

KAKADU TANZ

**VOLUPTUOUS**

**PANIC**

**THE EROTIC WORLD OF WEIMAR BERLIN**

**MEL GORDON**

**EXPANDED EDITION**





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# **VOLUPTUOUS PANIC**

**THE EROTIC WORLD OF WEIMAR BERLIN**

**EXPANDED EDITION**

**BY MEL GORDON**



**FERAL HOUSE**

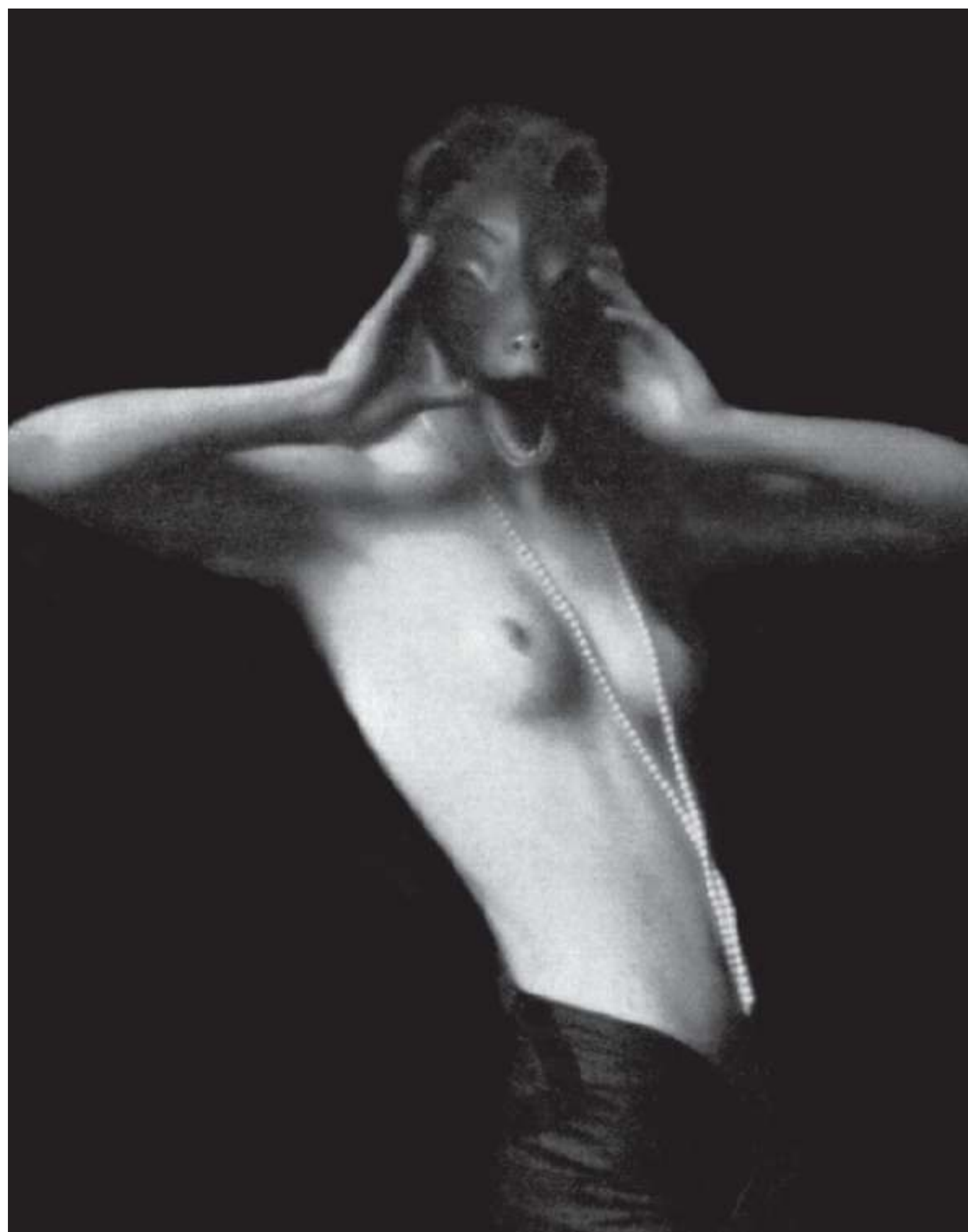




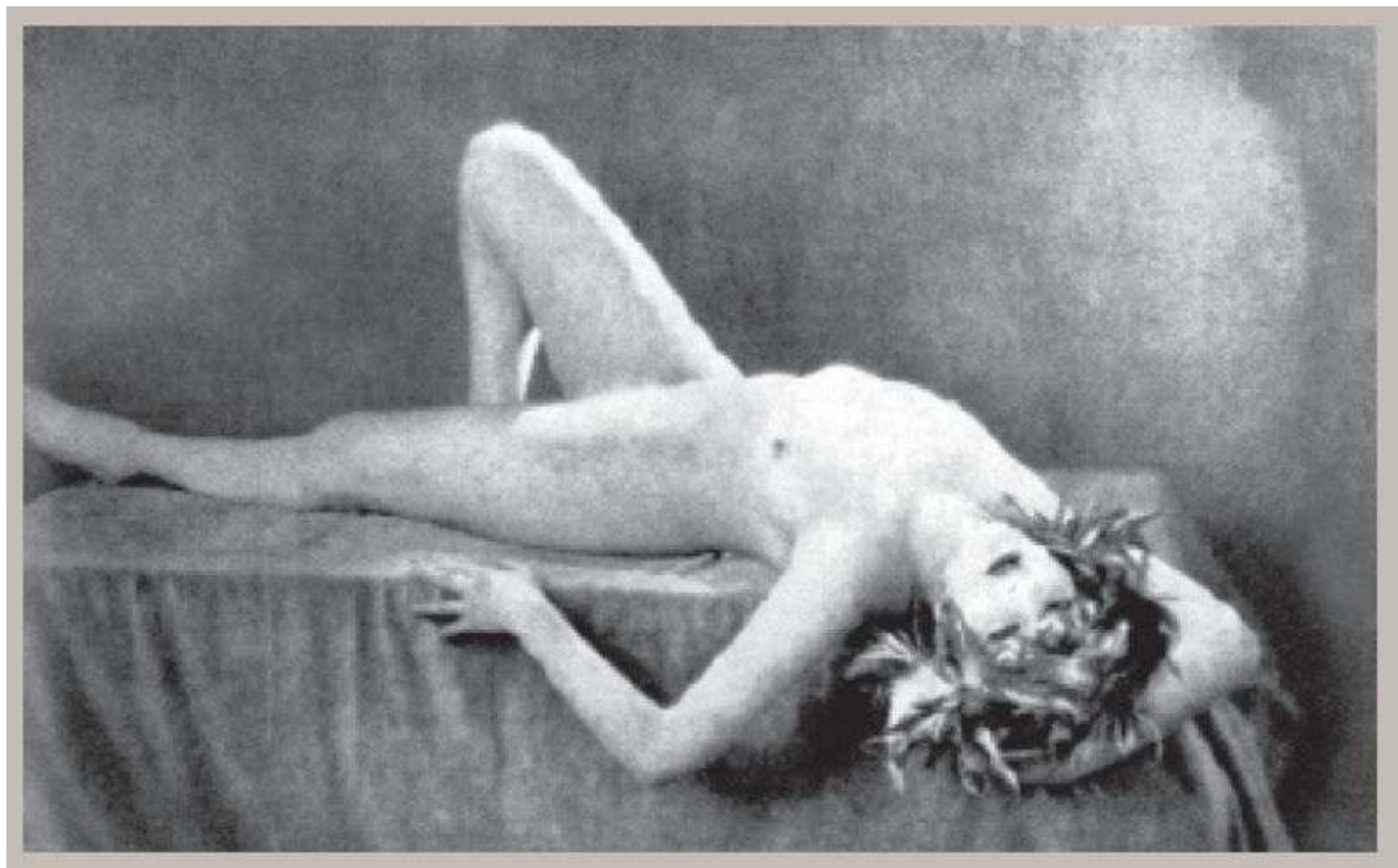


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This book is dedicated to Barbara Ulrich, my co-conspirator. It is also dedicated to three Weimar wildchildren, Henry Marx, Felicity Mason, and Tonio Stewart. Each was a master raconteur. They spent much precious time with me, telling me about their Berlin years and their many adventures there and in exile. All of them passed away before I finished this project. They will be sorely missed. Greatly appreciated was assistance from Michael Thaler, Ulrich Sacker, Tony Kaes, Jean-Marie Pradier, Ingrid Eggers, Christophe Bourseillier, Nina Hagen, Ute Kirchhelle, Shade Rupe, Jennifer M. Kapczynski, Rosa von Praunheim, Greg Day, John and the boys upstairs at Moe's.



## PREFACE



*Voluptuous Panic* began as research for an out-of-control theatre piece. In 1994, I wrote and directed a nightclub extravaganza for the German Queen of Punk Rock, Nina Hagen, entitled *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber*. The theme of the production was the tragic and dreamy life of Anita Berber, the most glamorous decadent personality from Berlin's Golden Twenties.

