

ENTERTAINMENT

Otterbein's 'Cabaret' is an impressive production, but misses emotional mark

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre celebrates a milestone with an elaborate production of *Cabaret* marking their 500th production.

This is a production that impresses more than it engages.

Cabaret, set in pre-World War II Berlin, illustrates the decadence of Germany in the days before the Nazis came to power.

In many ways a sad musical, *Cabaret* sets the tone of a fun, carefree city, then slowly shows us the growing threat of the Nazi regime and its effect on the characters.

There are two intertwining stories.

One concerns Cliff Bradshaw, a struggling American writer, and his relationship with Sally Bowles, a flamboyant singer with the Kit Kat Club.

The other involves an older couple, Fraulein Schneider, a boarding house proprietor, and Herr Schultz, a Jewish grocer.

Director Dennis Romer, with extensive creative and technical support, has fash-



REVIEW

ioned an elegant production.

The attention to detail in the staging of the large cast in the Kit Kat Club scenes is most impressive.

Stella Kan's choreography along with Craig Johnson's musical direction, a strong orchestra, and Stephen Monroe's vocal direction have created robust musical numbers.

From the snazzy, tiered club to a circular staircase, a train compartment that folds into the stage to a muted brown earthtone apartment, Rob Johnson's multi-leveled set design is remarkable.

As the master of ceremonies, Eric Dysart initially appears too youthful in his manner.

Although a more sinister edge might have added an interesting depth to his performance, he is mischievous with a fluid physicality.

The most fun part of the evening is Dysart, Amy McAlexander and Katie Pees' lively and naughty rendition of *Two Ladies*.

As Sally Bowles, Emily Cotton give a vivacious performance, the most consistent injection of pure energy in a production filled with energy.

Oddly, by the time she gets to her big number she seems just about spent. Thus, the song we've all been waiting for, *Cabaret*, comes off flat. But, that should not detract from an otherwise vivid performance.

Clifford Bradshaw is the straight role and Aaron Ramey looks the part with handsome young hero type looks.

He has a great singing voice and plays the role earnestly, but comes off as stiff.

Brent Tomer is sweet and sheepish as Herr Schultz, connecting well with Heidi Letzmann's solid performance as Fraulein Schneider.

Their courtship scene when he brings her a pineapple is

touching.

As Ernst Ludwig, Damon Decker is chillingly ominous.

Marianne Timmons is unabashedly sexy as Fraulein Kost, the rooming house boarder who entertains a bevy of sailors.

Romer's direction is most stunning in the moments that end each act.

The tableau that ends the first act has the company innocently starting *Tomorrow Belongs To Me* and gradually leading it into an unmistakable Nazi manifesto with Bradshaw and Schneider isolated on one side, Bowles and Scultz on the other.

The final hauntingly discordant tableau of the Nazi takeover is breathtaking in its power.

Both finale's are theatricality at its best, visually striking and deeply moving.

Which highlights a nagging thought about this production. These two moments are quite gripping, but stand out as the exception.

This is a strong, well-paced extravagant production, well-cast and performed. It is polished and professional, lovely to listen to and to watch.

Yet it rarely draws us in emotionally. We watch more with a sense of detached admiration than personal involvement.

Otterbein College Theatre's *Cabaret* continues Thursday through Sunday at 8 p.m. through May 10 at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., in Westerville. Tickets are \$14 Friday and Saturday and \$12 Thursday. For more information call 823- 1109.

'Cabaret' puts young cast to the test

By Scott Phillips

For The Dispatch

Otterbein College Theatre's production of *Cabaret* is more than just another spring musical.

The show, which opened at Cowan Hall last night, marks the nationally known theater program's 500th production.

Cabaret is certainly no cakewalk for a college cast. Adapted in 1966 by author Joe Masteroff, lyricist Fred Ebb and composer John Kander (from John van Druten's play *I Am a Camera*), the show proves a formidable challenge for director Dennis Romer's ensemble.

