

Life is a Cabaret

Historically, Bohemia refers to a geographic region of the Czech Republic and the Bohemians represent the influx of traveling gypsies, or Roma (Sell 43), that migrated to France in the early 19th century. Bohemian life and culture, however, has moved beyond the definitive boundaries of national identification and a myriad of facets illustrate what now defines the term “bohemian.” Gypsy, artist, ne’er-do-well, performer, musician, traveler, nomad, vagabond, degenerate, poet, punk – there seems to be no clear-cut description of a bohemian, but rather there exists a multiplicity and layering of terms that sculpt an identity that encompasses some, or perhaps all, of these characteristics. Despite the many shapes and shades the bohemian and the bohemian lifestyle may come in, a few common threads resonate: the rejection of bourgeois or conformist values¹ and the embrace of artistic and personal freedoms.

Bohemians actively lead a non-traditional lifestyle,² preferring freedom of expression, artistic creativity and eccentricity to conventionality and the status quo. Those who live the bohemian lifestyle are often noted for their passion for the unprecedented (Sell 42) or their willingness to sacrifice for personal choice. This paper will explore these themes and the representations of bohemian culture and lifestyle in the history of the cabaret and the theatrical and film versions of *Cabaret*, each as a unique body of text where song, dance and performance are essential common threads.

¹ <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255-s01/bohmemelifestyle.html>.

² <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-bohemian.htm>.

The German cabaret drew its inspiration from its French predecessors. Beginning with *Le Chat Noir* in the Montmartre district of Paris³, the popularity of the cabaret flourished and spread through Europe. Historically, the theatrical and film versions of *Cabaret* are rooted in the autobiographical memoirs of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* written in 1939. His quips influenced the play *I Am A Camera*, written by John van Druten with lyrics by Fred Ebb. The first performance of the stage version *Cabaret* took place at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York City on November 20, 1966,⁴ nearly a century after the emergence of the first cabarets in France. Six years later, the 1972 film adaptation of *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse won eight Oscars⁵. Though variant, all versions of the text -from book to two different theatrical versions, to film, and back to theatre - reveal tangents of bohemian life and culture situated in Weimar Germany from 1929 - 1931. The political and economic frictions occurring in Germany during the Weimar period coincide with Berlin's rise as a center of a flowering in the arts as the Weimar government essentially relaxed many forms of censorship. Thus, the Berlin cabaret scene expressed the misgivings of a lost post-war generation regaining its voice (Armstrong 2).

The oscillation between art and money reveals that the true significance of bohemian culture lay within the tensions of capitalism, where the radical modern artist is transformed into a cultural commodity, bought and sold in the marketplace (Gluck 352). Born out of cultural resistance, caught between art and commerce (Lareau 471), the cabaret was emblematic of controversial, provocative and satirical material where

³ <http://www.musicals101.com/cabaret.htm>

⁴ <http://www.answers.com/topic/cabaret-musical-play>

⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068327/>

politics, society and sexuality were privy to scrutiny. Hence, cabarets' thrive despite economic and political chaos; they were a means of escape, of coming to grips with and as vehicles for critique of this strange post-war environment through song, dance and performance. A night at the cabaret meant irreverent mocking of the changing morality and rising nationalism in Germany, the petty hypocrisy of the times and the grey misery of day-to-day existence - medicated through alcohol, laughter, performance and eroticism (Lareau 474). The bohemian art of cabaret functioned as an outsider culture that challenged hegemonic preconceptions and the bourgeoisie (Lareau 474) and offered an alternative aesthetic and antithetic utopia for the performers and the audience.

Meet Sally Bowles, our heroine in each form of the *Cabaret* text. An American actress, singer, dancer and performer with the desire of becoming a movie star. Despite her yearning for cinematic success, Sally is a bohemian through and through. She'll sleep with any director for a part but it's her work at the Kit Kat Club that defines her as an artist. Sally, sexually free and not ashamed of it, spends her time drinking, smoking and partying when she isn't performing. She combines meals and booze, mixing a raw egg with brandy for breakfast as she pampers herself in her boarding house bedroom. Sally is a classic bohemian diva – a traveling artist who migrated overseas, away from a bourgeois home with an uncaring father, to find herself and pursue her artistic dreams in Berlin. Signified by her outlandish hair styles and vivid make-up, bright green “Divine Decadence” nail polish and a provocative, sensational wardrobe, Sally's fearless passion for performance energizes her life, the lives of those she encounters and defines her socially, politically and sexually. Though in financial straights, Sally is wealthy in spirit

and she is resourceful; she uses her body and her sexuality to explore her artistic fantasies and to gain material wealth.

