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Theater review

"Cabaret"

by Melinda Calvert

Published February 5, 2009

The Aerospace Players' production of "Cabaret" is a blend of comedy and heartbreak, which makes it most interesting. The story takes place in 1930s Berlin before, and during, Hitler's rise to power. Based on the play "I Am a Camera" by John Van Druten and "The Berlin Stories" by Christopher Isherwood, it opens at the Kit Kat Klub, the hottest night spot in Berlin, a city still caught up in social decadence, where living is fun and loving is abundant.

Although the story revolves around Clifford Bradshaw (Dave Fulton), a young American who moves to Berlin to write a novel and to teach Germans how to speak English, it also explores an era when ominous political changes are beginning to take place.

Meeting Ernst Ludwig (Bob Borich) at the train station seems to have been a lucky thing for Cliff. Ernst wants to show Cliff the town and starts by inviting him to go with him to the Kit Kat Klub for a drink and also insisting on becoming his first language student. But this seemingly friendly gesture has eventual serious undertones. Meanwhile, at the Kit Kat, Cliff meets Sally Bowles, the lead act — and a Brit. He is very interested in Sally, but finding a room to rent is uppermost on his mind as he doesn't have a place to sleep. Fortunately, good old Ernst knows a landlady, Fraulein Schneider (Jeri Snoke), who rents him a room at an affordable price.

I found this interpretation of "Cabaret" to be a bit more serious than I expected, but also more engrossing. The entertainment scenes were splashy and fun to watch and I was encouraged to see such fine portrayals by the rather large cast. If I found fault with anything in this production it would have to be that the scene changes could run a little smoother and the spotlight find its target more quickly. Otherwise, the acting was wonderful, the orchestra and music were great, and the story appealing.

Drew Fitzsimmons is the lead as the Emcee in a near-perfect performance. His stunning portrayal takes on even grander tones because he had only about three weeks to prepare, as the original player fell ill and dropped out. Fitzsimmons' performance is top-notch.

Another memorable piece of acting is done by Meredith Sweeney (Sally Bowles). Her portrayal is strong and sincere and comes close to stealing the show. Then, too, the performances of several other cast members are also very good, notably Snoke (Fraulein Schneider), Michael-Anthony Nozzi (Herr Schultz), Jeannine Barba (Fraulein Kost), and Borich as Ernst. The dancing and acting performed by Steven Flowers and Roy Okida as the Kit Kat Klub Boys is mesmerizing and caught my attention early on.

Bob Minnichelli directs; choreography is by Jennifer James; and Neilsen Scott served as the dialect coach. Mark Agüero conducted the orchestra. The music for "Cabaret" was written by John Kander, with lyrics by Fred Ebb. The book is by Joe Masteroff.

The Aerospace Players is a club formed in 1988 and the members have been known to put on spectacular musicals with the Armstrong Theatre as their venue. One thing I found unusual about this company is that any member can try out, and possibly land a part, in one of their productions. No theatrical acting experience is required but the major roles are very competitive. The players are all from the aerospace industry, and due to fluctuating work schedules they start rehearsals about three months before opening.

Cabaret plays through Saturday at the James Armstrong Theatre, 3330 Civic Center Drive, Torrance.

Performances tonight at 7 plus tomorrow and Saturday at 8 p.m. Tickets, \$18 general; \$15 students, seniors.



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