Berber consciously broke every social and theatrical convention of her time, and then proclaimed some startline theory to justify her provocative, outlaw behavior. She haunted the Friedrichstraße quarter of Berlin, appearing in hotel lobbies, nightclubs, and casinos, radiantly naked except for an elegant sable wrap that shadowed her gaunt shoulders and a pair of patent-leather pumps. One year Berber made her post-midnight entrances looking like a drugged-out Eve, clad only in those heels, a frightened pet monkey hanging from her neck, and an heirloom silver brooch packed with cocaine.

On Berlin's cabaret stages, Anita Berber danced out bizarre erotic fantasias—scenic displays fueled by noxious concoctions of ether-and-chloroform, cognac, morphine injections, and a chic, passive sexual disposition. Satiated Berliners, after a few riotous seasons in the early Twenties, finally tired of Berber's libidinous antics. The high priestess of choreographic decadence died a pauper's death in 1928, the result, more or less, of a desperate attempt to quit cold-turkey from her most beloved

addictions, cognac.

Nina Hagen and I rejected the notion of Anita Berber as a doomed flapper or artistic victim of Berlin's uncaring, patriarchal public. For us, she was the first postmodern woman: a vibrant Marilyn Monroe with the devious, adolescent mind of Norman Mailer. Her life needed to be celebrated.

I decided to organize the performance like an invented German cabaret evening with discrete units of wild 1920s-going-into-the-1990s, Weill-Hollaender music; erotic Expressionist sketches, hardcore Berber dance (with sacred dildos and morphine syringes as props); smutty poetry-recitations-in-the-nude, and loops of Weimar pornography—all running in a side-show sequence and introduced by a devil, beyond-Joel-Grey MC, delivering witty, narrative commentary.

Finding authentic erotic images of Twenties Berlin for my show would be the simplest of a dozen directorial tasks. I figured two of three days (tops) in the public library would suffice. To my initial surprise, there were relatively few lurid Weimar pictorials, other than the obvious George Grosz and Otto Dix etchings of grotesque whores, war-cripples, and bald-headed exploiters.

The authoritative history of racy men's periodicals, Mark Gabor's *The Pin-Up* (Bell Publishing, New York, 1972) maintained, "In Germany, there were no girlie magazines of consequence until after 1945." [In fact, I later learned over 80 such mags could be found in Berlin kiosks in 1930.] The researchers for Bob Fosse's film *Cabaret*, which was shot on location in Berlin in 1971, also reported a remarkable lack of erotic documentation; one of them complained to *The New York Post*, only literary routines and political satires remained of the old cabaret milieu. Even contemporary German language books on the subject of interwar Berlin contained pitiful numbers of the provocative visual material that the production concept demanded.

My brain reeled. Did the Nazis or frightened Berliners destroy every suggestive publication during the politically sobering Thirties and Forties? Were Allied firebombings equally responsible for the incineration of Berlin's debauched past? Or maybe such print or photographic material from the orgiastic Weimar era never really existed as I imagined them.

