



Introduction



Every metropolis tends to generate an urban mythology, and Berlin is no exception. One of the more enduring fables associated with that city is that it was a hotbed for cabaret. This book seeks to assay that tale, by examining cabaret in Berlin from 1901 to 1944.

Berlin cabaret was not what most people today think it was. In the United States the prevalent image of 1920s cabaret seems to have been formed by a combination of Marlene Dietrich's Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*, the Sally Bowles character in Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories (most memorably portrayed by Liza Minnelli in the filmed musical *Cabaret*), as well as the socially critical songs of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. None of these figures, however, corresponded to cabaret as it was understood at that time. *The Blue Angel* was set in the dive of a Hanseatic harbor town, while Sally Bowles appeared in sleazy nightclubs. Brecht appeared only once on a Berlin cabaret stage, to sing two numbers that he had composed. His collaborations with Weill were rarely performed in such venues, but rather were embedded in full-length works of musical theater performed in opera houses or on dramatic stages.

Although these figures cannot be equated with cabaret, it would not be wrong to link them to cabaret's environment. Lola Lola performed in what was usually called a "Tingeltangel," a third-rate variety show that was a direct precursor of cabaret. Moreover, even though the sets of *The Blue Angel* deny a cabaret setting, the music was written by Friedrich Hollaender and performed in part by Weintraub's Syncopators. These were major figures in Weimar cabaret, as were Kurt Gerron and Rosa Valetti, the film's major supporting players. As for the Isherwood stories, in the 1920s bars with sleazy entertainment often dubbed themselves cabarets, to the horror of the cabaret purists. Indeed, in order to avoid this linguistic confusion, the German language now differentiates *Cabaret* and *Kabarett*. The words were used interchangeably through the Weimar era, but since the 1950s, *Cabaret* has referred to a strip show, while *Kabarett* is reserved for social criticism or political satire. Finally, it can be said that although Brecht and Weill did not write for cabaret, they were part of a wider culture

of satirical, mildly critical, often cynical songwriting which found its best expression on cabaret stages. Lola Lola, Sally Bowles, and Brecht and Weill were, in short, on the boundaries of cabaret. And those boundaries were very fluid.

For the purposes of this book, I would like to propose the following definition (or at least image) of an "ideal type" cabaret. It consisted of a small stage in a relatively small hall, where the audience sat around tables. The intimacy of the setting allowed direct, eye-to-eye contact between performers and spectators. The show consisted of short (five- or ten-minute) numbers from several different genres, usually songs, comic monologues, dialogues and skits, less frequently dances, pantomimes, puppet shows, or even short films. They dealt in a satirical or parodistic manner with topical issues: sex (most of all), commercial fashions, cultural fads, politics (least of all). These numbers were usually presented by professional singers and actors, but often writers, composers, or dancers would perform their own works. The presentations were linked together by a conferencier, a type of emcee who interacted with the audience, made witty remarks about events of the day, and introduced the performers.

Even Max Weber admitted that ideal types are hard to find in reality. Likewise, this pure type of cabaret was rare, and when it miraculously appeared, it was short-lived. All aspects of cabaret were subject to change. With increasing popularity, a troupe might move to larger quarters: the stage would expand and, more important, the auditorium would be enlarged to be filled no longer with tables, but rather with rows of chairs facing the performers. The intimacy of ideal-type cabaret, an intimacy between actors and audience (and among the spectators themselves), would thereby be lost. The content of performances likewise might be transformed. It could become more literary and dramatic. When mainly professional actors were involved, when there was a dearth of good cabaret material, or when the audience preferred more conventional dramatic forms, one-act skits would come to dominate the program, and eventually a total conversion to drama would be made. The cabaret would, in short, become a regular theater. In contrast, a cabaret might become less literary, or decidedly nonliterary. If censorship hindered parody or satire, or if an audience wanted more show and less tell, then the stage would be left with variety acts, and the cabaret would end up as just another vaudeville hall. If a troupe felt commercially compelled to appeal to the absolutely lowest common denominator of public taste, it could mutate into a purveyor of what Germans in the twenties called "nude dancing." That is precisely what most stages calling themselves "cabarets" are today.

