

Paul Capsis brings his idiosyncrasies to the role of the Emcee.

Come Blow Your Horn!

CABARET RETURNS TO PROVIDE A TIMELY ANECDOTE FOR A WORLD IN DISARRAY.

WHEN IT COMES to *Cabaret*, most think of the 1972 movie starring Liza Minnelli and Michael York. And rightly so, considering this particular film earned eight Oscars and lifted Minnelli out from the shadow of her famous mother, Judy Garland.

Cabaret's story, however, goes much deeper than the popular movie. It began as *Berlin Stories*, a 1939 novel by Christopher Isherwood. It was adapted into the play *I Am A Camera* by John Van Druten in 1951 before finally becoming the 1966 *Cabaret* musical we know today. It was the song-and-lyrics duo of John Kander and Fred Ebb who created what many believe to be “the musical for people who hate musicals”.

Set in Berlin of the 1930s with the rise of the Nazi Party as the political backdrop, *Cabaret* tells the story of bisexual American writer Cliff Bradshaw and his relationship with English performer Sally Bowles. The cabaret itself takes place in a seedy, burlesque nightclub called the Kit Kat Klub where social and political commentary is cleverly told through song.

Successful productions of *Cabaret* are usually innovative and intense. For instance, one Broadway production included a large, warped mirror that reflected back at the audience. The 1993 London revival directed by Sam Mendes (with Alan Cumming as the Emcee) involved the cast stripping to reveal concentration camp uniforms, yellow stars of David and pink triangles (symbolizing the Jews and the homosexuals killed in concentration camps) and a

symbolic scene of a gas chamber.

Actors, directors and producers are still inspired by the chilling shadows around the show. In its 50th year, producer David M Hawkins has brought a new production to Australia, directed by Nicolas Christo who pays homage to the original source.

“We are lifting a glass to the author of the *Berlin Stories*, the incredible Christopher Isherwood,” says Christo. “David Hawkins and I are so passionate about the poetry and insight of Isherwood and want to give this production that sense of wickedness and wit. This is a show that draws on the decadence of Berlin and serves up the swirling art and culture clashes of the 1920s and '30s.”

Playing leads in the wickedness are Chelsea Gibb, renowned for her role as Roxie Hart in *Chicago*, and Marcus Graham from television's *Jack Irish*. But as roles go, one of the most interesting is that of the Emcee, a somewhat ghoulish character who has been described as a “devil-doll host”. Integral to the story, he is Riff Raff to Rocky or Che to *Evita* and in the new Australian production is played by Paul Capsis.

“I had dreamed about doing this role,” says Capsis. “There are roles you long to do and sometimes it's a bit obvious, but because the Emcee inhabits a dank, dark world, it's very hard to resist him.”

Joel Grey won an Oscar for his portrayal. Alan Cummings sexualised the character in the '90s. Capsis' interpretation will be keenly anticipated.

“I've just read Joel Grey's book *Master Of Ceremonies*, which is brilliantly written. I was interested in what was going on for Mr Grey when he created the original Emcee on Broadway and how he found him. We are very different people, Mr Grey and I, but I imagine I shall bring my own lived experience into the role, with my own edge,” says Capsis.

When Christopher Isherwood wrote the original story the world was on the cusp of massive political change – the rise of right-wing fascism in Europe. Aspects of the story seem reflected in the current state of the world, director Christo points out.

“It's a scary case of history repeating itself,” he says. “Sure, the rise of Trump in America is an obvious parallel to the rise of Nazism but even in Australia we are witnessing a move to the political right and, still, we scratch our heads and think ‘how?’ This is a show that has the guts to examine the implosion of one of the world's greatest cities, Berlin, and one of the most progressive societies to have ever existed.”

For some, theatre revivals may seem tedious but, as with recent productions such as *Angels In America* and *RENT*, *Cabaret* comes at a time when counterculture protest, freedom of speech and artistic license are needed more than ever.

MORE: *Cabaret* plays the Hayes Theatre in Sydney from January 9 and Athenaeum Theatre Melbourne from April 27. Go to: www.cometothecabaret.com.au