the play. The firm distinction between performance and life in the acting and in the script parallels the dichotomous thinking that is central to Nazism in the Klub (and to racism everywhere).

My goal for the final draft was to ground the text more firmly as play than in our other versions. We did this by substituting some of the raunchier performative language for less stylized scenes that reveal character and relationship: the fundamental components of drama. Sacrificing some of the music, which though entertaining is superfluous to the storytelling, also grounded the play more firmly in the realm of straight theater. We added dialogue economically throughout with the intention of shaping the characters into specific human beings from which actors are able to find playful and revealing idiosyncrasies and psychologies. An example of this is Sally's aforementioned disclosure of her youth to Cliff. Another is the scene that follows "Money, Money." It should establish a history of fraternal intimacy and teasing between Sally and Schultz, while highlighting Cliff's discomfort sex and with Schultz's bisexuality. Sally demonstrates her neediness while Schultz demonstrates his low self-worth. Both Sally and Schultz like to shock their conversational partners, but where Sally proves herself to be a childish imposter of the type, Schultz demonstrates his skill at punishing others and by extension at punishing himself.

As I have mentioned previously, performance throughout the piece is written to move fluidly between naturalism and highly stylized nightclub acts. These acts sometimes include anti-Semitic references. Anti-Semitism is used as a dramatic device that moves the plot forward and that arouses humor, which is self-consciously perverse, exploitative, and hopefully will lead the audience to listen through laughter. Laughing audiences are listening audiences. The combination of anti-Semitism and humor will both contribute to the Klub's unreality, while reflecting a world in which people laugh at what we deem other, different, or less than. An example of this is the High Comedy section of the play in which two KKPs and the Emcee dressed as cartoonish business men laugh about the effect of concentration camps on the human body and on business as they sip tiny cups of coffee and read the paper. Originally we thought that we would use this moment from Isherwood's story *A Berlin Diary: Winter 1932-3* as the catalyst for a devised piece based on the Jewish Boycott of 1933 in which Germans boycotted Jewish businesses. Instead, we opted for simple, concise, and misplaced comedy. This has the dramatic effect of the literary device bathos, in which an anti-climax occurs as the result of the movement from the sublime or extraordinary to the banal and ridiculous. The moment is memorable by virtue of its incongruity. This moment as with other moments of the play (for example the Emcee's degrading introduction of Herr Schultz just before "Money, Money") pairs humor with camp. Susan Sontag, in her famous 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'" references Christopher Isherwood's writing as the only example of camp in print. She defines camp in part as "a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous," adding that "these are grave matters."<sup>87</sup> Key to camp, which celebrates unnaturalness and exaggeration, is self-awareness. More specifically, the awareness that what one is doing is bad, ethically or

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<sup>87</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," Georgetown University, accessed Jan. 18, 2019, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>



aesthetically (or both). For this reason the combination of camp and humor creates the quality of a private joke shared between intimates, making the audience feel smart for knowing better than the unenlightened and for sharing that knowledge with performers who wink at their own badness. The effect is to implicitly problematize anti-Semitism by forcing the audience to hear the perspective of those who condone, normalize, view it as spectacle, and laugh at it.

#### PART IV: WRITING IS *STILL* RE-WRITING

Sally taught to fight for my innocence—both in my life and onstage. I have grown comfortable playing strong women who express their strength with slight archness. Though Sally does this too, she feigns it. Sally challenged me to shed those comfortable tactics in order to reveal her innocence. In my life, I shy away from my own innocence and recoil at being considered an ingénue. So does Sally. I tried to bring this insecurity to my portrayal of her in order to celebrate it and to celebrate innocence. By the second semester of playing her, I relished being able to drop Sally's vamp-iness in order to find her softness, but I also relished dressing up as the vamp when it suited me (her). I adopted Van Druten's theory of Sally as a little girl playing dress up, far too amused with herself to pay any real attention to anyone else. This is how she blithely ignores inequity when she sees it—she simply hasn't noticed. While Sally resembles me and I resemble Sally, we are different. As an actor, I learned the importance of maintaining the spark of joy that imbues a performance with life even when that is difficult so that my character is able to pursue what she wants without me in her way.