Cabaret was thus not only bounded by dramatic theater, variety shows, and nude dancing; those other types of performance could even be part of

the trajectories of individual cabaret troupes. Two further genres must be considered as well: revue and agitprop. Revues were performed on large stages with an abundance of often gaudy production numbers, and held together by something vaguely resembling a plotline. The revue was related to cabaret inasmuch as it comprised a smattering of songs and dialogues of a satirical or parodistic nature. While revue was the most commercial (because most costly) of these entertainments, agitprop was the most political. As we shall see, politics was never the central theme of Wilhelmine or Weimar cabaret; to the extent that those stages were politicized at all, they lacked a clear standpoint and tended to make fun of all parties. The agitprop movement, which flourished in the last years of the Weimar Republic, tried to alleviate that situation by developing cabaret-style performances that centered on political issues and espoused a firm standpoint, however flawed—that of the Communist Party.

In sum, the history of cabaret cannot be written without considering developments in theater, vaudeville, nude dancing, revue, and agitprop—as well as operetta, popular music, dance crazes, film, and many other facets of public and commercial entertainment. How is one to pull this together? At first I planned to write a slim book, on the principle that one should not produce a large volume about *Kleinkunst*. Yet as I pursued a number of disparate themes, the project expanded inexorably, and I had to establish some limiting parameters. Consequently, various important aspects of cabaret had to be neglected. Performers were, in a sense, the lifeblood of cabaret; both the “stars” and the lesser entertainers, each with a distinct style and personality, gave shows their special character. Yet with a few notable exceptions, I have not sought to paint a full portrait gallery of Berlin’s cabaret scene. This is due partially to limitations of space, but also to the difficulty of capturing in words the spirit of performances that were aural, gestural, and visual. Unfortunately, no cabaret performances of the Weimar era were recorded on sound film. The best one can do to reexperience particular entertainers like Kurt Gerron, Paul Graetz, Trude Hesterberg, Paul Morgan, or Rosa Valetti is to contemplate still photos, listen to gramophone recordings, or see their performances in film (where they did not play cabaret roles). Obviously, a book is not a proper medium to reproduce these effects.

Language has intruded at another level as well: since I am writing in English, I have had to forgo reproducing much of the untranslatable verbal wordplay, the witty or awful puns that were rampant in cabaret. Still, I have tried to examine some of the more important cabaret lyrics, and I apologize in advance for the quality of my rhymed-verse translations (where I have sought to retain the meter and rhyme sequence of the original, sometimes at the expense of the literal wording). Finally, I have

concentrated on a middle-ground of commercial cabaret, and have left out some institutions at both ends of the cultural scale. At the “low” end, restaurants with live entertainment sometimes called themselves cabarets during the Imperial era; so did most night spots featuring nude dancing shows under the Republic. I allude to this fact whenever it impinges on “genuine” cabarets, but I do not examine those faux stages in any detail. At the “high” end, there were evenings of poetry readings or musical recitals that also dubbed themselves cabarets. The most significant were probably the occasional performances of “Gnu” and the “Neopathetisches Cabaret,” which were extremely important forums for the presentation of Expressionist lyrics. Yet they too fall outside the boundaries of commercial entertainment that is the focus of my work.

So what is left? Generally I have been guided by thematic concerns. Here too one has to be selective, since a study of cabaret can raise a host of significant issues. The ones I found most important—or at least most interesting—are politics, sex, fashion, and race.