Presented in conjunction with Otterbein's Department of Music, *Cabaret* centers on an affair between British chanteuse Sally Bowles (Emily Cotton) and American writer Clifford Bradshaw (Aaron Ramey), two expatriates living amid the social turmoil of pre-Nazi Berlin.

Alternating between scenes at Clifford's boardinghouse and the notorious Kit Kat Club, a popular nightclub, *Cabaret* darkly contrasts the gloomy realities of late Weimar Germany with the Kit Kat's frenetic decadence.

As the country's consciousness becomes ever more infected with Nazi ideology, Clifford finds it increasingly difficult to remain apolitical. As the social situation in Berlin disintegrates, so does his relationship with the now-pregnant Sally.

Romer does his best to convey the sense of impending doom, which must hang in the ether of any successful production of *Cabaret*. In this instance, however, success requires

an element of sophistication and a *Weltanschauung* that is beyond the reach of most undergraduate actors.

Even so, the ensemble does a fine job with Kander's score, and some performances are memorable. At Wednesday's final dress preview, Cotton had some difficulty hitting the high notes, but she is fetching and often poignant in her portrayal. Ramey's strength is his singing voice, admirably showcased in *Perfectly Marvelous* and *Why Should I Wake Up?*

Heidi Letzmann and Brent Tomer give competent character turns as Clifford's landlady, Fraulein Schneider, and her Jewish gentleman-friend, Herr Schultz.

Eric Dysart tackles the role of

the Kit Kat Club's Master of Ceremonies with an intensity more than equaled by his considerable talents as a singer and dancer. Dysart shines in numbers such as *Two Ladies* and the mammon-worshipping *Money*.

Stella Kane's choreography captures all the sleazy sexuality of the Berlin nightclub scene, and Ruth Boyd's costumes are a tribute to her talents as an artist and designer. Rob Johnson's set is surprisingly flexible, given its use of large pieces.

The whole of Otterbein's *Cabaret* may be less than the sum of its parts, but the parts that work make it worth seeing.

Happy 500th, Otterbein.

THEATER REVIEW

Cabaret, Otterbein College Theatre and Department of Music's student production of the Kander and Ebb musical. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Master of Ceremonies Eric Dysart
Clifford Bradshaw Aaron Ramey
Sally Bowles Emily Cotton
Fraulein Schneider... Heidi Letzmann
Herr Schultz..... Brent Tomer
Ernst Ludwig..... Damon Decker

Goose steps and garters

Being presented at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through May 10 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$12 and \$14. Call 823-1109.

Life missing from this 'Cabaret'

By Scott Phillips
For The Dispatch

The Sound of Music notwithstanding, *Cabaret* is almost certainly the best musical ever written that has Nazis in it.

Columbus audiences, however, might soon have reason to feel they are being *Cabaret*-ed to death — Otterbein College Theatre performed the Tony award-winning show a couple of years ago, Gallery Players is staging it now and a Broadway touring revival will arrive in 2000.

But a good restaging of this disconcerting musical — with its decadent *mise en scene* (based on John Van Druten's *I Am a Camera*), Fred Ebb's acerbic lyrics and John Kander's discordant music-hall score — is always worth seeing.

Set during the death throes of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s, *Cabaret* offers a metaphor for the social sickness that left Germany vulnerable to the insidious seduction of National Socialism.

Seen through the eyes of American writer Clifford Bradshaw (Mark Bernhardt), Berlin is a city on the brink of political apocalypse. The decadent Kit Kat Club serves as a microcosm of the greater calamity occurring in the streets; it is a place where a dissolute and apathetic public comes to pick up sexual partners, soak up gratuitously vulgar entertainment and otherwise fiddle while Rome burns.

Gallery Players' Pamela Hill has directed a revival that is visually handsome but fails to capitalize on the rich material afforded by Kander and Ebb.

Stephanie R. Gerckens' set literally uses the glitzy Kit Kat Club, set on the stage apron, as a frame of reference for the more quotidian scenes in Bradshaw's boarding house, set through the picture frame of a recessed proscenium arch.