The content of her performance “Mein Herr,” – music, lyrics, dance - exemplify Sally’s carefree bohemian view of men, sex and relationships (Fig. 1)

Selection of Lyrics to “Mein Herr”

The continent of Europe is so wide,
Mein Herr.
Not only up and down, but side to side,
Mein Herr.
I couldn't ever cross it if I tried,
Mein Herr.
So I do..
What I can...
Inch by inch...
Step by step...
Mile by mile...
Man by man.

Bye-Bye, Mein Lieber Herr.
Farewell, mein Lieber Herr.
It was a fine affair,
But now it's over.
And though I used to care,
I need the open air.
You're better off without me,
Mein Herr.

[SALLY AND CHORUS GIRLS]
Don't dab your eye, mein Herr,
Or wonder why, Mein Herr.
I've always told you I was a rover.
You mustn't knit your brow,
You should have known by now
You'd every cause to doubt me,
Mein, Herr.



Figure 1: Liza Minelli as Sally in Fosse’s *Cabaret*

True to bohemian ideals, Sally dances suggestively in a sexy costume, professing herself as a “rover” and casual lover. It isn’t that she’s no good for the bourgeois “Mein Herr,” rather, it’s that he isn’t good for her. He will only get in her way. The ironies in these lyrics expose her facetious sentiments and true nature as a traveler and explorer of love.

Her musical counterpart is Emcee of the Kit Kat Club. Emcee serves as more than a performance partner for Sally in the film and theatrical texts, he also functions as a

narrative device and as a symbol of gender-bending and sexual deviance. He appears in a ménage-a-trois piece called “Two Ladies” where he romps around with two women in evocative and frivolous play (Figure 2):

Figure 2:
Image and Lyrics from “Two Ladies”

[EMCEE]
We switch partners daily
To play as we please.

[GIRLS]
Twosies beats onesies,

[EMCEE]
But nothing beats threes.
I sleep in the middle,

[GIRL 1]
I'm left,

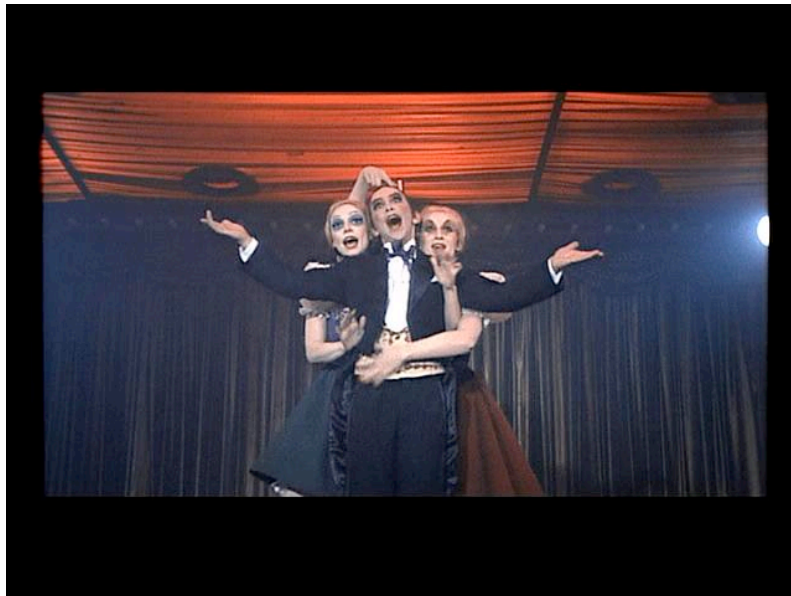
[GIRL 2]
Und I'm right,

[EMCEE]
But there's room on the bottom
If you drop in some night.

[GIRLS]
Beedle dee, dee dee dee...

[EMCEE]
Two ladies.
Beedle dee, dee dee dee...

[GIRLS]
Two ladies.
Beedle dee, dee dee dee,
And he's the only man.



He also appears in drag during a burlesque chorus-line sequence (Figure 3) that unfolds into a devilish mockery of the SS where the stage and film performances transform the

scantly clad cross-dresser and the female chorus line into marching Nazi troops. Are they insinuating that the Nazi's are homosexual? Or more importantly, suggesting the social/political change from freedom to authoritarian ideology and conformity?