In the cabaret of the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras (unlike *Kabarett* today), political themes played a secondary role. Nevertheless, to the extent that they were addressed, they raised some important questions: Is satire a useful political tool? How focused can satire be? To what extent does humor detract from political messages? These questions plagued politically committed entertainers, even in the agitprop movement, where Communist ideologues increasingly worried that workers were being amused but not mobilized by the shows. While Communists found satire a difficult propagandistic tool, their firm political beliefs saved them from cynicism, a pitfall of “bourgeois” cabaret. In the Weimar era, many entertainers made jokes about all political parties—hardly a difficult task in any age. Over time, however, this could lead to an oppressive sense of disillusionment. The resulting cynicism logically implied the end of satire, which works only when one can confront ideals and reality. Satire pits stated purpose against actual practice, essence against surface appearance, ingredients against packaging. At the very least, it is a useful vehicle for unmasking hypocrisy. But what if one discovers that hypocrisy is all-pervading? In the Weimar era that problem was compounded by the fact that satirists themselves were caught up in the very compromises they mocked. Even the best of them routinely toned down political statements to curry favor with the public or avoid conflicts with the state. Faced with these dilemmas, the more introspective performers and writers, like Kurt Tucholsky, fought an increasingly desperate battle to avoid cynicism, to cling to shreds of ideals.

Whereas such issues were internal to the cabaret movement, politics also intervened from the outside. The years 1901 to 1944 saw three very distinct regimes in power, which handled cabaret in substantially different ways.

In Imperial Germany, theater was subject to preliminary censorship. Although Berlin's censors were (in my opinion) quite open-minded, nothing could be said on stage that had not been approved by the police. The Weimar Republic, in contrast, abolished censorship. Although strictures by the state crept back in attenuated forms, cabaret performers quickly realized that their main "censor" was now the audience. Since many spectators took great offense at having their political ideas mocked, the box office dictated that satirists exercise restraint. Predictably, the Nazi era saw the most radical changes in the cabaret landscape. Entertainers who were Jewish or left-of-center fled the cabarets, and the country as well, leaving insipid variety-show programs in their wake. Thereafter, performers who tried to make even benignly jocular references to life in the Third Reich invariably fell afoul of the Nazis' numerous cultural watchdogs.

Compared to political issues, sexuality and gender were much more prominent themes on cabaret stages. Of course, this was true not just of cabaret. Love, romance, courtship, marriage; sexual hunting, conquest, and intercourse—the sentimental and the unsentimental modes of sexuality have dominated popular music and theater for a long time. But those themes underwent dramatic changes between 1900 and 1930, as individuals transformed their actual sexual practice. The Great War was a watershed, and the 1920s saw an ongoing "sexual revolution" for men and women. Simultaneously, the lifting of censorship permitted the popular arts to address sexual themes more freely. To be sure, this opened the door to greater prurience, since women could be seen naked on stage. But the loosening of strictures also allowed a more explicit, and perhaps more honest, portrayal of intergender relations, as popular music transcended the saccharine sentimentality of *Wilhelmine* lovesongs.

Within this context, cabaret had a field day. Its numbers mocked the kitschy romanticism of much popular entertainment; they satirized conservative moralists who denounced the loosening of sexual mores; and they made fun, in turn, of those liberalized sexual manners. Moreover, cabaret dealt with themes that were not addressed in most types of popular music or theater: prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism. But this image of cabaret standing at an ironic distance to the sexual practices, the sentimental entertainment, or (after 1918) the flesh-baring of the time is not quite accurate, since cabaret also counted sentimentality and skin as part of its own appeal. A typical evening at a cabaret would have both cynical and nostalgic lovesongs; and even a number that made fun of nude dancers or the kicklines of "Girls" might be performed by a woman wearing skimpy clothing. In this sense, cabaret was something of a tease: it simultaneously satirized and sustained the erotic energy of the day.

