

The Evolution of Cabaret

By Harrison Landsberg

1939 – Goodbye To Berlin (Book)

The evolution of Cabaret begins in 1939 with the publication of Christopher Isherwood's novel, Goodbye To Berlin. Goodbye To Berlin is a semi-autobiographical novel collecting a series of sketches of Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s. It is in this novel that we meet characters such as Sally Bowles, who was based on teenage cabaret singer Jean Ross, and Fraulein Schneider, who was named Fraulein Schroeder in the novel, and was based on a woman named Fraulein Meta Thurnau.

Goodbye To Berlin introduces us to Christopher Isherwood and his relationship to Sally Bowles, and shares the story of a disintegrating Berlin during the waning days of the Weimar Republic.

1951 – I Am a Camera (play)

In 1951, Christopher Isherwood's novel was adapted into a Broadway play titled 'I Am a Camera', the title being part of a line from the novel's first page ("I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."). The original production was staged by John Van Druten, and led to multiple Tony Awards for the lead actresses in the play. I Am a Camera ran for 214 performances, between November 28 1951 and July 12 1952.

1955 – I Am a Camera (film)

In 1955, Van Druten and Isherwood's hit play was adapted into a film. Starring Laurence Harvey as Isherwood, and with Julie Harris once again starring as Sally Bowles, the film was set to be a success. Unfortunately, due to censorship, emendations had to be made, leading to significant deviation from the source material, and the film was unsuccessful on release. Luckily for the future of Cabaret, however, the film became a hit in the 1955 British box office.

1966 – Cabaret Begins

The year 1966 is when Cabaret truly began. Broadway producer Harold Prince decided he wanted to create an adaptation of Isherwood's novel, and hired playwright Joe Masteroff to work on it. Prince also invited song writing duo John Kander and Fred Ebb to work on the project. Kander and Ebb created songs such as 'Willkommen' and 'Cabaret' that are still beloved today. This adaptation also changed some iconic characters, such as changing the antisemitic landlady to be a kind woman in love with a Jewish fruit vender (Herr Schultz), and changing Isherwood's character to an American novelist called Clifford Bradshaw. This version introduced new characters such as The Emcee and the aforementioned Herr Schultz as well.

1972 – Cabaret (film)

1972 brings with it one of the most loved movies of the decade, an adaptation of Kander & Ebb's 'Cabaret'. Directed by Bob Fosse and with Liza Minnelli as Sally, and Joel Grey recreating his iconic Emcee role, the movie brought new life to an already stunning musical. This film adaptation included new songs such as 'Mein Herr' and 'Money, Money', while it removed characters such as Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz, and with them, songs as 'Married' and 'So What?'. Despite these changes, Cabaret (1972) was hugely well received.

1987 – Broadway Revival

In 1987 Cabaret had its first Broadway revival. The revival once again saw Joel Grey as The Emcee, and was directed by Harold Prince. The revival added the song 'Don't Go' for Cliff's character, and combined songs 'Sitting Pretty' and 'Money, Money' into one. The show opened on October 22nd 1987, and ran for 261 performances, starting at the Imperial Theatre and later transferring to the Minskoff Theatre.

1993 – Sam Mendes Production

In 1993, director Sam Mendes revived Cabaret at the Donmar Warehouse in London. Starring Alan Cumming as The Emcee, this revival is considered one of the most iconic versions of Cabaret. The portrayal of The Emcee changed majorly in this revival, going from a sexually aloof character in a tuxedo, to a highly sexualised character with suspenders around their crotch and red paint on their nipples. This version also included the song 'I Don't Care Much' for The Emcee's character, and hinted heavily towards Cliff being bisexual. Mendes' production of Cabaret is well known for having one of the most shocking endings to the show. Ending with a reveal of The Emcee in a concentration camp prisoner's uniform, with a yellow star (identifying Jews), a red star (marking communists), and a pink triangle (identifying homosexuals), this is one of the most impactful, and heartbreaking, endings of Cabaret. This version was also filmed for UK television.

1998 – Broadway Revival

The 1998 Broadway revival had Alan Cumming reprising his role as The Emcee, alongside newcomer Natasha Richardson. Despite having a similar creative team, there were some changes made to this version, such as ‘Sitting Pretty’ being removed (meaning ‘Money, Money’ was performed on it’s own) , and the song ‘Two Ladies’ now being performed by The Emcee, one Cabaret girl, and one Cabaret boy in drag. This version of Cabaret also saw Raúl Esparza, John Stamos, Neil Patrick Harris, and many others, as The Emcee.

2014 – Broadway Revival

In 2014 Sam Mendes once again directed a Broadway revival of Cabaret starring Alan Cumming as The Emcee. This version also had Emma Stone star as Sally Bowles.

2021 – West End Revival

In 2021 Rebecca Frecknall directed a West End revival of Cabaret. This version began on November 15 2021. Eddie Redmayne took on the role of Emcee, and Jessie Buckley the role of Sally. There have also been other notable actors as the iconic Emcee and Sally duo such as Mason Alexander Park and Maude Apatow, and Layton Williams and Rhea Norwood. Billy Porter and Marisha Wallice have also played the duo.

2024 – West End > Broadway

2024 saw the West End production of Cabaret moving to Broadway. Starting on April 1st 2024, Redmayne continued his role as The Emcee, this time alongside actress Gayle Rankin. This version has also seen Adam Lambert and Auli’I Cravalho as Emcee and Sally, and was nominated for 9 Tony Awards.

As Of June 2025

Currently Cabaret is running on the West End and on Broadway at The Playhouse Theatre and The August Wilson Theatre respectively. Currently starring as Emcee on Broadway is Orville Peck, and on West End The Emcee is played by Rob Mudge. Sally is played by Eva Noblezada on Broadway, and Hannah Dodd on the West End.

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