

## Weimar Wonderland

We know better, of course, than to trust the emcee who welcomes us to Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret*: Life isn't quite as beautiful as he proclaims. In Hal Prince's landmark 1966 Broadway production, an upstage mirror reflected the audience as if to implicate them in the Nazism that gradually engulfs the onstage characters. In his new version, opening this month at New York's **Roundabout Theatre**, British director Sam Mendes goes a step further—he puts his audience *into* the act. Mendes is transforming Club Expo, a Times Square disco, into the decadent Kit Kat Klub. “Instead of the audience being willing participants,” 32-year-old Mendes devilishly says, “the club’s environment makes them victims.”

Mendes, who is making his American debut with this production, has cobbled an impressive career in England, scoring hits at the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as at his West End base for the last five years, the Donmar Warehouse. An oft-described *enfant terrible* (he directed Judi Dench in *The Cherry Orchard* at the tender age of 23), Mendes has proven that he's equally comfortable supervising Shakespeare, Sondheim, Mamet or Williams. In April, his National Theatre production of *Othello* makes a brief stop at the **Brooklyn Academy of Music**.

Although Mendes previously directed *Cabaret* at the Donmar in 1993, he claims he only managed to “scratch the surface.” Setting the entire show in the Kit Kat Klub has required excising bits and pieces of the existing text while incorporating revisions made for the 1987 Broadway revival. For the Roundabout's production, Mendes reports, book writer Joe Masteroff has incorporated substantial rewrites to better integrate the idea that Cliff, the show's American protagonist, is “a gay man deluding himself into a straight relationship.” Current revisions also attempt to bring “more complexity and emotional depth” to the role of Sally Bowles,



JOAN MARCUS

Willkommen! Alan Cummings as the Master of Ceremonies in the Roundabout Theatre's *Cabaret*.

played by Natasha Richardson. “I don't think of this as a 30-year-old musical that's getting a revival,” says Mendes. “It's more like a work in progress. The authors are alive and they're still working on it.”—*Gerard Raymond*

## Jailbird Theatre

While planning the **Annex Theatre's** second decade, com-

pany members Mike Shapiro, Chris Jeffries, Peggy Stafford, Ed Hawkins and Tessa Francis put their collective heads together and uncovered a way

to guarantee state and national support of the Seattle company's programming—and put an end to the day-job dilemma all in one fell swoop.

The answer? Crime pays. Annex's unconventional plan is to

get company members arrested, then create theatre inside the state's penitentiary system. Some of the advantages might be:

- The theatre would be 100 percent Washington state taxpayer supported
- There'd be no more struggling to find day jobs (minimum volunteer hours required making license plates)
- No performance-space rentals
- Opening-night party food would be provided free of charge
- There'd be luxuriously staffed administrative support
- There'd be the opportunity to

appeal to the governor if you don't approve of the season's shows

- Nearly endless opportunities for site-specific staging
- Stong outreach potential—a natural for grants
- The costume burden would be lifted—every character wears light blue coveralls
- Extra time for bad behavior means longer runs
- Solitary confinement time can be used as a sort of sabbatical to develop new material
- An instant cover story in *American Theatre*.

—*Stephen Nunns*

