

Excerpt from:

**LESS THAN CHORUS** by Lee MacDougall

The party would begin during the show. It was a production of the musical *Cabaret*, and we spent much of the evening celebrating at the infamous Kit Kat Club. A few of us were playing waiters at the club; we sang in the big musical numbers, moved furniture during scene changes, and served the stage customers. We would also spread the word about who was hosting the party after the show. The line between the two was often blurred.

The concept for this production was to have the leads perform on the stage, while the chorus of waiters and call-girls would lurk in the aisles, waiting for their chance to jump up and perform during the songs. When they were finished we would be back in the dark, serving the “guests” at the club who were seated at tables crammed into the aisles. This show was an apt metaphor for the young actor’s experience at the Festival.

Stratford is a large repertory company, with a different show running every evening and afternoon, to enable patrons to visit for a few days and see as many plays as humanly possible. To give the actors an incredible opportunity, and to keep us off the streets, we would be cast in up to four shows a season. We would rehearse three shows simultaneously for the first few months, open them to the public, then rehearse a new show when we weren’t performing. If an actor had been cast in three shows, and they couldn’t find a fourth, they would stick them in the musical.

So *Cabaret* had a rather large cast. There were the nine lead actors; eight young men who played waiters, sailors, and Nazis; eight young woman who played hooker/dancers; and there were twelve guests. This last group only appeared in the scenes at the club; their duties included applauding, smoking, and generally providing atmosphere. There are many long scenes in Cliff’s apartment, or at Fraulein Schneider’s, so the guests had a lot of down time during the three hour show. There is an area under the Stratford mainstage called the underworld; a dark confluence of hallways that allow people to make entrances via the ramps, or vomitoria. Because there was nowhere to house the guests, they were asked to remain in the underworld for the duration of the

show. Whenever we ran through this area carrying furniture, we would hop over the twelve bodies sprawled on the floor, trying to nap while they waited for their moment on the stage. But they never actually made it to the stage. When they were needed, they would trudge up the vomms and squeeze around the tables in the dark aisles. The guests hated this show.

There were a few actors among the guests who had lead roles in other plays. They had signed their contracts believing in the notion of a true repertory company, in which an actor might play Hamlet in one show, and the third soldier in another. This never happened. As in any democracy, the leads were always leads, and the servants were only servants. But some people still lived in hope, so they accepted the role of guest, thinking it would be a nice restful show. One day during rehearsal, a women playing one of our leads happened upon a female guest.

“Oh this must be so boring for you,” the older actress said, “hanging around, doing nothing for hours.”

“Ya, it’s pretty deadly,” mumbled the humble star.

“And you have a great part in the Marlowe. I’m amazed that you would accept such a small role in this. I mean a chorus part.” continued the gracious veteran. “Oh - but the waiters and the girls are the chorus. You people are - *less* than chorus.”

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When I arrived home the music was already blaring, and the living room was full of people dancing. In those days Stratford had three theatres running shows every night. Word had spread that we were hosting, and people had let themselves in. No one locked their doors. I started stacking beer and ice in the sink, and putting out bowls of chips. This looked like it might be a big one.