Provided by a commercial costume company, the costumes, from

Theater review

■ Gallery Players will present *Cabaret* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. Nov. 6, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 14 and 2:30 p.m. Nov. 17 — at the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Community Center's Roth/Resler Theatre, 1125 College Ave. Tickets cost \$18, or \$12 for members. Call 614-231-2731, Ext. 248.

the sexy unmentionables of the Kit Kat chorus to the period street clothing of the club's patrons and Bradshaw's rooming house acquaintances, are colorfully spectacular.

Unfortunately, the performances are disappointing. As Bradshaw's lover, the British chanteuse Sally Bowles, Stephanie Raye Lancaster does not possess the required vocal range, and potentially show-stopping tunes such as the title song *Cabaret* and the slyly suggestive *Don't Tell Mama* lose much of their punch.

Bernhardt's Bradshaw treats Bowles more like a college roommate than a lover. As a result, the sexual tension between the two

characters is almost nil.

As the enigmatic Emcee, Ashley D. Sergeant has some good moments, particularly in *Two Ladies*, a gleeful tribute to the delights of a *menage a trois*, and *If You Could See Her*, during which he dances with a gorilla in a burlesque of miscegenation between an Aryan and a Jew.

But Sergeant never goes over the top in the way that the role demands, and he often seems overwhelmed by Musical Director Jeffrey D. Hamm's seven-piece band.

Overall, the cast is at its best when they perform as an ensemble, such as the numbers featuring the Kit Kat Girls or the Emcee and the waiters' romantically fascist *Tomorrow Belongs to Me*.

In fairness, it should be mentioned that the opening-night crowd at the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Community Center rewarded the *Cabaret* cast with a standing ovation, although that particular honorific is so overused anymore that it is effectively meaningless.

Despite the obvious enthusiasm of Saturday night's audience, Gallery Players' *Cabaret* came across much like the chest of a Weimar flapper: richly attired but disappointingly flat.

CD 15-99

Otterbein's 'Cabaret' beats Players'

Funny. I don't remember **Cabaret** being this raunchy.

The dancers certainly didn't bump and grind this provocatively when Players Theatre staged the musical in 1993. Or maybe it's just that their moves didn't *seem* so shocking because they took place at the Riffe Center instead of in conservative, teetotaling Westerville. You know how sitcoms never seem so tasteless as when you're watching them with your parents? Same difference.

At any rate, Otterbein's 500th production is not only raunchier but better overall than the show that turned out to be one of Players' last productions. Director Dennis Romer keeps the tone more consistently dark than Ed Graczyk did in '93. That's appropriate considering the story pirouettes around the rise of Naziism in Berlin, 1929.

It begins as Cliff, an American novelist, arrives in the German capital and is immediately befriended by Ludwig, a smuggler, and Sally Bowles, a singer at the tacky Kit Kat Club. Sally and Cliff are soon setting up housekeeping with financial help from Ludwig.

But before Cliff can surrender himself to domestic bliss, signs of gathering storms appear. The Nazis are beginning their drive to take over Germany, towing



Raunchy moves, chilling moments: Emily Cotton and Eric Dysart in *Cabaret*

their anti-Semitic ways along with them. As their influence grows, not even the Kit Kat Club can escape the rising tide of prejudice and intimidation.

It's when the action wanders into the club that Otterbein's production is at its best. That's partly because of the deliciously slutty Kit Kat Girls but mostly because of Eric Dysart's amazing performance as the Emcee. Singing, dancing and grinning with feline mischievousness, he's a nonstop marvel.

The scenes outside the club sometimes work and other times don't. Blame, in part, a couple of actors whose effectiveness varies from scene to scene.

Aaron Ramey is always low-key likable as Cliff, but Emily Cotton plays Sally too over-the-top to win the audience's sympathy. As a singer, Cotton shines brightly during her naughty delivery of *Don't Tell Mama* but later fails to generate sparks with the show's title number.

Theater

RICHARD ADES



After Dysart's Emcee, the most convincing performance is given by Heidi Letzmann as Cliff's pragmatic, middle-aged landlady. Unfortunately, she also gave the most uneven performance on opening night, apparently losing her concentration during Act II. But when she was good, she was very good, both speaking and singing numbers such as the pragmatic and tender *So What*.

