

Theater: Michelle Williams' First Performance After Tony Snub

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CABARET *** out of **** **ROUNDBOUT AT STUDIO 54**

Talk about motivation! Hours after her show Cabaret -- and the performance of Michelle Williams in particular -- failed to get a Tony nomination, she took to the stage playing Sally Bowles, the British gal who lacks talent but has deluded herself into thinking she's a star. Williams could draw on this "rejection" to feed her performance of fragile insecurity. Or Williams could draw on it to fire herself up with something to prove. In any case, it added a frisson of excitement to the Wednesday night presentation of Cabaret.

Traditionally, Sally has not been an awards magnet. After six major productions in New York and London over the past 48 years, Natasha Richardson is the only woman to have won a top award for playing the part immortalized by Liza Minnelli on film. In fact, the original Sally from 1967 (Jill Haworth) wasn't even nominated, even though that production received ten nominations and won seven, including Best Musical.

The Oscar-nominated Williams is making her Broadway debut, not to mention her professional debut in a musical, so it's silly to talk about a "snub." With 16 musicals debuting this season, there was a bevy of leading female performances to choose from, many of them highly acclaimed. It's one of the most competitive categories around. Further, she's on anyone's short list of the best actresses working today, with excellent taste in projects (Meek's Cutoff, Blue Valentine) and a determined effort to challenge herself repeatedly. She does precisely that with Cabaret and the result is her own take on Sally, the only reasonable tack any actor can pursue when performing a famous part.

And let's get one other bit of nonsense out of the way. Some people were scandalized by this revival of a revival, a return of the legendary Cabaret production from 1998 that turned Alan Cumming into a star. But why? Actors returning again and again to their most famous roles is a tradition as old as the theater itself. James O'Neill (father of Eugene) performed the lead role in The Count Of Monte Cristo again and again throughout his

career, racking up some 6000 turns in the part before all was said and done. Yul Brynner performed *The King And I* back in 1951, and then returned with it to Broadway in 1977 and again in 1985 (not to mention London and touring it all over the world). Rex Harrison played Henry Higgins again and again on Broadway and on the road. In fact, my very first introduction to professional theater was seeing Rex Harrison doing *My Fair Lady* in Miami, Florida, in the early 1980s, more than 35 years after the show premiered. Personally, I look forward to seeing Cumming as the emcee in 2030.

So what is a visit to *Cabaret* like? Well, if you saw the 1998 production, you know exactly what it's like. This is essentially the same show, with the same look and the same boundary-bursting concept that was so influential newcomers might not realize what all the fuss was about. Alan Cumming is the Emcee and the years have added a gravity to his turn. He's not the lithe young man so eager to please, so excited to be performing. He's older and seedier and when you're talking *Cabaret*, that's a good thing.

Our hero (and there are precious few of them in this tawdry tale) is Cliff Bradshaw (Bill Heck), a young writer who comes to Berlin in 1929 hoping to finish a novel. Instead, he's caught up in the decadent whirl of Weimar Germany, where a friend on the train turns out to be a Nazi and hours after arriving he's at the decadent Kit Kat Klub, flirting with a guy he met in London and getting hit on by Sally Bowles, the "toast of Mayfair" as she's called.

The friendship between the conflicted Cliff and flighty Sally alternates with the sweet romance between their landlady Frau Schneider (Linda Emond) and fruit seller Herr Schultz (Danny Burstein). (Both nominated for Tonys and rightly so.) But darkness is falling: the songs at the Kit Kat Klub grow nastier and nastier, bricks are thrown through the window of Schultz's store and even pregnancy can't convince Sally it's time to give up her foolish dream of stardom.

But it's fun! Cumming is having a blast as the Emcee (no sleepwalking here through a role he knows by heart) and the boys and girls in the band all couple and uncouple with naughty abandon. It may not play as shockingly as it did even just 16 years ago, but it's still amusing. And they're beautiful! (Will Carlyon, we're looking at you.)

Heck (so good in *Orphans' Home Cycle*) is an especially manly Cliff, where that part has always leaned heavily on more helplessly gay than potentially passing. He's more of a believable temptation than usual to Sally with his offers of a traditional life. Her ability to know how illusory this is proves one of Sally's few moments where she actually faces reality. Cliff is also the only one who wakes up to the nightmare of what's happening politically and Heck is strong as his anguish grows.

The elderly romantics always steal the show, if only because it's the only storyline with heart and a chance at a happy ending. It's the same here, with Emond and Burstein delightful. Burstein's willful blind eye to how his country has turned on him is moving and sad. Emond takes your breath away every time she sings, from her delightful opener "So What" to her defiant but resigned "What Would You Do."

And Williams is memorable as she charts her own course, playing a Sally that is very true to the original stories of Isherwood and the part as conceived. Unless you're Liza, the role doesn't call for a great singer. But in fact, Williams -- according to my guest -- has a better voice than Natasha Richardson. It's a Piaf-like trill and surprisingly strong in passages. Her Sally is a silly thing who is trying to shock Cliff and everyone else. But she's also unwinding mentally. "Mein Herr" is suitably frantic. The way Sally is drawn to a microphone to perform "Maybe This Time" is like a moth to a flame. And her near nervous breakdown during "Cabaret" (where she decides to get an abortion and give up the illusion of marriage with a gay man while clinging to the illusion that she'll soon be a star) is very convincing.

I'd love to see Williams at the end of her run, when she's had even more time to grow in confidence and chops. But you don't need to wait a second to appreciate her skills as an actress. In the final moments of the show, Cliff is walking out the door for good and Sally asks plaintively, "Dedicate your book to me?" and the spotlight falls

and her haunted, broken look had the audience pin-drop quiet.

If you've never seen it, why wait? The show is filled with great songs, though for me it gets a little heavy-handed in its message both at certain points and the final reveal pointing toward the coming Holocaust for Jews, gays (and Romany). This production was legendary for good reason. If you compare it constantly to opening night back in 1998, you're sure to be dissatisfied. But that show ran six years and gave a wealth of performers the opportunity to leave their mark, from Michael C. Hall and Neil Patrick Harris to Jennifer Jason Leigh and Susan Egan. Now more people can do the same, after these actors eventually move on. I, for one, am glad the Kit Kat Klub is open for business.

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