

THEATRE REVIEW

Sweet decadence: the Naples Players bring 'Cabaret' to life

BY NANCY STETSON
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Naples has a reputation for being uptight and ultra-conservative, a place where, unfortunately, the '50s are still very much alive.

So it's a relief to know that, for a short while, at least, there's a nightclub smack in the middle of 5th Avenue South where none of that exists. Step into the Kit Kat Klub, and you're stepping into 1930's Berlin, where anything goes. Men dance with men, women dance with women, and everyone is beautiful. Yes, even the orchestra is beautiful.

Of course, the Kit Kat Klub is a theatrical construct, but for a few shining hours five times a week, it comes alive on the stage of the Sugden Community Theatre when the Naples Players put on "Cabaret."

When you walk into the Blackburn Hall, actors are already on stage in the club, buying drinks, talking, flirting, pairing off. It's as if the place has a life of its own and you just happened to wander by for a couple hours to watch some of the goings on. There is no curtain rising or falling. It's as if the club has always been there, just waiting for us to stumble upon it.

Matt Flynn's two-story set isn't glamorous — because the Kit Kat Klub isn't glamorous — but it's well-designed, enormously clever and versatile.

Clifford (John McKerrow), an American writer casting about for rich material and inspiration for his yet-unwritten novel, visits Berlin. Before he's even stepped off the train, he's met his first Nazi (Tony Oteri as Ernst), though he doesn't realize it. He's in Berlin all of three hours before he winds up at the Kit Kat Club.

McKerrow plays Clifford as a decent guy who happens to be sexually conflicted, or maybe just bisexual. At the club, he's pursued by a man he'd met at a club in another city, but rebuffs him. Nightclub singer Sally Bowles (Dede

Salm) a British singer, flirts with Clifford, and winds up moving in with him shortly after.

It's as if Salm was made for this role; she plays Sally with the right mixture of worldly wiseness and little-girl vulnerability underneath. And her musical numbers ("Don't Tell Mama," "Mein Herr" and "Cabaret") are explosive, but she also has the ability to move us with the haunting "Maybe This Time." Sally hopes for true love, but it never seems to work out for her.

The Kander and Ebb score is outstanding, with lyrics and melodies that hook us and amuse us; the cast does this marvelous score justice, as does the orchestra, conducted by Charles Fornara. Unfortunately, the night I attended, there were a couple spots where the voices weren't amplified enough to be heard above the orchestra.

Mark Vanagas, as the emcee, is deliciously decadent. He slinks about the stage, rolling and thrusting his hips suggestively, leering and beckoning you. He is the bridge between our world and the Kit Kat Klub. He's sexually omnivorous and in "Two Ladies" boasts about his threeway with another man and a woman. Vanagas grows more outrageous with each appearance, constantly changing costumes, wigs and personas.