Relying on private European contacts and antiquarian bookstores, I launched a feverish search for all bits of data and representations from pre-Hitler Germany. Within a few months, I had acquired dozens, then boxes, of extraordinary Weimar Berlin paper items, erotic news magazines, cabaret postcards and playbills, sexy hotel brochures, *Galante* journals, *verboten* travelogues, illustrated "Moral Histories" (*Sittengeschichten*), underground tabloids, popular crime weeklies, and naughty what-to-do-after-midnight guidebooks. These saucy remnants contained not just pictures and photographs but descriptions, exposés, and print enticements of every sort.

The living ephemera of a lost Berlin, if only a few hundred scraps, had fallen into my hands. Now I had considerably more than a cache of weird material to brighten up a wild performance project. Scattered around my copy stand was enough arcane junk for a book. Or two. ■







A disgusting city, this Berlin, a place where no one believes in anything.

**Cagliostro, 1775**

And now we come to the most lurid Underworld of all cities—that of post-war Berlin. Ever since the declaration of peace, Berlin found its outlet in the wildest dissipation imaginable. The German is gross in his immorality, he likes his Halb-Welt or underworld pleasures to be devoid of any Kultur or refinement, he enjoys obscenity in a form which even the Parisian would not tolerate.

Netley Lucas, *Ladies of the Underworld*, 1927

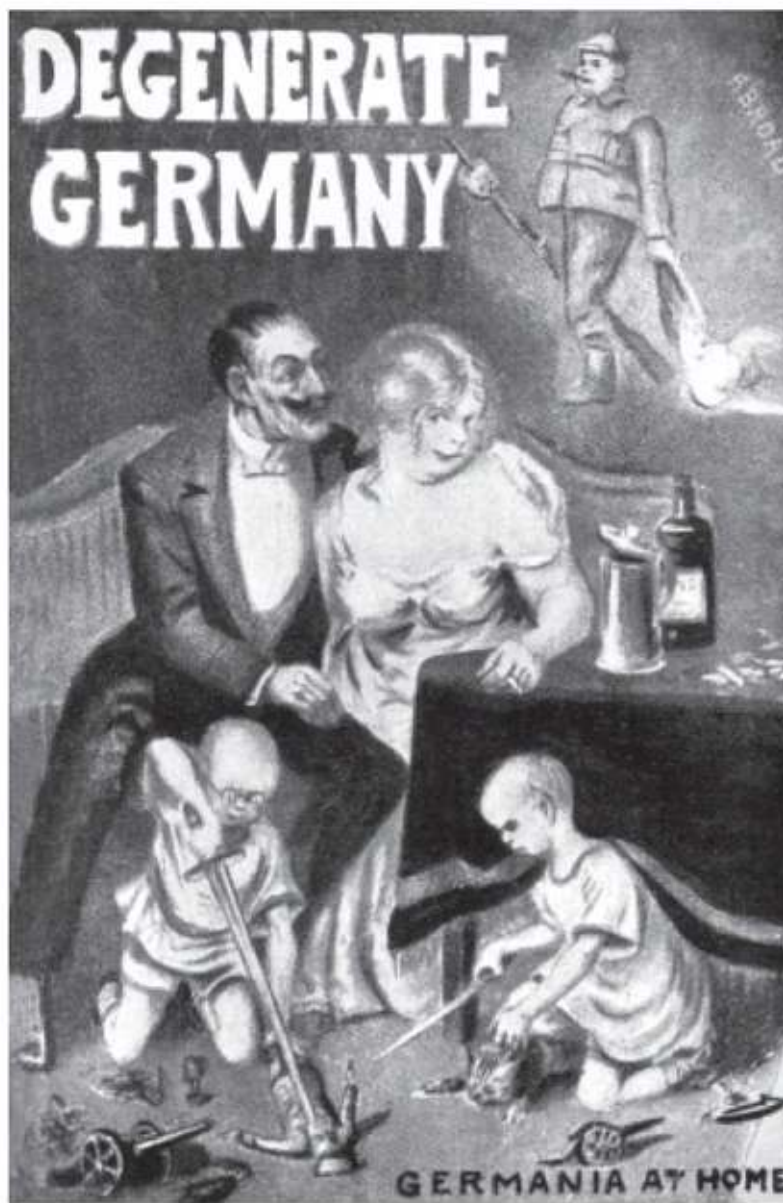
## **ONCE IN BERLIN**

**Berlin means depravity.** Moralists across the widest spectrum of political and spiritual beliefs have condemned by rote this chimerical metropolis as a strange city, built on strange soil. Even the alkaline air around the Prussian capital (*Berliner Luft*) was said to contain a toxic ether that attacked the central nervous system, stimulating long-suppressed passions as it animated all the external tics of sexual perversity. In the center of Europe, mesmerized audiences were warned, sits a nightmarish municipality, a human swamp of unfettered appetites and twisted prurient proclivities. The American writer, Ben Hecht, self-described bon vivant and one-time foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, characterized the expansive pre-Nazi cityscape succinctly as the “prime breeding ground for evil.”