Both the "Two Ladies" and the drag performances serve as overt suggestions of the sexual liberty and daring prevalent in the world of the cabaret. Emcee is risqué and wildly expressive in face and body, using physicality to exude himself on stage. His standard dress is a suit with top hat, bowtie, monocle and tails, which parodies bourgeois attire. Small and impish, Emcee contradicts a typical view of masculinity by wearing heavy red lipstick, rouge, eye shadow and thick false eyelashes.

Unlike Sally, we don't see how Emcee lives or learn anything about his lifestyle outside of the cabaret; his identity is confined solely to the stage and the performative mode.

He is the performance and an icon of the cabaret itself. He is both form and content. Emcee is emblematic of what the cabaret and bohemian culture signify - desire, self-expression, ridicule of ruling social constructs and an unapologetic lust for life.



Fig. 3. Emcee in drag, performing wildly for the audience

Though both the theatrical version and film adaptation of Cabaret are remarkably similar in style, costume, setting and form, the film rendition alters the structure of the stage performance by adding language and elements inherent in the medium of cinema, as

well as characters, plot lines and three new musical performances. Fosse cuts three songs from the stage version in exchange for dialogue and scenes that did not exist prior. He does this to accentuate character and elevate drama, as well as to juxtapose images of the rising Nazi powers outside of the club with the intimate pleasures inside the cabaret. The bleak and violent images of the Nazis serve as a striking negative contrast to the positive and dazzling images of the bohemian cabaret.

For example, the film version of *Cabaret* opens and closes with Emcee, looking in a mirror that reflects him and the audience behind him, who appear as an abstract swirl. In the opening shot of the film, he pops into frame upon the beat of a drum roll, looks into the mirror and at the cabaret audience (and essentially at us, the viewer). A sinister smile breaks across his painted face as he welcomes us to the cabaret (Fig. 4). The swirl of the audience's reflection serves to represent an audience of faceless, unidentifiable patrons. This distorted image represents the ideology behind the cabaret – where all are welcome and where identities will be reshaped, molded and blurred, where the bizarre goes unnoticed and people are accepted for what they are (Galvin 2). This distortion also presents a certain bohemian naïveté – that entertainment, art and freedom can change or transcend social constructs. Outside of the Kit Kat Club, the Nazi party grows with increasing force and a staunch moral war against degenerate decadence, gypsies and Jews grows. But for now, in the dark theatre of the cabaret, one can forget the worries of the world or of everyday existence and blend into the bohemian lifestyle celebrated here.

Similarly, the film ends with a recreation of this same shot, and Emcee bids us farewell and hurriedly, almost fearfully, exits. The camera dollies out and pans right to

reveal patches of clarity in the mirror that did not appear in the opening shot which denotes change and a new climate. The first recognizable image is that of a brown shirt donning a red swastika armband (Figure 5). Mitchell describes the swastika as an image that is a “notorious offender...[that] functions as an almost universal symbol of unredeemable evil” (129) and he argues that images can be treated as if they were “persons or animated beings.” Mitchell states there is a phenomenon called “iconophobia syndrome;” where “people are afraid of images” (141). Fosse captures this phenomenon – where the stagnant, motionless image of the swastika replaces the anonymous, responsive and enthusiastic churn of the audience and sends Emcee running for his life. The Nazi’s have invaded the sacred bohemian space of the cabaret. No need to explain as the credits roll over the frozen shot of the Nazi’s and the image of the swastika, that their presence marks the decline of decadent art and bohemian culture in this period of German history.

The community created in the cabaret is now involved in a life-threatening operation as opposed to a life-enhancing venue for art and expressivity. Sell explains that for the bohemian, finding a community has always been a life-threatening quest, and as Emcee swiftly disappears behind the curtain, he symbolizes the disappearance of many artists and bohemian cultures (Sell 43) and the breakdown of their communities by an infiltrating and hostile force. From the initial abstract image of blurry smudges reflected to the audience and to us, on to the frightening concrete image of an intimidating SS audience, the opposing images are also placed on opposite sides of the frame. Fosse uses this cinematic visual framing device of mirrors and reflections to provide satirical punctuation (Armstrong 3) and to present thematic contrast between bohemian counter-

culture and the rising political faction that would persecute, ostracize and execute bohemians and artists of this type.