To the extent that it was contemporary, topical, and *aktuell*, cabaret dealt primarily with fashion, with current styles and trends. Politics and sex were realms of fashion in this sense. Cabaret zeroed in on fadishness in other areas as well: high culture, popular entertainment, habits of speaking, styles of clothing, new commercial goods and the advertisements that touted them. This aspect of cabaret made it an art form that was continually up-to-date. But just as there were ambiguities in its political stances and elements of bad faith in its sexual parodies, cabaret's send-up of fashion was ambivalent. Cabaret became a parasite that lived off its age: it could ridicule, it could criticize, but it put nothing in place of the objects it attacked. Moreover, cabaret itself was a fashion from the very beginning: the initial success of Wolzogen's Motley Theater inspired a host of imitators, and led to an "Überbrettl" fad in 1901 and 1902. Other cabaret fashions appeared in the ensuing decades. The more self-conscious troupes were aware of this and made light of their own trendiness. But that fact underscored the problem that lay at the heart of cabaret, whether political or not: What was its purpose? If everything is just a fad, if anything can be mocked, then what has happened to the Good and the True and the Beautiful? If they are irreplaceably lost, then we are left, once again, with cynicism.

Or are we? There is, after all, a bright side to "relativism." If there are no eternal verities, then you are free to fashion your own values; if there is no timeless art, then you can create art for your time. If you can mock anything, then nothing has the moral authority to claim your allegiance, to weigh you down. Cabaret represented freedom and creativity and play. Many of the writers and performers, and probably much of the audience, valued it for precisely this reason. It was no wonder that the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche were invoked by cabaret's first practitioners.

The issue of race, however, underscores the fact that while cabaretists might have been playing, other historical actors were deadly serious. Of the four major themes that I discuss, racial or ethnic identity was raised least frequently. There was quite a bit of joking about the various German "tribes," especially Prussians, Bavarians, Saxons, and Austrians. I do not discuss that benign form of humor, although I do suggest ways in which popular stages helped define the character of "the Berliner." Much more serious, I believe, were the ways that Jews and blacks were depicted in cabarets and revues. Many of the entertainers were Jewish, and they told jokes about Jews to audiences that were primarily Gentile. That rarely led to protests by Jewish citizens in the Imperial era, but by the 1920s, the rise of virulent political anti-Semitism made the subject much less funny, and Jewish jokes became rarer. Simultaneously, some stages made light of Adolf Hitler. While they ridiculed the logical absurdity of his ideas, they

failed to fathom the immensity of the Nazi danger. As for blacks, German stages had hosted African American song-and-dance numbers since the turn of the century. They received considerably more attention during the Weimar era, as jazz—or what passed for it—became a prominent style of popular music. Seemingly liberal critics praised black entertainment, but in a manner that perpetuated racial stereotypes: African Americans were equated with a healthy, “primitive” vitality, a sensibility derived from the African “jungle.” That questionable rhetoric was intended to be complimentary. In contrast, German conservatives, horrified by jazz and the black entertainers, engaged in vicious and unambiguous racist attacks against “Negro culture.”

Like politics, racism was not only a theme of cabaret numbers but also a potent force that could intervene from the outside. That became most apparent in 1933. “Negro culture” was proscribed, although jazz managed to survive in various forms. A much more drastic fate awaited Jewish entertainers. They were banished from Germany’s stages, and the most prominent figures fled abroad. The lucky ones found a haven in England or the United States. The less fortunate emigrated to countries like Austria, France, Czechoslovakia, or the Netherlands, where several years later they were captured by the agents of the expanding Reich. In the concentration camps at Westerbork and Theresienstadt/Terezín some of Berlin’s most famous entertainers put on shows for their fellow Jewish prisoners. Cabaret had always lacked a firm purpose, and in these “transit” camps that were way stations to Auschwitz, the performers and the audience asked the most agonizing questions about the value of that art.