Aiding the actors' efforts are Rob Johnson's handsome, revolving set and Ruth Boyd's witty, dark-toned costumes.

While more consistent performances would help this *Cabaret*, I have to admit it still probably wouldn't excite me that much. After seeing Bob Fosse's brilliant 1972 film interpretation, the 1966 Tony winner just seems too dated and impersonal to be as chilling as it should be.

Besides, both times I've seen *Cabaret* on the stage, the most chilling moment was an unintentional one. It came after the Emcee's dance with an ape in a tutu—a hilarious number in the Otterbein version.

The pas de deux ends with an anti-Semitic punch line, meant to show that Nazi prejudices are beginning to seep into the Kit Kat Club. But at each production I saw, the audience greeted the insult with laughter rather than a gasp.

Either the Emcee needs to try a different delivery of the line, or audiences should be required to revisit *Schindler's List* before coming to the theater.

STILL ON STAGE

EXCERPTS FROM THEATER REVIEWS BY RICHARD ADES

Agnes of God, presented by Reality (see Agenda):

"Yes, Michele Cuomo gives a skilled performance as Agnes, a naive young nun who's suspected of secretly giving birth and then killing the baby. But Cuomo initially plays Agnes like a cranky little girl, destroying the aura of spiritual mystery."

"And yes, Vicky Welsh Bragg gives a great performance as Agnes's mother superior. But look at the play she's wasting the performance on."

"John Pielmeier's 1980 drama is just not a satisfying piece of work."

Forever Plaid, presented by CATCO (see Agenda):

"I'd hoped I could just appreciate the classic tunes and just ignore the lightweight humor in between. What made it impossible was the 'humor' didn't always stay in between."

"Imagine: You're all set to enjoy *Chain Gang* or *Moments to Remember* when you find out you're expected to laugh because a quartet member has screwed up his dance steps. And it wasn't that funny the first time."

The Road to Mecca, presented by Red Herring (see Agenda):

"South Africa's now-dismantled system of racial oppression still haunts this fact-based story."

"Since her husband died years ago, Helen has spent her days putting together a fanciful version of Mecca outside her house. Now she's being pressured to move into a senior citizens home run by the local church."

"The play and the production are just good enough to hold our attention while leaving our emotions untouched."

INFO:

Otterbein College Theatre will present *Cabaret* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Running time: 2-1/2 hours in two acts. Tickets are \$12 today, \$14 Friday and Saturday. 823-1109.

THE OTHER PAPER
COLUMBUS, OH
N CIRCL. 50.000

OCT-28-99

Normal people and insane times are more interesting

Theater

RICHARD ADES



389 I seem to like **Cabaret** a little more every time I see it. Maybe that's because each production I see is a little better than the one that preceded it.

Otterbein College staged a lively **Cabaret** in 1997, though it wasn't good enough to change my opinion that Bob Fosse's '72 film adaptation is superior to the theatrical original.

Now, after seeing Gallery Players' production at the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Community Center, I still think Fosse's version is best. But I do have a new appreciation of the stage show's emotional potential, along with a renewed appreciation of director Pamela Hill's talent.

Hill—the guiding light behind several local triumphs, including last year's *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Yassenoff—turns the musical into a coherent portrait of a city declining in its way toward Nazism.

Productions of **Cabaret** often emphasize the decadence of pre-World War II Berlin, as symbolized by the sleazy Kit Kat Klub where American writer Cliff first meets singer Sally Bowles. The message seems to be that sexual amorality is setting the stage for Hitler's brand of political immorality.

Hill's production, however, has a different feel that is probably more historically accurate. Her Kit Kat Klub is less gilly than it's usually portrayed, while the boarding house where Clifford takes up residence is borderline decrepit. Could it be that poverty, rather than sin, is what leaves **Cabaret's** Berlin open to Hitler's message of hate? Considering the action takes place at the beginning of the Great Depression (1929-30), it's an easy theory to buy.

