



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Jon Peterson welcomes Portlanders to *Cabaret*.

In the spring of 1934, English writer Christopher Isherwood spent most of his days in the garden of a Canary Islands pensione chronicling the time he spent in Berlin, much to the derision of the owner, who urged the young man to go swimming instead. "After all," the proprietor said, "will it matter a hundred years from now if you wrote that yarn or not?"

The answer is, most emphatically, yes.

The Tony Award-winning Broadway revival of the musical *Cabaret* comes to Portland Aug. 15-20, but this version might not be what you're expecting. When you think of *Cabaret*, you might fondly recall the stylish Bob Fosse film before mentally filing the memory away in the Liza/Barbra/Judy file, the one marked For Music Theater Queens Only. But *Cabaret* boasts an impressive literary legacy, as well, and it occupies an important place in gay cultural history.

While the sexuality of the narrator in Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* is left ambiguous, the 1939 novel's success paved the way for his more daring gay-themed works, including the classic *A Single Man*. But his alter ego is almost incidental to the story that inspired *Cabaret*.

"I am a camera, with its shutter open, passive, recording, not thinking," Isherwood writes. For gay audiences, the character who matters most is his most enduring creation, Sally Bowles.

With her green nail polish and loose morals, she remains a symbol of defiance of bourgeois convention. In the penultimate scene in John Van Druten's 1951 theatrical adaptation, *I Am a Camera*, Sally's mother comes to fetch her back to England.

Isherwood describes Julie Harris' performance in the role: "In a token of her humiliation, she wore a frumpy expensive British coat, which her mother had made her put on. She looked as miserable as Joan of Arc must have looked when she was forced to stop dressing as a man. Then, in the last scene, Julie entered in the costume she had worn throughout the most of the play—a black silk sheath with a black tam o'shanter and a flame-colored scarf: the uniform of her revolt. Seeing it, one knew, before she spoke, that her mother had retired routed from the battlefield. The effect was heroic. Bohemia had triumphed."

When it came time to turn the play into a musical, composing team John Kander and Fred Ebb wrote the music with their friend Liza Minnelli in mind, but because Sally is described in the novel as singing badly, director Hal Prince rejected her on the grounds that she sang too well. One listen to the marginal vocal stylings of Jill Hayworth on the original cast album quickly dispels the wisdom of that decision.

To Isherwood's utter dismay, the stage musical also made the dubious historical suggestion

that the moral decadence of Weimar Germany contributed to the rise of Nazism rather than standing in defiance of it. Moreover, the leading man was transformed into an overtly heterosexual American. These changes, however, allowed the middle-class Broadway audience of 1966 to revel in the onstage debauchery while simultaneously condemning it.

Fosse's 1972 smash version of the musical, on the other hand, earned its place in the gay history books simply by being one of the first positive depictions of homosexuality in film. In this version, the protagonist is a bisexual Englishman played by Michael York, whose wide face and boyish smile make him a dead ringer for the young Isherwood. Sally's offhand acceptance of this character's sexuality endeared the film to gay audiences. *Tales of the City* author Armistead Maupin called *Cabaret* the first movie that "really celebrated homosexuality," and its depiction of the wild excesses of Weimar Germany reminded him of his life in San Francisco.

By assuming the role of Sally in the film, Minnelli also assumed the mantle of gay icon long held by her mother, Judy Garland. But whereas Garland's public persona—the tormented outsider longing to fly over the rainbow—resonated with the pre-Stonewall generation of gay men, Minnelli's Sally spoke for the emerging gay sexual liberation. When Minnelli makes reference in the title song to her alcohol- and pill-addicted friend Elsie as being "the happiest corpse I'd ever seen," the subtext of Garland, dead just three years of an overdose, is clear. Now clean and sober herself, Minnelli has gone on to make the song a declaration of triumph over adversity (rather than convention) by changing the line "When I go, I'm going like Elsie" to "When I go, I'm NOT going like Elsie."

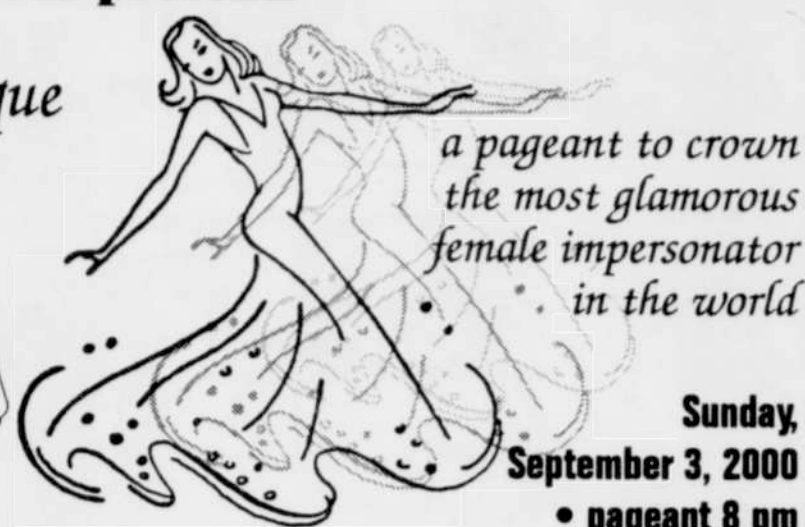
Cabaret's newest incarnation is directed by Sam Mendes, who won an Oscar for the film *American Beauty*, another gay-themed story about defying convention. In an attempt to recapture the shock that earlier versions had for theatergoers, this production promises to be darker, raunchier and more disturbing than its predecessors. But to find out whether the production is true to the story's gay roots, you simply will have to "come to the cabaret."

■ *CABARET* plays Aug. 15-20 at Keller (formerly Civic) Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets start at \$20 from the box office, (503) 241-1802, or Ticketmaster.

MARC ACITO is the creator of the comic strip "The Boys Next Door." Much to his mother's delight, he played all the leads in his high school musicals.

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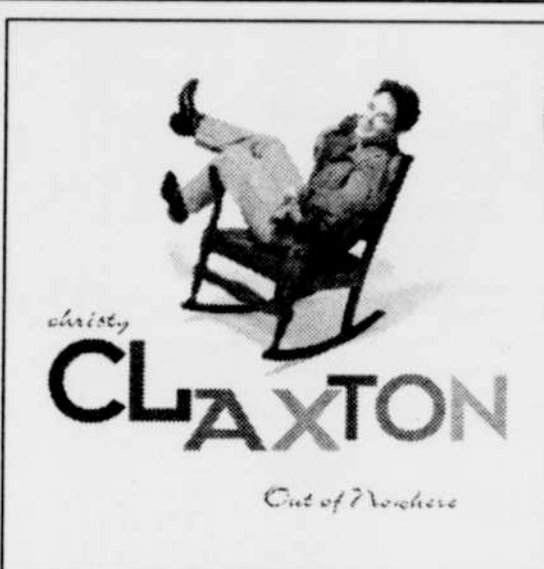
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