This book seeks to weave together the themes of politics, sexuality, fashion, and race as treated in cabarets and related types of popular entertainment. There is no straightforward manner of doing this. Aesthetic theorists have long debated whether form should or should not reflect content. If this volume’s structure were to mirror its cabaretic subject matter, then it would consist of an array of disconnected numbers. Since that goes against my narrative grain, I suggest that the book be read as something closer to a revue: it has several themes, but they are woven very loosely, they sometimes break off abruptly, and they are not tied together in the end. I admit that this approach has pitfalls. In 1930 Friedrich Hollaender and Marcellus Schiffer scripted a show, with music by Rudolf Nelson, entitled *Der rote Faden*—a reference to the proverbial “red thread,” the tenuous plotline that was supposed to run through a revue. The title was ironic, however, since a “red thread” was precisely what the script lacked; the characters spent the whole show looking for it in vain. I hope that this book is not like that revue. But just in case, I now provide a synoptic program guide.

The first chapter delineates the environment in which cabaret arose, by focusing on Berlin as a modern metropolis with a tradition of critical wit. It also describes the variety show, a form of urban entertainment that was the immediate precursor of cabaret. The second chapter takes an in-depth look at Berlin's first cabaret, Wolzogen's Motley Theater, which already displayed the commercial and political compromises that were to characterize cabaret in the Imperial era and beyond. Chapter 3 examines a different type of parodistic stage, Max Reinhardt's Sound and Smoke. Unlike the Motley Theater, which soon gave up any highbrow artistic pretensions, Sound and Smoke represented a new theatrical sensibility which Reinhardt was to incorporate into his world-famous productions of classical and modernist drama. The ensuing chapter presents an overview and analysis of other forms of cabaret-type entertainment in the decade before the Great War. Berlin's metropolitan modernity found expression in various guises: bohemian pub-cabarets on the Parisian model, the urbane suavity of Rudolf Nelson's upscale cabarets, Claire Waldoff's immensely popular representation of the lower-class Berliner, and the spectacular revues of the Metropol-Theater.

Chapter 5 examines the political tone of cabaret in World War I and the early years of the Weimar Republic. As in all belligerent nations, popular entertainment during the war was virulently nationalistic. That mood persisted on most popular stages throughout the republican era. Left-liberal cabaret authors had a hard time finding an appreciative audience for their critical works. Kurt Tucholsky soon honed down the satirical edges of his lyrics and introduced sentimental notes. Walter Mehring gained acclaim not for his political messages, but rather for his formal experimentations based on Dadaist aesthetics. The next chapter deals with the most popular form of live entertainment on Berlin's stages during the mid-twenties: the revue. One element of the revue derived from nude dancing, which proliferated after the abolition of stage censorship in 1919. Other notes were contributed by "American" forms of entertainment, such as jazz, which was implicated in a debate about black culture. But the most sensational number of any revue was the kickline of "Girls," which generated a major discourse concerning gender, machine aesthetics, and militarism. Chapter 7 returns to more explicitly political themes, as it surveys the final years of the Republic. While some cabarets and the new genre of "cabaret-revue" had some mildly critical numbers, they tended to lack political focus. That was not a fault of the agitprop movement, which sought to employ cabaret-style entertainment to spread the Communist message. Both "bourgeois" cabarets and leftist agitprop made fun of Hitler, but neither of them correctly assessed the Nazi threat or predicted the horrors to come.

Chapter 8 describes the fate of cabaret in the Third Reich. Almost all prominent Jewish entertainers fled the country in the spring of 1933. Of the “Aryan” cabaretists that remained, few dared to make jokes about the realities of National Socialism. Those who did were brought into line: in 1935, members of the Catacombs and the Tingel-Tangel spent several weeks in a concentration camp. The Nazis attempted to replace the “negative” satire of the Weimar era with a “positive cabaret” that would support the regime’s goals, but the effort failed on account of its total humorlessness. By the time the war broke out, German cabaret had been fully depoliticized. The epilogue describes the final vestiges of genuine “Berlin cabaret” after 1940. Many prominent Jewish entertainers who had fled in 1933 were caught by Germany’s advancing armies. Interned in Westerbork and Theresienstadt, they staged shows for the Jewish captives, until performers and audience were transported to Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Treblinka.