

• Dallas Theater Center's 'Cabaret' is phenomenal take on the musical



Ben Torres/Special Contributor

Kate Wetherhead (Sally Bowles) with dancers Kent Zimmerman (left), who plays Bobby, is in the ensemble and is the associate choreographer, and Jeremy Dumont as Herman, are in the Dallas Theater Center's production of Cabaret.



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Theater

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Texas theatrical insiders have always known that if somebody gave Joel Ferrell all the resources Broadway directors enjoy, he could turn out a musical as good as any in the country. With Cabaret, it has finally happened.

In the nearly 45 years since librettist Joe Masteroff and songwriters John Kander and Fred Ebb wrote the

show, Cabaret has evolved. For the Dallas Theater Center version, which opened Friday, Ferrell has taken it a step further.

A young American, Cliff (Lee Trull), visits Germany during the glorious decadence of the Weimar Republic and the onset of Nazism. Despite his homosexuality, he forms a liaison with British cabaret singer Sally Bowles (Kate Wetherhead).

Designer Bob Lavalley has changed the Wyly Theatre into the Kit Kat Klub, where many members of the audience are at tables to watch the leering Emcee (Wade McCollum) welcome the customers lasciviously. For the 1972 movie, Bob Fosse used essentially only the numbers performed on the cabaret stage. Ferrell adopts the sequence of the 1998 Broadway revival, which combines most of the original score with new songs from the film.

That revival emphasized the horror of the Nazi takeover, and Ferrell heightens it even more. From the beginning, his stomping chorus girls and boys might almost be wearing jackboots. The main influence on Ferrell's choreography isn't the ubiquitous Fosse but the Bill T. Jones of Spring Awakening— with the same emphasis on nubile post-adolescent sexuality. (Be prepared for a certain amount of nudity, and a much greater quantity of sheer raunch.)

Ferrell has always coaxed singing actors into exquisitely detailed psychological performances. The role of Cliff's landlady, Fraulein Schneider, was originally written as a star part for Lotte Lenya — who epitomized the Weimar cultural scene in her youth. I saw her do the role, and she wasn't a patch on Julie Johnson in the role. Johnson is both endlessly subtle and gloriously intense. Her singing is even better than her acting, and her scenes with David Coffee as her elderly Jewish suitor are highlights of the show.

The two out-of-town guests are just as phenomenal. Wetherhead doesn't worry about the standard questions about Sally – whether she's actually got talent, for instance. This Sally has so much talent you couldn't hide it if you tried. McCollum's Emcee is even more sleazily androgynous than his great predecessors in the role. He can also suddenly turn on a boyishly macho charm, and his singing is virtuosic in its control of color and mood.

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Through May 22 at the Wyly Theatre, 2400 Flora St. Runs 160 mins. \$15 to \$200. 214-880-0202, www.dallastheatercenter.org.