

Cliff Notes

Cabaret has evolved over the past three decades — and so has its hero. Librettist Joe Masteroff charts the changes.

By Gerard Raymond

Finding your true sexual identity can be tough, especially if you're a character in a 1960s Broadway hit musical. But Cliff Bradshaw, the male ingenue in *Cabaret*, has been fortunate to be part of a hit show that has continued to evolve over three decades.

"I've always said that Cliff finally turned gay when he came to New York, which is everybody's story!" laughs playwright and librettist Joe Masteroff, discussing the musical he wrote with John Kander and Fred Ebb, which opens on Broadway March 19 in the Roundabout Theatre Company production. Masteroff is actually referring to an earlier Broadway incarnation of this popular musical, set in 1930s Berlin, but let's go back to the beginning.

Director Harold Prince, who had worked with Masteroff on the 1963 musical *She Loves Me*, approached the librettist about writing the book for a musical based on John Van Druten's *I Am a Camera*, a 1951 drama that was, in turn, based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. A musical adaptation by Sandy Wilson was already in the works, but Julie Andrews — who was keen on playing the part of Sally Bowles, the down-and-out cabaret singer in the stories — wasn't happy with the book. Wilson's score, according to Masteroff, sounded similar to his 1953 success, *The Boy Friend* (the show that introduced Andrews to Broadway), and Prince and Masteroff both felt that the flavor of 1930s Berlin would be better evoked by music in the vein of Kurt Weill.

Prince subsequently hired John Kander and Fred Ebb, then fresh from *Flora, the Red Menace*, to write a new score.

"We almost never worked in a room together," recalls Masteroff. "John and Fred had written quite a number of very good songs with a German cabaret feeling. They'd bring [their work] in, and Hal would be the guru of the whole thing. Somehow, every one of those songs seemed to fit very comfortably as a comment or a lead-in to the book scenes I had written. It seemed like some genius planned all this, but really a lot of it

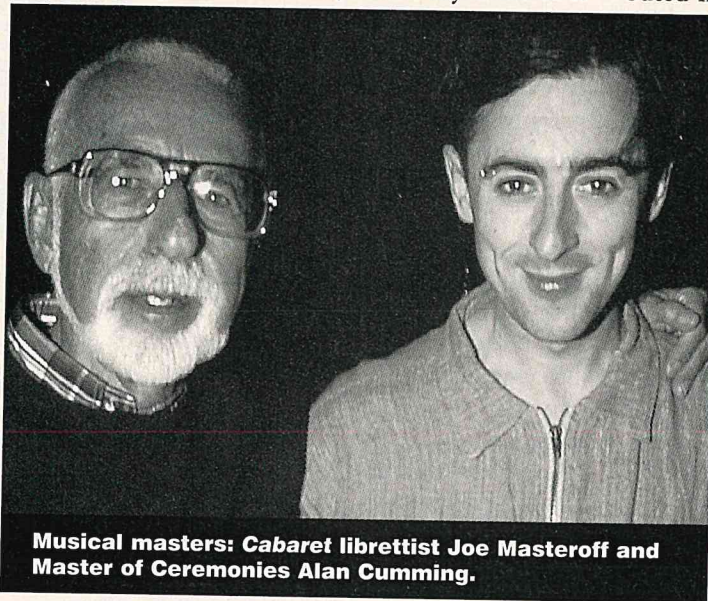
cameras don't have sex, and in Broadway musicals it's necessary for people to be a little more red-blooded," notes Masteroff wryly. So he and his collaborators made Cliff a heterosexual who has an affair with and impregnates Sally, the eccentric singer he encounters in Berlin.

"It would have been unthinkable to have a gay hero, or even to hint at it, in 1966," says Masteroff. In fact, it was only a full decade later, in his autobiography *Christopher and His Kind* (37 years after the publication of *Berlin Stories*), that Isherwood himself outed his character with the explanation, "For Christopher, Berlin meant boys." The stage incarnation of Chris/Cliff had to wait yet another 10 years for his sexual liberation. In the meantime, the creators of *Cabaret* felt they had enough risky elements to contend with.

"We figured that when you have a show that has Nazis and abortions, you don't have to make life any tougher on yourself," Masteroff says, adding that no one involved had anticipated the magnitude of the show's subsequent success.

Indeed, they had even scrapped the original title, *Welcome to Berlin*, for fear that it would be box-office poison, with memories of the Holocaust only 20 years in the past. As it happened, *Cabaret* won that season's Tony for Best Musical and ran for over 1,000 performances.

By 1972, when Bob Fosse's brilliant Oscar-winning movie version of *Cabaret* hit the screen, the so-called sexual revolution was in full flower and the Stonewall riots of 1969 had



Musical masters: Cabaret librettist Joe Masteroff and Master of Ceremonies Alan Cumming.

happened by sheer luck."

But from the start, one problem stood out: What about Cliff? Isherwood had been deliberately silent on the sexual orientation of the character who narrates his stories (called Christopher in the original), an obvious stand-in for the gay author. In Van Druten's stage adaptation, Cliff became an asexual spectator, embodying a metaphor Isherwood had used in the book to describe the way the narrator passively observed events. "But

struck a decisive blow for gay liberation; Cliff, now called Brian and played by Michael York, had become a bisexual. The movie, written by Jay Presson Allen, dealt a bit coyly with the three-way dalliance between Brian, Sally, and her German suitor. (Isherwood scoffed that the character's homosexuality was treated in the film as an "indecent but comic weakness to be snickered at, like bed-wetting.") But the die was cast. When Masteroff got another crack at the character, played by Gregg Edelman in Prince's 1987 Broadway revival, he took the next logical step. "Cliff was sort of gay when we were on the road for a year," Masteroff reports, "but when we opened in New York, he was finally out of the closet."