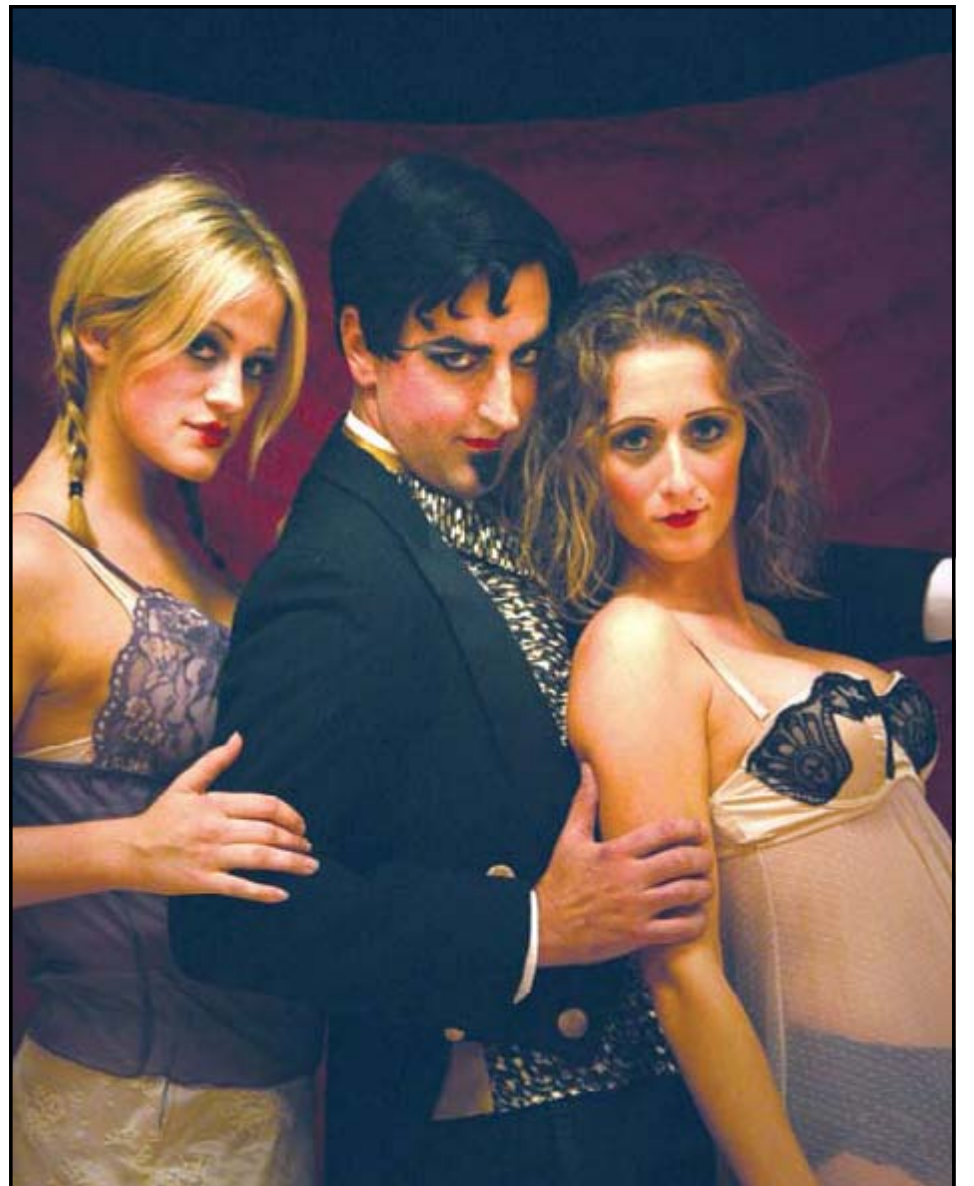
He proudly sports a full-length leather coat, prances about in lacy bustiers, crossdresses and dances with the women. His hair is orange, then black, then a mass of golden curls a la Gorgeous George. You never know what he will wear next, as he's continuously reinventing himself and pushing the boundaries.

Vanagas's real-life wife, Dot Auchmoody, designed the costumes for this production, and she pulled out all the stops, especially with the costumes for Vanagas and the dancers at the Kit Kat Klub.

Choreographer Dawn Lebrecht has done a remarkable job with a cast of non-professional dancers as they perform the languid, sexy moves like pros.

The Kit Kat Klub is a dim, shadowy place filled with people who like to live in the shadows. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to see all the action from the back of the theater. Another small mis-step is the cartoonlike bed used in the "Two Ladies" number; it seems out of style with the rest of the show's design.

The musical includes another love story: that of Fraulein Schneider (Megan



COURTESY PHOTO

Emcee (Mark Vanagas) with two of his Kit Kat Club ladies (Abby Onuska and Jennifer Sulivan), in a scene from "Cabaret" the Kander and Ebb musical presented by The Naples Players through April 5 at the Sugden Community Theatre in Naples.

McCombs) and Herr Schultz (played with tenderness by Victor Caroli). Both are German, but Schultz is Jewish. Though thrilled to have found love so late in life, Schneider slowly begins to realize what it would mean to be married to a Jew in a country where the Nazis are coming into power.

McCombs, who ruled as Eleanor in the Naples Players' production of "Lion in Winter," also commands the stage — and the audience's attention — whenever her character is in the footlights. She has two solos ("So What?" and "What Would You Do?") and two duets with Caroli ("It Couldn't Please Me More" and "Married.") Her portrayal of Frau-

lein Schneider is rich and complex, and in itself worth the price of admission. You get the impression that just by the power of her acting, she urges others around her up to her incredible level.

Director Dallas Dunnagan has not only cast this musical well, but presents us with an intriguing production that makes innovative use of the stage and also incorporates film. Her vision for the musical sets it apart from other productions. This is a "Cabaret" that is decadent, seedy and clever. Its characters party until they die. They laugh and sing and partake in orgies until the chaos outside overtakes the chaos inside the club with a chilling finality. ■

If you go

>>What: "Cabaret"
>>When: 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through April 5
>>Where: The Sugden Community Theatre, 701 5th Avenue South, Naples
>>Cost: \$35
>>Information: Call (239) 263-7990 or go to www.naplesplayers.org

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