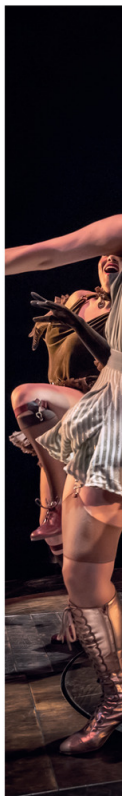


Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club

John Kander music **Fred Ebb** lyrics **Joe Masteroff** book
August Wilson Theatre, New York 1 April 2024 – ongoing
 REVIEWED ON 17 APRIL 2024

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Willkommen! And bienvenue! Welcome!: Gayle Rankin as 'scrappy British cabaret singer' Sally Bowles; Cliff (Ato Blankson-Wood) falls for Sally's charms

It's been 25 years since Rob Marshall and Sam Mendes staged *Cabaret* in a Broadway theatre designed to evoke the show's Weimar-era Kit Kat Club, with the audience seated at café tables. Rebecca Frecknall's revival, imported from London, aims to push the immersive experience further. Designer Tom Scutt has transformed the entire August Wilson Theatre, including the marquee (which reads 'Kit Kat Club,' the show's title relegated to an eye-shaped 'C' logo). Theatregoers are invited to arrive up to an hour and 15 minutes before curtain, ushered through a back alley, handed a complimentary shot of schnapps, and then encouraged to explore the lobby and two upper hallways decked out as bar/performance spaces for seven roving dancers and five musicians. Dressed in costumes (also by Scutt) that look like the result of a *Project Runway* thrift-store challenge, they perform burlesque-meets-mime routines, as when a female dancer twerks up against a standing bass. (Jordan Fein is credited as the prologue director, with music by Angus MacRae.)

More surprises await in the auditorium, where the original stage has been converted into two levels of seating, leaving the cast only a circular platform with a fringed canopy overhead. Small round tables circle the new stage, and even the traditional seating includes a slender shelf for drinks. (Producers must be counting on pre-show booze and food sales to recoup the costly renovation.) Patrons at my

preview had swallowed the marketing pitch – they were dressed in club-ready glittery gowns, precarious heels and flapperish fascinators.

I have no idea what any of this elaborate framework has to do with John Kander and Frank Ebb's beloved musical about a couple of

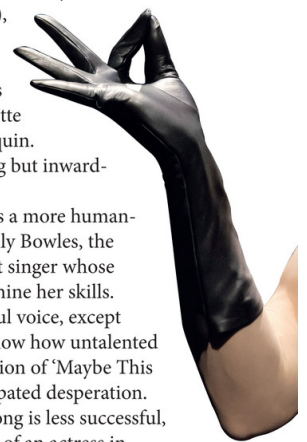
“Rankin has a wonderful voice; ‘Maybe This Time’ oozes with dissipated desperation”

expat creatives in pre-World War Two Germany. I could imagine an immersive club for *La Cage aux Folles* without any tonal challenges, but there's nothing about Frecknall's approach that prepares you for the dark turns that this musical takes as the Nazis bust up the revelry.

Unfortunately, the disconnect continues during the show itself – starting with Eddie Redmayne's peculiar approach to the Emcee. He's a dynamic presence, with a puckish charm, and his clear, strong baritone nicely suits the showier tunes. But he employs a thick, stylised accent that takes a while to adjust to, making his opening number less of a come-hither 'Willkommen' than a greeting that immediately puts us on guard. As the show

progresses, and he cycles through a series of ever-more exaggerated looks (from pants with flares at the thigh to eventually a Reich-style overcoat), he maintains his distance with a series of broad hand gestures that suggest a marionette or 19th-century harlequin. It's a skilful, fascinating but inward-facing performance.

Gayle Rankin makes a more human-scale impression as Sally Bowles, the scrappy British cabaret singer whose survival instincts outshine her skills. Rankin has a wonderful voice, except when she's trying to show how untalented Sally is, and her rendition of 'Maybe This Time' oozes with dissipated desperation. Her take on the title song is less successful, a performative display of an actress in



Production credits

Cast Eddie Redmayne, Gayle Rankin, Bebe Neuwirth, Ato Blankson-Wood, Steven Skybell, Henry Gottfried, Natascia Diaz *et al*

Direction Rebecca Frecknall

Choreography Julia Cheng

Music direction, supervision Jennifer Whyte

Set, costumes Tom Scutt

Lighting Isabella Byrd

Sound Nick Lidster

Hair, wigs Sam Cox



Eddie Redmayne's fascinating Emcee; Herr Schultz (Steven Skybell) and Fraulein Schneider (Bebe Neuwirth)



PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

breakdown mode rather than a *cri de coeur* that rings true. Scutt's design also lets her down – why is her supposedly very expensive fur coat dyed a sickly green? Worse, she has zero chemistry with American wannabe novelist Clifford (Ato Blankson-Wood, a fine actor saddled with a thankless role). His quick romantic attachment to Sally is puzzling since he's introduced as bisexual (even smooching a chorus boy) and lacks his own song to define a character meant to be the audience's stand-in. (Cliff had a song in both the original 1966 production and the 1987 revival.)

The key relationship that emerges is the unlikely romance between spinster landlady Fraulein Schneider (Bebe Neuwirth, in peak form) and fruit salesman Herr Schultz (Steven Skybell), who flirt adorably and bring an earnest ardour to duets like 'It Couldn't Please Me More.' They emerge as the show's emotional centre, making palpable the damage that the Reich will wreak even as their late-in-life love blinds them to the magnitude of the threat. These two lost souls offer proof that even a flawed *Cabaret* is still worth the price of admission – though they'd probably feel out of place in the ultra-hip version of the Kit Kat Club that surrounds them.

Thom Geier

Your guide to...

Cabaret

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Premiere Directed by Hal Prince, it officially opened at the Broadhurst Theatre, New York, on 20 November 1966. It ran on Broadway for 1,166 performances, winning eight Tonys.

The story With source material by John Van Druten and Christopher Isherwood, it charts a doomed affair between Sally Bowles and writer Cliff Bradshaw against a backdrop of the burgeoning Nazi regime.

Film (1972) Producer Cy Feuer commissioned an alternative script, and three additional Kander and Ebb songs were inserted: 'Mein Herr', 'Money' and 'Maybe This Time'. Liza Minnelli starred, Bob Fosse directed.

Did you know? Original Emcee Joel Grey won a Tony for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical, as well as an Oscar for the same role.