Isherwood, Van Druten, Kander, Ebb, Masteroff, Allen, and Fosse all taught me how to adapt. Having concluded the analytical portion of my senior project, I want to apply more of what I gleaned from their works to the creation of my own. The first is to be mindful of scale and

of the particular constraints—social, political, and practical—in place of the creation of the specific piece. Our project was limited to 25 minutes. In other words, it could never be a full length musical. The scale of our show—its actors, its set, its stage, and its structure—all resembled that of a full-length musical. As my ideas developed, I have considered a few different ways to reconcile the discrepancy in scale. The first is to go further with the dramatic scenes as a playwright. Elise and I moved toward this in the final version of our script, but I am curious about and eager to expand that choice. My new conception of this same version of the piece would be to include the first and last numbers in order to frame the play with the kinds of stylization—one diegetic and one integrated musical number—that are central to the 1966 musical. I would then allow the rest of the play to unfold as a series of interactions between Klub patrons without the interruption of other songs. With this new choice to ignore our original structure based on six musical numbers, I could develop the storylines and relationship between the two protagonists, Sally and Schultz, even more pointedly.

Were the script to remain the same, I might apply a directorial approach to the discrepancy of scale that I have identified. The stage would be bare except for a piano. Two square outlines would be marked on the floor—a 6-by-6 foot square that surrounds a grand piano and an empty 3-by-5 foot square center stage. I would limit the band to percussion: one pianist and one drummer. The actors might alternate drumming to accompany the piano. Another idea would be to have one drummer with a cajón drum. A drummer sits on this kind of drum, which can make sound at a variety of pitches and timbers. An ensemble of five actors—one bass, one tenor, one alto, one mezzo, and one soprano—would alternate roles just as Jake Stiel did, playing Ernst Ludwig and Schultz. They would modulate their voices and change their physicality in order to indicate the change. These changes would be severe, accentuating and contributing to

the unreality of the space. Costume would be simple and uniform, evoking the world but not distracting from the actors' expressivity. Once the actors and musicians walked onstage each would jump into their respective box as the script called them to do so and would not be able to leave until the piece had finished. That the ensemble is trapped in this space parallels the circumstances of the play.

The first to enter would be the pianist or the pianist and drummer. Once inside their boxes, they are in the Kit Kat Klub. The boxes would accentuate the distinction between the inside and outside worlds that our script illuminates. All performance by the ensemble of actors would occur facing out so that even conversation occurred facing the audience. The effect of this is to suggest a larger space than that to which the ensemble is confined,<sup>88</sup> evoking naturalism while consciously resisting it. The ensemble would conjure background, foreground, and middle ground with their bodies. They would use their bodies to shape of stage pictures that might otherwise be conveyed with props, set pieces, or signs. For example, the changing of the New Year could be made with bodies or hands. That the ensemble is limited in space, sound, and number parallels the smaller scope of the piece. Rather than ignoring the constraints imposed by the piece, we would highlight them to make them purposeful and evocative. The choice to emphasize constraint would contribute to the sense of this piece as being an adaptation rather than a truncated version of an existing work. The effect of this staging and design would be to create the sense of the Klub's unreality with highly stylized movement, developing strategies of storytelling used in the 1966 musical and film versions of *Cabaret*.

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<sup>88</sup> I was taught this technique by Heriberto Montalbán in a Movement Theater class at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

7. If You Could See Her



Maya Sokolow performs “Willkommen” as the Emcee.



The cast of *An Evening at the Kit Kat Klub* performs “Willkommen.”



The cast performs "Willkommen."



The cast performs "Don't Tell Mama" with Melina Young as Sally Bowles.