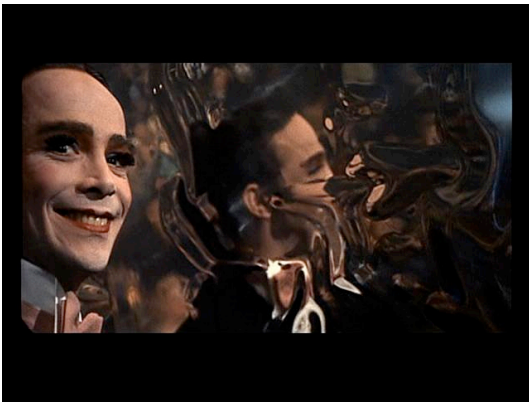


Figure 4: Emcee: “*Willkommen!*”



Figure 5: The final shot of *Cabaret*.
“*Auf Wiederseh’n!*”

As unique texts, the stage version of *Cabaret* captures the intimacy of live performance and harkens back to the French and German traditions of the late 19th and early 20th century. (I saw a *Cabaret* in 1999 during a revival performance at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. Emcee received three standing ovations.) The audience is encouraged to sing and dance with the show – in essence, to embrace and interact with the text, to actively participate in the celebration of carefree bohemianism.

With a playbill, the audience leaves with a tangible piece reminiscent of the performance (Fig. 6).

In contrast, the film version, by nature of the medium, is removed from the live performance; instead we catch glimpses of the audiences in cutaway shots and view the cabaret from a third-person point of view. The director is able to juxtapose the growing rise of a

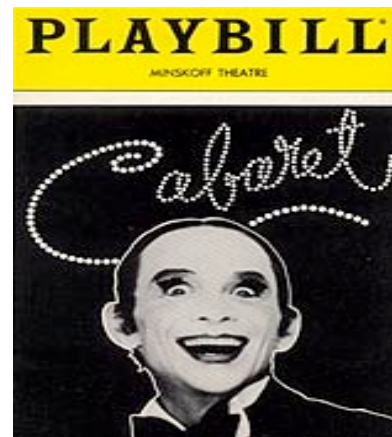


Fig. 6. Grey as Emcee on Broadway

hostile and dangerous force throughout the performance scenes, cutting from the club to the streets and back and forth, which contrast the vibrant interior of the cabaret with the dangerous exterior, using editing to imply that these moments are occurring simultaneously in time and space. Therefore, theatre as textual medium can be interactive, and in the case of *Cabaret*, is impossible to avoid. In contrast, the cinematic text of *Cabaret*, though engaging, still relies heavily on editing, shot composition and the structural devices of the medium to tell the same story.

Regardless of textual medium, the messages of *Cabaret* remain constant. In here, the poet, the artist, the dancer, singer, transsexual, gypsy and punk alike are welcome.

Work Cited:

Armstrong, Richard. "Dancing in the dark: personality and politics in 'Cabaret'." Australian Screen Education 42 (Autumn 2006): 125(6). Academic OneFile. Gale. Virginia Commonwealth University. 4 Nov. 2007. <<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>>.

Broadway: The American Musical. Memorable Musicals. Cabaret / PBS. 2004. PBS Online. 06 November 2007. <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/musicals/cabaret.html>>.

Cabaret. Dir. Bob Fosse. Perf. Liza Minnelli, Joel Grey, Michael York. ABC Pictures. 1972.

Cabaret (1972). Internet Movie Database. 05 November 2007. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068327/>>.

Cabaret Lyrics – Cabaret Soundtrack. 2007. Lyrics on Demand. 06 November 2007. <<http://www.lyricsondemand.com/soundtracks/c/cabaretlyrics/index.html>>.

Cabaret, musical play; definition. Answers.com. 04 November 2007. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/cabaret-musical-play>>.

Cabaret 101 – Part 1. 1996 – 2003. Musicals 101. 06 November 2007. <<http://www.musicals101.com/cabaret.htm>>

Galvin, Peter. "Cabaret: a study guide." Australian Screen Education 31 (Autumn 2003): 85(6). Academic OneFile. Gale. Virginia Commonwealth University. 4 Nov. 2007 <<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>>.

Gluck, Mary. "Theorizing the Cultural Roots of the Bohemian Artist." Modernism/modernity. Vol 7, No 3. 2000. pp. 351 – 378.

Lareau, Allen. "The German Cabaret Movement during the Weimar Republic." Theatre Journal. Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec., 1991), pp 471 – 490.

Mitchell, W.J.T. What Do Pictures Want?: The lives and loves of images. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2005.

Sell, Mike. "Bohemianism, the Cultural Turn of the Avantgarde, and Forgetting the Roma." The Drama Review 51:2 (T194) Summer 2007. pp 41 – 59.

Welcome to Bohemia. May 2001. Mount Holyoke College's History 255: 'Les Miz and Les Media. 04 November 2007. <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist255-s01/bohmeme/lifestyle.html>>.

What is a Bohemian? Wisegeek. 04 November 2007. <<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-bohemian.htm>>.