Amazingly, the legend of wicked Berlin, the international sex-tourist Mecca of the Twenties and early Thirties, endures into the twenty-first century. Two full generations after its Sodom and Gomorrah-like demise in March 1933, hundreds of American and British filmmakers, pop novelists, fashion photographers, playwrights, academics, I and twenty-something website designers still play out the enchanting tale of a debauched, twentieth-century Eldorado that disappeared in flames. With Babylon and Nero’s Rome, Weimar Berlin has entered into our topological thesaurus as a synonym for moral degeneracy.



Sebastian Droste, the husband of Anita Berber, 1923



Anti-German propaganda, London, 1915

## Mythological Roots of Weimar

Contemporary knowledge of life in Twenties Berlin principally springs from mass-market films and plays. But the number of Lost-in-Weimar costume-dramas is surprisingly small. Motion-picture shorthand normally brings to mind the haughty personas of Marlene Dietrich, Lotte Lenya, Joel Grey, and Liza Minnelli—each iconically attired in a lacy garter belt, black silk stockings, and shiny elevated footwear.

Although Josef von Sternberg's early talkie *The Blue Angel* (shot simultaneously in German, English, and French in 1930) was based on Heinrich Mann's 1905 novel, its dark atmospheric rendition of sexual debasement at least belonged to a then present-day Berlin. In fact, the Blue Angel cabaret of the movie title was directly modeled on a Berlin North dive known as The Stork's Nest. Even Marlene Dietrich's chair-straddling Lola-Lola character had more than a passing physical

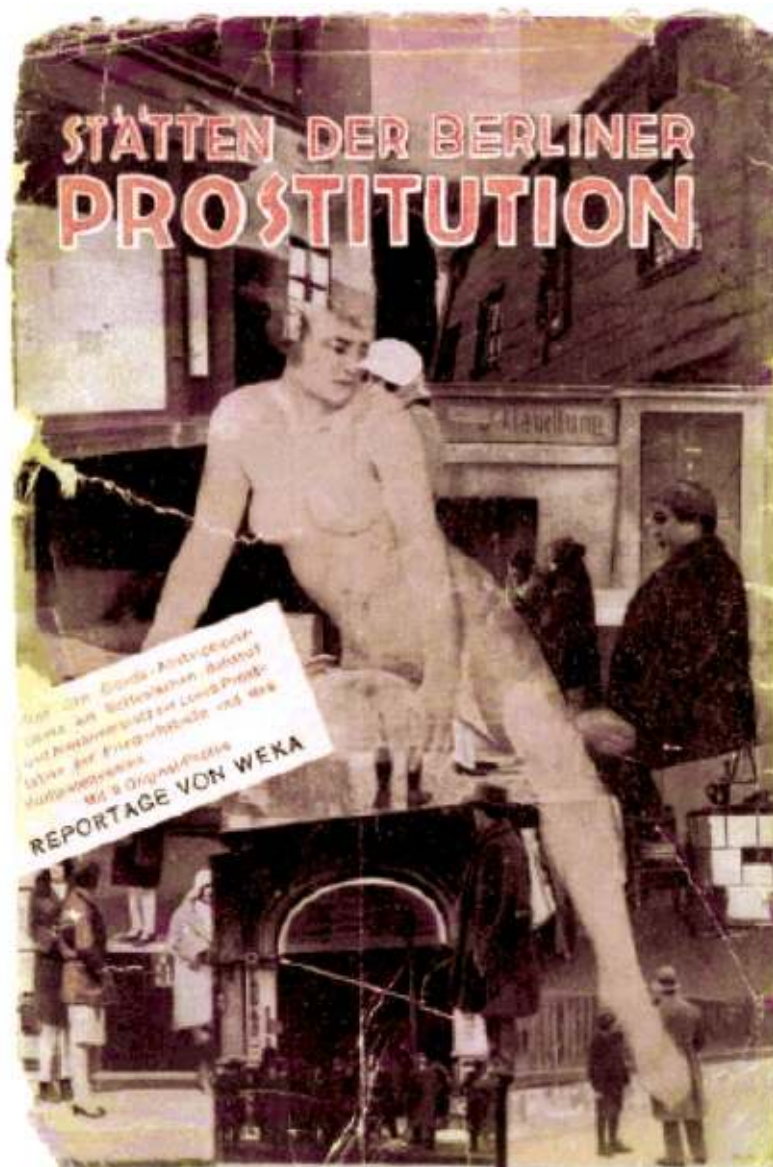
likeness to the Nest's real-life star fatale, Lola Niedlich, who was not above hawking her own dirty postcards between other singers' acts.



