

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Cabaret: Then and now

**W**ith a storm in the wind, what would you do?

Almost 30 years ago, I sang these lyrics from the original version of *Cabaret*, the musical by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Mastersoff based on the play *I Am a Camera*, which was adapted from Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin*.

*Cabaret* is set in 1930s Berlin when the Nazi Party is gradually taking over Germany. It centers on a young American named Cliff who adventures to the Kit Kat Klub, a seedy cabaret where he meets a British singer, Sally Bowles.

Many readers might be familiar with the movie starring Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey. In 1998, the new Broadway version of the play was adapted with songs from the film. In it, LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersex) undercurrents became more prominent and the club and dancing became more gritty and raunchy.

I was in the original version of the musical twice, once as a Kit Kat Girl and a few years later as Fräulein Schneider, the "B" story of the play, about an ill-fated elder romance. I always wanted to play the role of Fräulein Schneider when I was closer to the actual age of the character and had more life experience. When I learned that Fuse Theatre Ensemble, a company that also produces the OUTwright Theatre Festival of LGBTQI works, was staging *Cabaret*, I auditioned. I've now checked off my bucket list an opportunity to reprise a character I love in the "new" risqué version of the play that contains more sexual situations and nudity than the previous productions.

What's most striking is that the storyline of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany is more blatant and ominous. Considering the recent rise of nationalism and neo-Nazi gatherings, *Cabaret* has greater weight and pertinence now than when I was last involved in the play in 1989. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there have been daily headlines of not only anti-Semitic hate crimes, but racist, xenophobic, and homophobic ones as well.

Sometimes people stand up to it, but more often they stand by as spectators or brush off its impact.

I'm even more deeply troubled when people of color become part of a hate movement. A self-declared "Asian Nazi" — 24-year-old Heon "Hank" Jong Yoo of Tyler, Texas — was arrested in April on charges of making false statements when



Dmae Roberts plays Fräulein Schneider in *Cabaret*. (Photo/Greg Parkinson Photography)

he purchased seven guns in east Texas. Yoo created YouTube videos of himself singing "Dixie," wearing a Confederate soldier's uniform, and "denigrating Black Lives Matter and Jewish people." On the Southern Poverty Law Center's website, he was quoted as "considering myself white" and calling his parents a racial slur.

It saddened me that an immigrant raised in Texas could be so attracted to fascism. It's even worse that no one stood up to him, taught him to embrace being Asian, or connected him with communities of color.

It takes strength to stand up against hate. Many people don't, however, because they are afraid, as exemplified by Fräulein Schneider in the play when she sings the questions: *Would you pay the price? What would you do?*

My revisitation of *Cabaret* in the highly immersive production in Portland is featured through June 2 at the real cabaret setting of the Funhouse Lounge. It also has a cast that's two-thirds LGBTQI and includes five actors of color. Though some might blush (or laugh) at the nudity and sexuality, the play holds a mirror to the growing nationalism and neo-Nazi activities in our country. *Cabaret*, with its fun and sometimes poignant and chilling songs, dramatizes how evil can grow slowly into a pandemic if it's not addressed. After making a decision between love or bowing to the will of an oppressive nationalist movement, Fräulein Schneider asks the important question that still rings true in 2018: *Go on; tell me I will listen. What would you do? If you were me ...*

*Cabaret* is playing at the Funhouse Lounge, located at 2432 S.E. 11th Avenue in Portland, through June 2. To learn more, call (214) 504-6350 or visit [www.fusetheatreensemble.com](http://www.fusetheatreensemble.com). To buy tickets, visit [www.boxofficetickets.com](http://www.boxofficetickets.com).

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**Wondering what events are going on this week?**  
 Check out *The Asian Reporter's* event calendars, on page 12.