Cut to 1993, when Sam Mendes decided to stage *Cabaret* at the Donmar Warehouse, his home base in London's West End. The young British director, who already had a series of successes from Shakespeare and Chekhov to the London premiere of Sondheim's *Assassins* under his belt, placed the entire musical within the Kit Kat Klub and boldly rewrote sections of the book to accommodate the concept. The authors were thrilled.

"The rewrites weren't legal, but we didn't complain because it worked so well," Masteroff says cheerfully. The 1987 Broadway revival had proved a pallid recreation of the original, and the authors were eager to bring Mendes' exciting new rethink to New York. For his part, Mendes felt he'd only scratched the surface of his concept in London. Now, in a Times Square theater specifically re-designed as the Kit Kat Klub, and with the assistance of choreographer Rob Marshall, he is mounting the third Broadway incarnation of *Cabaret*. But most importantly, the original authors are back at work on the show they started writing over 30 years ago.

In revisiting his script, Masteroff was only too happy to take his cue from Mendes' Donmar production. "I happen to think Sam is a wonderful director, and if he wanted to do it backwards, I'd say go ahead!" Like most of the stage productions that followed the movie, the new *Cabaret*

includes the songs Kander and Ebb wrote specifically for the film — "Mein Herr" and "Money, Money," along with "Maybe This Time," which the team had previously written and which had been recorded by Minnelli. But the romantic subplot invented by Masteroff involving Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz (dropped in the movie) is still a major element of the show. "I thought Fraulein Schneider should have a story of her own," Masteroff explains. "I always felt that when you saw a Hitler rally in a newsreel, where there were two million people heiling, there must have been people who stayed at home and didn't heil."

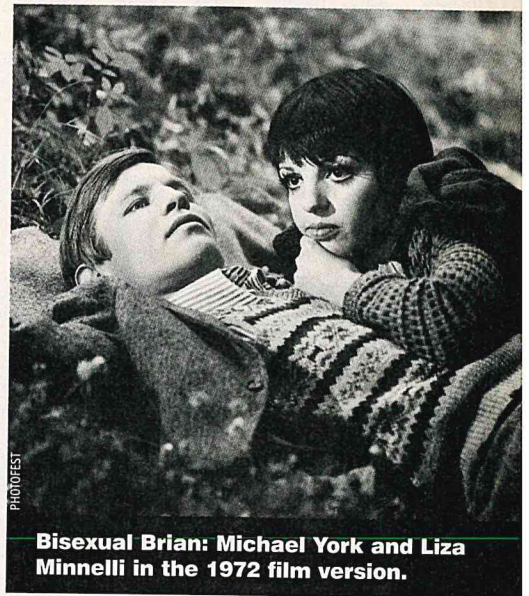
Changes in the current version involve fleshing out the role of Sally Bowles, who had only about 40 minutes stage time in the original. (The movie, of course, was tailored to Liza Minnelli's talents; the singer was in practically every scene, and sang most of the songs.) In the new version, Sally, played by Natasha Richardson, will be more integrated into the story and the musical numbers. The part of the Emcee — inextricably linked with actor Joel Grey — has also evolved. Played in this production by Alan Cumming, the character changes political and sexual identities with chameleon-like ease, and is now liable to pop up in scenes outside of his cabaret act.

Summing up, Masteroff says, "The whole production is more appropriate to Berlin in the '30s. The Emcee is a lot smuttier than Joel Grey ever was, and the Kit Kat Klub is not a fancy place, it's a crappy nightclub." And what about our gay hero, played in this production by John Benjamin Hickey? Does Cliff still have an affair with Sally? "All I can say," Masteroff chuckles, "is that having met Natasha Richardson, it doesn't take any special effort to fall in love with her. She's gorgeous! Everyone will understand how poor Cliff — though he's gay, and he knows it — would find her irresistible!" ■

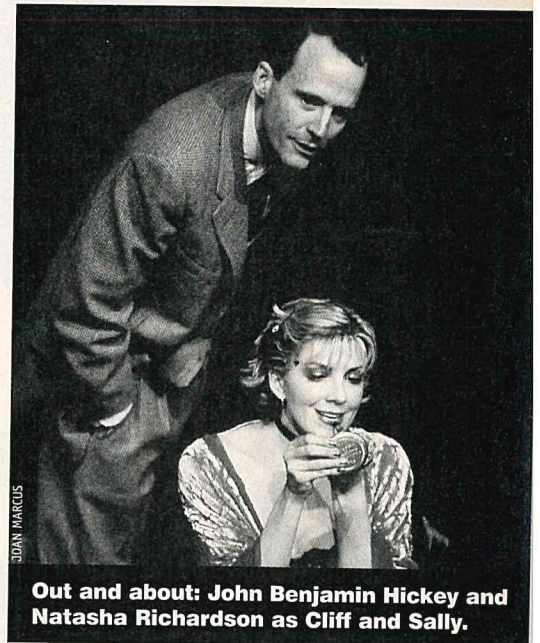
GERARD RAYMOND is a freelance writer specializing in theater and film.



Closeted Cliff: Bert Convy and Jill Haworth in the original Broadway production.



Bisexual Brian: Michael York and Liza Minnelli in the 1972 film version.



Out and about: John Benjamin Hickey and Natasha Richardson as Cliff and Sally.