A sexual exposé, *The Forbidden Book*, 1929

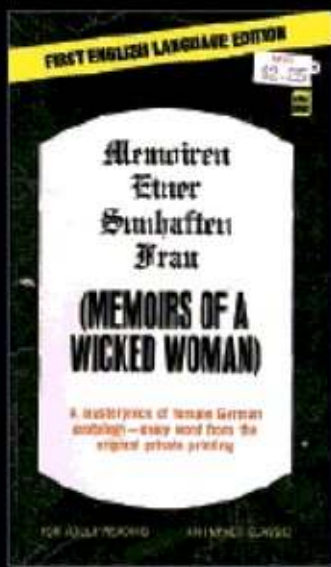
(Dietrich, of course, later claimed her glamorous, cold-hearted inspiration was sparked by nameless male transvestite, an anonymous fashion-plate she admired at the Silhouette, Berlin's HQ for glam-dom gender-benders. Maybe, maybe not.)

Another émigré, Lotte Lenya, the diminutive Viennese chanteuse, arrived in New York in 1936 with equally high hopes. Although her composer husband Kurt Weill dutifully pushed her career forward, Lenya's star rose only in the post-World War II period when the Weill/Brecht Weimar confection *The Three-Penny Opera* became the surprise Off-Broadway musical hit of 1954. Lenya achieved immediate cult status as a novel avatar of Berlin sexuality—the saucy shrew with the delectable whiskey-and-cigarette rasp. Everything about Lenya radiated High Camp (not yet defined but rapturously appreciated in the Greenwich Village habitat of the time) from her ironic stage delivery to her evil-if-matronly bisexual predilections. Moreover, Lenya herself disturbingly epitomized the cartoonish whores from George Grosz' pornographic oeuvre, another Weimar import that was gaining popularity in the Eisenhower-Marlborough Book Club-Kennedy era.