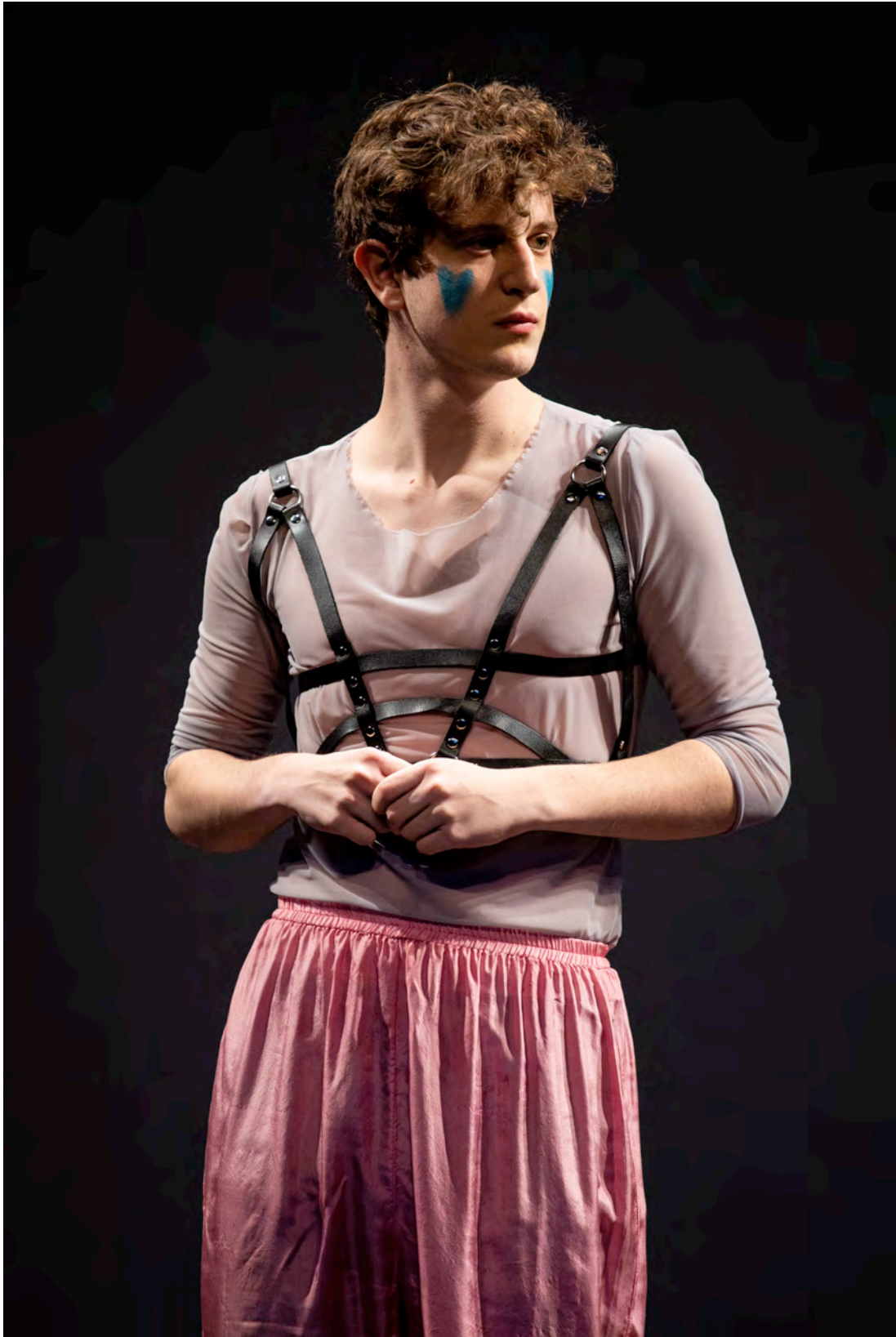
Patrick Toohey answers a call as Cliff Bradshaw.



The Emcee, Maya Sokolow, takes the Klub's temperature with the help of KKP, Cheyenne Conti.



Jake Stiel and Melina Young perform "Cabaret" as Sally and Schultz.



Jake Stiel as Schultz.





Sam Tomecek rings in the New Year.



Jake Stiel as Ernst Ludwig leads the cast in singing "Tomorrow Belongs to Me/America the Beautiful."

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