A major contribution to the cohesiveness of Hill's production is made by Stephanie Gerckens's scenic design,

which places most of the non-Kit Kat action on a mini-stage in the middle of the club. This underscores the Kit Kat's connection to the outside world, which becomes all too clear as the plot unfolds.

The most obvious shortcoming of the production is that Mark Bernhardt and Stephanie Raye Lancaster develop little chemistry as Cliff and Sally, who become a couple soon after they meet. Both characters are a bit bland, particularly Lancaster's Sally, though the actress does display a singing voice that's strong enough to do a decent job on such John Kander-Fred Ebb tunes as the title song and *Don't Tell Mama*.

Making up for the weakness of the show's younger couple, Dianna Ball and Rich Unger are marvelous as Cliff's widowed landlady and her suitor, a Jewish fruit vendor named Schultz. The two play their parts just right, handling the comic scenes without veering into cuteness, and the dramatic scenes without wading into sentimentality.

In important supporting roles, Jon

Schelb and Dianna Ball avoid stereotypes as a smuggler with questionable politics and a prostitute who becomes Cliff's neighbor.

Over at the Kit Kat Klub, Equity actor Ashley Sergeant earns his pay by creating an Emcee who sings and dances entertainingly while allowing us a glimpse of the humanity under the greasepaint. In fact, one of the subtle charms of Hill's production is that all of the club's staff members—Emcee, waiters and Kit Kat Girls—are recognizably human. It's one more way that Hill re-creates an insane moment in history without turning the participants into mindless robots.

This is not a perfect **Cabaret**. The absence of sparks between Cliff and Sally weakens the finale. Also, fans of Fosse's brilliant choreography will probably be disappointed by the simple dancing they see here.

Nevertheless, Hill and her cast and crew have succeeded in filling Berlin with real people, and in doing so they've made the danger that approaches the city a source of honest, heartfelt grief. That's something not even Fosse could pull off.

So what's the answer?

Women at Play has taken on a Harold Pinter play of uneven worth and staged it with uneven results.

Deftly directed by Katherine Burkman at a pace that makes room for the trademark Pinter pauses, **Ashe's to Ashe's** is at least diverting. After it's over, though, you wonder if you haven't been presented with a puzzle that annoyingly has no solution.

Christy Stanlake is masterful as Rebecca, a woman who seems to be men-

tally or emotionally disturbed. Rebecca begins by describing an old lover who was abusive and later recalls scenes that are odd and increasingly horrifying. Yet it's not clear whether any of her memories are real.

David Fawcett is less successful as Devlin, who at times appears to be Rebecca's therapist. The man attempts to draw her out, but it quickly becomes apparent that he's not approaching the task as an objective healer. The main problem with Fawcett's approach is that he overdoes the man's manipulative nature, making him a cardboard cad.

Pinter's play is on the surface a portrait of a male-female power struggle in which the woman has ceded all her advantages except the ability to ignore hard questions. As the woman tells her story, it then offers up images that could be taken from the Holocaust. Since, however, the woman is too young to have experienced that tragedy, the source of her "memories" remains unknown.

While Pinter's plays often leave threads hanging out, his better works create situations that seem emotionally complete. That can't be said for **Ashe's to Ashe's**.

If this **Women at Play** production is worthwhile, it's mainly due to Stanlake's assured performance as a woman suffering from demons that remain unknowable.

INFO:

Gallery Players will present **Cabaret** through Nov. 7 at the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Community Center, 1125 College Ave. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays. Running time: 2 hours, 35 minutes (including intermission). Tickets are \$18, \$16 for seniors, \$5 for students. 237-5223, Ext. 260.

INFO:

Women at Play will present **Ashe's to Ashe's** at 8 p.m. today and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Ohio State University Hillier Center, 40 E. 16th Ave. Running time: 50 minutes. Tickets are \$10, \$5 for students and seniors. Valet parking available. 457-6580.

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
COLUMBUS, OH.
FM CIRC. 299,881

MAY-1-97

Designer takes fresh approach to each show

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Willkommen ... bienvenue ... welcome to the colorful world of costume designer Ruth Boyd.

