

CABARET (1972)

"Leave your troubles outside... In here, life is beautiful."

Major Credits:

director: Bob Fosse

cinematography: Geoffrey Unsworth

music: John Kander and Fred Ebb

cast: Liza Minnelli (Sally Bowles); Michael York (Brian Roberts); Joel Grey (Master of Ceremonies); Marisa Berenson (Natalia Landauer)

Background:

Arguably the last great American film musical, **Cabaret** was adapted from the stage musical of the same name (1966), which in turn derived from John Van Druten's play **I Am a Camera** (1951) and Christopher Isherwood's stories from **Goodbye to Berlin** (1939). The film was a huge financial and critical success, winning eight Academy Awards, including Oscars for Fosse, Minelli, and Grey. **Cabaret** broke from the conventions of its genre by separating music from story and, with one powerful exception, confining performances to the stage of the Kit Kat Klub. Fosse said that he was trying to create a "plausible believability" within the traditionally escapist, fantasy world of the musical.

For all the originality of its choreography, the film is deeply indebted to cinematic and theatrical history, from Eisenstein's montage theories and German Expressionism to Brecht's **Threepenny Opera**. In its treatment of decaying society in Weimar Germany, it resembles Visconti's **The Damned** (1969) and DeSica's **The Garden of the Finzi-Continis** (1972); in its portrayal of the artistic, bohemian community resisting the claims of politics and history, it evokes Truffaut's **Jules and Jim** (1961) and anticipates his **The Last Metro** (1980). It is filled with allusions to other classic films: **The Blue Angel** (especially in Liza's performance of "Mein Herr"), **M** (close-up of the child's ball), **Citizen Kane** (Liza projecting spokes of light from a rear spot at the end of "Maybe This Time").

Cinematic Qualities:

1. editing--The film utilizes rapid cutting to animate the opening number in the Kit Kat Klub and subsequent stage performances. Notice, however, how the montage techniques tend to slow down during the second half, as the Weimar regime breaks down and the film itself winds off the last reel (especially in the panning shots that predominate in "If You Knew Her Like I Do"). Subtly, through the shift in editing style, **Cabaret** reinforces the sense of entropy that threatens the characters.

2. cross-cutting--Another editing device, linking simultaneous action taking place in separate spaces. The startling cut from the couple screaming beneath the elevated streetcar to the Nazis beating up the club manager initiates a series of cross-cuts from decadence in the streets to decadence on the stage.

3. casting--Much of the vitality and poignancy of **Cabaret** derives from 25-year old Liza Minnelli's performance. Her talent

aside, the casting of Minelli draws on the film audience's memory of her mother, Judy Garland. When Sally Bowles announces early on, "I'm going to be a great film star. That is, if booze and sex don't get me first," everyone in the original audience was likely to think of Judy, who had died just three years before. Everyone in the audience now is likely to think of Liza herself. Songs were added and Sally Bowles' character was modified to fit our view of the actress' extraordinary heritage (her father, Vincente Minelli, directed such famous musicals as **Meet Me in St. Louis**, **An American in Paris**, and **Gigi**). Liza's performance style--not to mention her appearance--constantly reminds us of her mother. In David Thomson's words, both performers share "the same perilous confusion of talent and taste with exhibitionism and neurosis." The role of Sally Bowles is enormously resonant as a result.

Topics for Discussion:

1. The songs in **Cabaret** serve as a running commentary on the developing action. Consider how the lyrics, choreography, editing, lighting, and performance style of each musical number influence the audience's understanding of the film's serious themes.

2. In contrast to all the other songs, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" is rendered in a natural setting by a non-professional in an unrehearsed, unrepeatable form. What makes this performance so powerful? Consider carefully all aspects of the cinematic presentation, including the abrupt cut to the MC at the end.

3. While in some ways re-inventing the form of the film musical and certainly raising it to new levels of achievement, **Cabaret** may also represent a bold self-critique, a questioning of the escapist ethos of the musical. What is the film's prevailing attitude towards cabaret, theatre, movies, the very role of "entertainment" in modern society? How are we to understand the film's bittersweet rendering of its own central metaphor, Life is a Cabaret?

4. The film's presentation of gender and sexuality may now appear anachronistic. Sally Bowles seems but another version of the "whore with a heart of gold," at times both vamp and virgin. Brian's sexuality seems equally simplistic: he is "saved" from homosexuality by the love of a good woman, then nearly ruined again by the agent of decadent capitalism. Can any sense be made of the film's gender politics?

5. While the film **Cabaret** mirrors historical developments (literally, in the opening and closing shots--although, significantly, the mirror image is deliberately distorted), the cabaret stage tends to **anticipate** social change, raising the question of whether the function of art is to reflect or to foreshadow real life events. The filmmakers may have been influenced in this regard by Sigfried Kracauer's **From Caligari to Hitler**, a study of the relationship between German Expressionist Cinema of the 1920s and the rise of facism.

6. **Cabaret** is very much a movie of its own historical moment, now a period piece itself reflecting on an earlier period. How are the attitudes of "the late Sixties" imposed on this representation of another time, another place?

"Maybe This Time"

The montage sequence begins with cu of Brian and Sally's romantic kiss/overlapping sound montage (music)/pan up/ dissolve to:

1. cu of Sally (bright lit) in profile, R of frame		dissolve, pan down
2. 2-shot of S and Brian (dim lit) in bed		dissolve, pan up
3. same as #1		pan l, dissolve
4. cu of B flexing		pan down, dissolve
5. frontal ms of S		pan l, dissolve
6. cu of B reading newspaper	eyeline matches	cut
7. cu of S reading		cut
8. same as #6		cut
9. same as #7		cut
10. same as #6		cut
11. same as #7		cut
12. ls revealing distance across room; S on l, B on R		dissolve, pan down
13. ms of S (dim lit) on stage l of frame; 180 pan around S		cut
14. same as #5; zoom back to ls, revealing empty tables		cut
15. cu of manager		cut
16. cu of female trombonist		cut
17. cu of man at table		cut
18. ls of S on stage in L background; MC backstage in R foreground; split screen effect		cut
19. cu of S in profile; slow reverse zoom to reveal piano player in foreground		cut
20. cu of S (bright lit)		cut
21. ls of S. (back lit); zoom in		APPLAUSE