

## Cabaret, The Kit Kat Club at the Playhouse Theatre review ★★★★★

Jessie Buckley and Eddie Redmayne star in Rebecca Frecknall's superb revival of *Cabaret*, staged inside an intimate reconstruction of the musical's Kit Kat Club

[By Holly O'Mahony on 13/12/2021 CULTUREWhisper](#)



Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club. Eddie Redmayne 'The Emcee' and Jessie Buckley 'Sally Bowles'. Photo: Marc Brenner

Director Rebecca Frecknall ([Summer and Smoke](#), and plenty more at the Almeida Theatre) revives Joe Masteroff, John Kander and Fred Ebb's 1966 musical *Cabaret* in an immersive production that invites its audience into the glitzy, sordid debauchery of Berlin's Kit Kat Club. Once seated and sated on wine and Schnapps, it indulges us with a carousel of ravishing performances before chilling us with parallels between the dawn of the Nazi era – the musical's deadly undercurrent – and the state of affairs in the UK today.

Based on Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin* and best known for the 1972 film starring Liza Minnelli, *Cabaret* revolves around the relationship between American writer Cliff Bradshaw (Omari Douglas, of [Constellations](#) and [It's a Sin](#) acclaim), who's come to Weimar-era Berlin in search of a story to cement his name, and English cabaret performer Sally Bowles (Jessie Buckley, of [Wild Rose](#) and the NT's [Romeo and Juliet](#)), who he meets in the city's hedonistic Kit Kat Club.

In Frecknall's production, the world of the play extends beyond the auditorium and even its surrounding bars, where ruffles of gold lick the walls and performers strut the marble worktops or languish on them, legs spread. Designer Tom Scutt's subtle recreation of a prohibition era speakeasy brands the exterior of the Playhouse Theatre – renamed the Kit Kat Club for the duration of *Cabaret's* eight-month run –

with simple black and white lettering. No bright lights or towering photos advertising a starry cast, but peer closer and a discreet A4 poster will inform you of the blockbuster operation awaiting inside.



Jessie Buckley 'Sally Bowles'. Photo: Marc Brenner

The auditorium, too, has undergone a full redesign in the hands of Scutt, architect-designer Patrick Berning and a sizeable renovation team. A rotating wooden stage hovers amid an assortment of tables and chairs, arranged in-the-round, which replace the front rows of the stalls. Each is fitted with trinkets which add to the atmosphere: a warm, glowing lamp and a faux telephone. It's incredibly intimate and if you can afford the extortionate ticket price attached to these premium seats – upwards of £200 a pop – it is, admittedly, worth it. It's a remarkably small stage to hold such heavyweight performances, and the proximity is part of what makes this *Cabaret* so special.

The production is traditional in appearance (Scutt's costumes are a parade of lace trimmings, clownish callotts and velvet shorts), but fresh and innovative in its approach. Each look, gesture and utterance is exquisitely, meticulously directed.

Under Julia Cheng's playful choreography, chorus members snake between the front rows of the audience, while Eddie Redmayne's off-beat and deliciously absurdist Emcee swings his legs over a balcony while gleefully watching the performances below, in a directorial decision likely to have caused uproar with the theatre's health and safety management. Later, during Redmayne's surreal performance of 'Two Ladies', chorus members thrust and grind in the background, one masturbating over a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.



Eddie Redmayne 'The Emcee'. Photo: Marc Brenner

Equally triumphant is the show's trio of star talent – Redmayne, Buckley and Douglas – who, from the first note of Redmayne's quasi-operatic 'Willkommen' to the last of Buckley's gut-punching 'Cabaret', make this musical sparkle, soar and ultimately sear.

Douglas, in an uncharacteristically demure role, is charming as the wet-behind-the-ears author. But those who saw his spicy take on showgirl Nora in Emma Rice's [Wise Children](#) may feel a pang of regret that this nimble mover is denied a moment of cross-dressed showmanship.

Redmayne appears to relish in his own grotesqueness as the Emcee, his sweeping hand gestures and unnervingly bent smile never more appropriate than when conducting the show's macabre reprisal of Nazi number 'Tomorrow', dressed as a pearl-boned skeleton.

Buckley flits between fierce and vulnerable. Her softer number 'Maybe this Time' shimmers with hope, but it's through the titular 'Cabaret' that she lays down her full hand. It's a performance that rises into a frantic, frenzied fever pitch, leaving her twitching and grasping at the invisible party of yesteryear, while we, her audience, can only look on in awe.



Omari Douglas 'Cliff Bradshaw' and Jessie Buckley 'Sally Bowles'. Photo: Marc Brenner

Anna-Jane Casey as Fraulein Kost and Elliot Levey as Herr Schultz offer strong supporting performances. Their take on 'It Couldn't Please Me More' is an affectionate, whimsical highlight.

So easy is it to be swept up like Sally Bowles in the spirited passion of the cabaret, that even those familiar with the story might be shocked anew when the conniving Ernst removes his coat to reveal a swastika.

With the rise of the Nazis, the party is over. While the Kit Kat Club remains open, we witness its soul die as its gaggle of performers swap their glamorous garments and free-flowing movements for ill-fitting suits and rigid marching.

While on the surface a reflection of the Nazis terrible rise to power, the themes of *Cabaret* speak for the UK today, a Brexit-voting nation living under a [government that recently approved a proposed amendment](#) to the nationality and borders bill, allowing individuals to have their British citizenship revoked without warning.

Through stripping the club of its splendour and allowing the country's politics to seep through the cracks, Frecknall reminds us no party can continue inside when a democracy is broken and liberties are lost.