Boyd is celebrating her 25th year as a designer by costuming *Cabaret*, which opens tonight as a collaboration of Otterbein College's Theater and Music departments.

"A costume designer is not in the fashion business," said Boyd, who has designed more than 100 shows for Players Theatre, Columbus, Otterbein, Theatre Lancaster, the Susan Van Pelt Dance Ensemble and Phoenix Theatre Circle, a children's troupe.

"Some shows need to be beautiful — but *Cabaret* mainly needs to be decadent and shocking," she said.

Set in and around Berlin's garish Kit Kat Club in the early 1930s, composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb's Tony-winning musical drama places a seedy show-biz milieu and doomed romance against the sinister rise of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party.

"Except for the waiters' bright-red jackets, there are no bright colors in the show," Boyd said. She and director Dennis Romer agreed on a darker color scheme blending burgundies, golds, deep greens and blacks.

Boyd admires *Cabaret* more than some musicals because "it's not all glitz, fun and games."

She also appreciates the opportunity to mix "show" clothes and period street clothes.

"You can use your imagination more in *Cabaret* because you can try things that people would not ordinarily wear," she said.

Boyd has costumed *Cabaret* before — for Players in a glittering 1993 production in the Riffe Center's Capitol Theatre — but she refuses to repeat herself.

"That was a brighter, glitzier show, somewhat different in approach; this is darker."

"When I costume a show a second time, I want it not only to look different, but also to be an improvement over my former work. ... I want the costumes to do a better job of serving the overall concept of the playwright and

the director."

Boyd designed about 100 costumes for Otterbein's 36-member cast. Most were made from scratch under the supervision of Marci Hain in Otterbein's costume shop, but the Tyrolean dresses, lederhosen and a fur coat were borrowed from Boyd's 1993 *Cabaret*.

DETAILS, DETAILS

Over the years, Boyd has learned to pay attention to the details "that make it so correct."

In *Cabaret*, theatergoers should keep their eyes peeled for gloves with sequins, hats with fringe and jackets with multicolored wool cuffs.

"I very much enjoy putting in added details that only the most knowledgeable or the sharpest eyes will notice," Boyd said.

For singer Sally Bowles, Boyd fashioned a purse out of a velvet scarf. "Sally is a free spirit, so you can add stuff to her street clothes that other people might not wear."

Boyd views the costumer's job as helping to fulfill the director's vision. For this *Cabaret*, she worked closely with Romer, choreographer Stella Hiatt Kane and lighting designer Dana White.

Boyd added "all sorts of hidden pockets" to Bowles' Money dress "so she'll be able to have money wherever Stella wants her to put it in and take it out."

White vetoed only one of Boyd's suggested colors — "a weird shade of green" — because it faded too much under the lights.

Among Boyd's recent credits: Otterbein's *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Picasso Does My Maps* and *The World Goes Round* and Phoenix's *Winnie the Pooh*, *Little Women* and *Yellow Dog*.

During the past year, Boyd has become Phoenix's regular costume designer. She likes children's productions because they usually allow much bolder use of color.

Boyd, who began sewing as a little girl, still is attracted by the colors and textures of costumes — and the deeper, "more jeweled" the tone, the better.

"Unless it's called for," she said, "I'm not ordinarily a pastel person."



Ruth Boyd

Boyd honed her craft on the Players team

Costume designer Ruth Boyd praises Ed Graczyk as her mentor.

Of Boyd's first 50 or so shows, most were staged by now-defunct Players Theatre Columbus under Graczyk's staging or artistic direction.

"Ed taught me to see things from a stage, and not be afraid of putting patterns together as texture," Boyd said.

Her first show was a 1972 Players Club production of *Toys in the Attic*, starring Bette Spiro, Lil Strouss and Jackie Bates.

Among her favorite Players' designs: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Angel*, and three of Graczyk's original works: *A Country Christmas Carol*, *A Murder of Crows* and the 1976 premiere and 1991 revival of *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*.