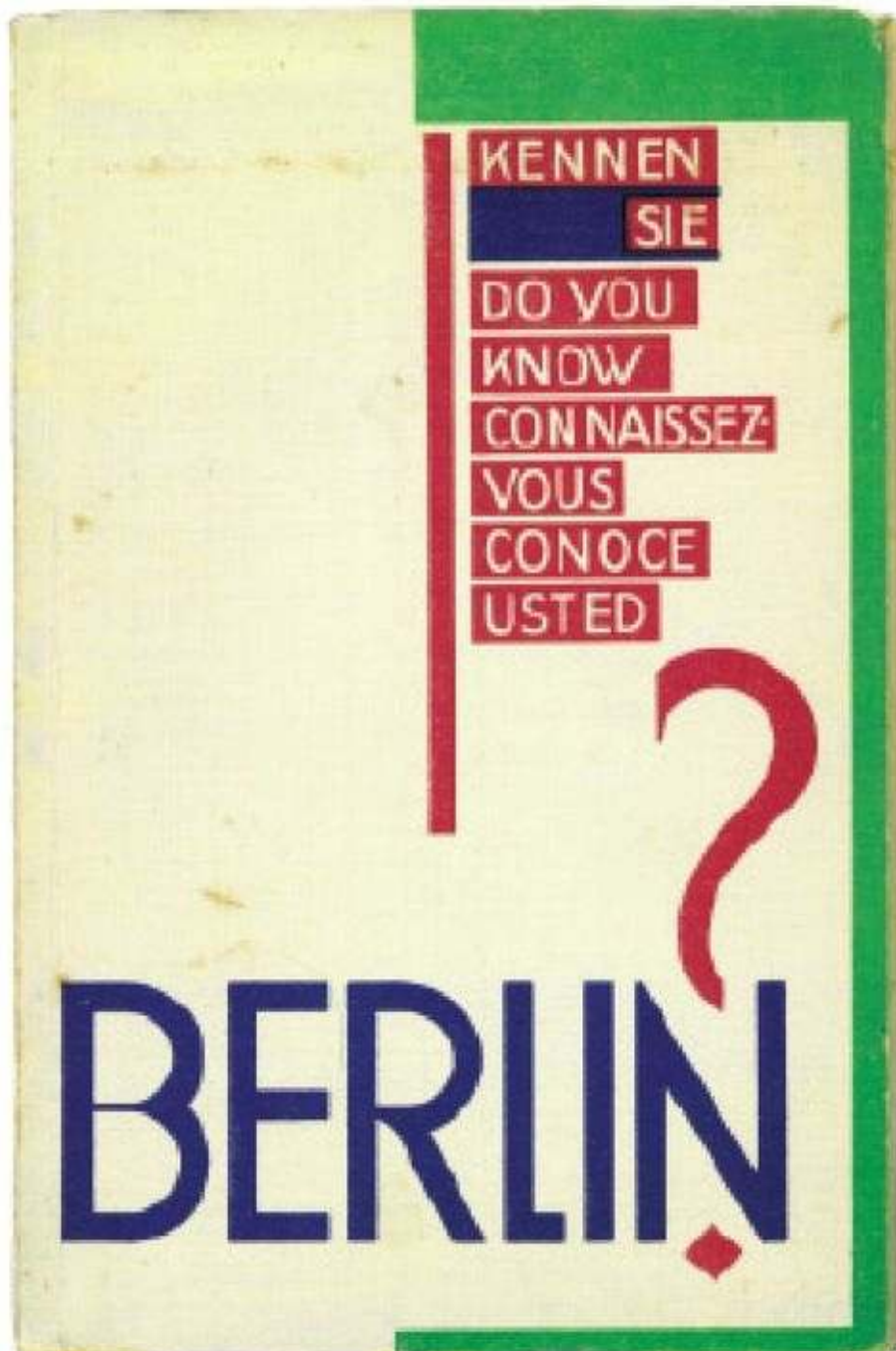
*Sites of Berlin Prostitution, 1930*

I The writer most responsible for the myth of “Sodom on the Spree” was, of course, the British writer Peter Pan, Christopher Isherwood. His semi-autobiographical *Berlin Stories* were written in the 1930s but only found a wide readership decades later when they were appropriated for Broadway and Hollywood vehicles.

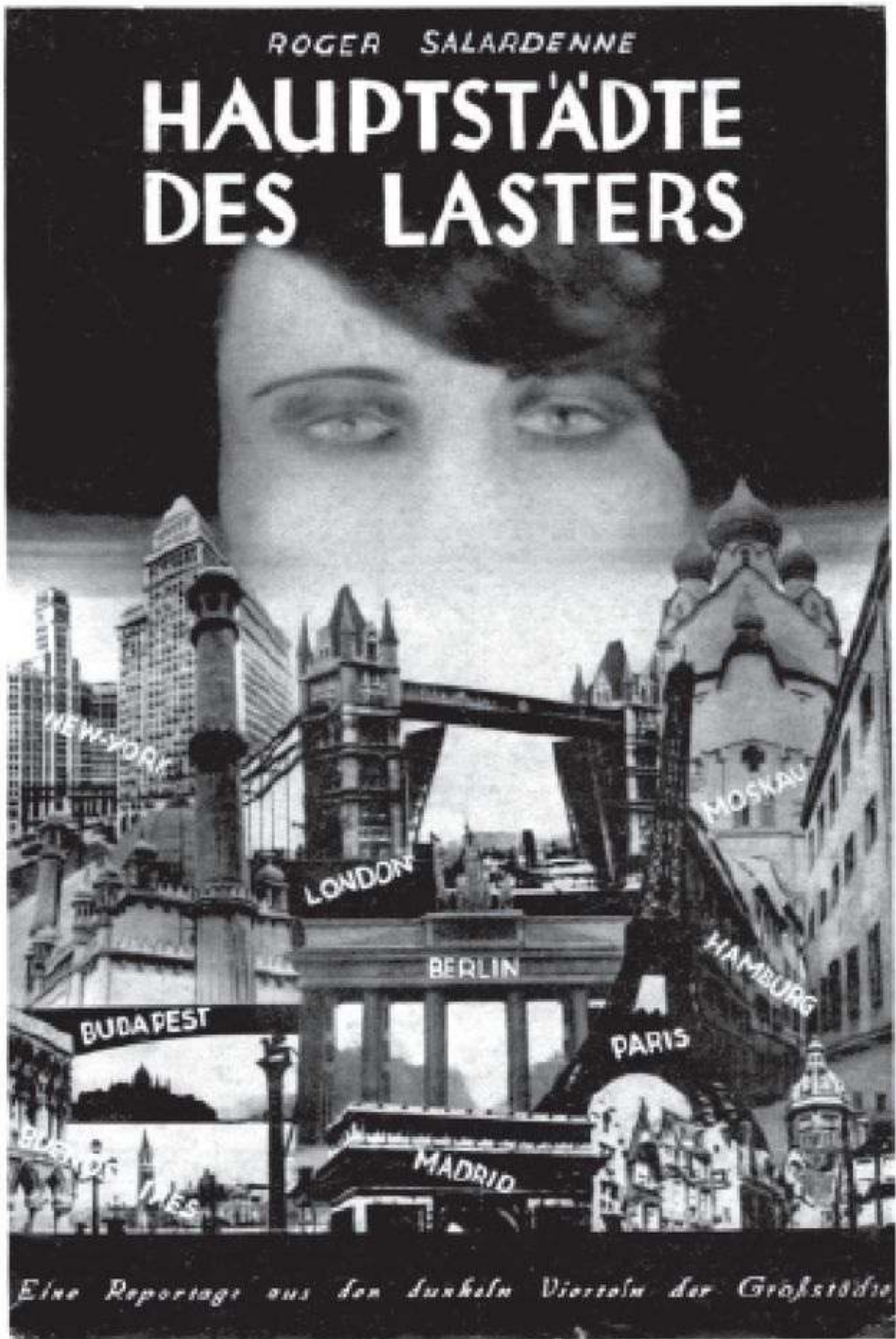


Popular representations of wicked Berlin

The first dramatization of the Isherwood vignettes, *I Am a Camera* (staged in 1951; filmed in 1953) introduced the American public to the character of Sally Bowles and the sinister “demonic Berlin Nazi takeover” theme. These adaptations, however, were essentially cerebral renderings—in the inimitable “Playhouse 90” black-and-white television style—not helped by their tame erotic imagery (nary a nipple or garter in sight) and conventional Fifties scenario: serious, artistic type lands in a dangerous and sexually-charged environment (usually a foreign stand-in for Manhattan), becomes involved with a promiscuous female, realizes the folly of his ways, and returns with newly-minted enthusiasm to his trustworthy wife/fiancée/home (that is, the domestic tranquility of Levittown).



Contemporary accounts of Berlin's nightlife, 1929 and 1931



Hal Prince's Broadway musical version of the Isherwood stories, *Cabaret* (staged in 1966) provides an entirely fresh and titillating look at nocturnal Berlin. His scenic designer, the Russian-born Boris Aronson, actually spent several months in the city during the depths of the 1923 Inflation. And the



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