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Theater BY RICK LEVIN



Teenage Wasteland

New musical *Spring Awakening* is the best After-School Special you never saw

Hope isn't the only thing that springs eternal; spring springs eternal, too, and if April is the cruelest month, it's also the stiffest and moistest. Ask any 16-year-old. We tend to forget that Romeo and Juliet, super randy to rut, were just a few moons into their teens, their bodies ripe and hormones blooming to burst. Spring is the season of youth and youth is the springtime of life. Only sexless crimps would claim youth is wasted on the young. Nope — the kids are okay, and everything else is a waste of time.

It seems pointedly ironic and fitting, then, as the chill sets in and the first leaves twirl brown to the ground, that our autumnal attitudes are given one final tweak with *Spring Awakening*, the hot-and-bothered 2007 Broadway musical (itself adapted from the 1892 German play) reinterpreted and co-directed for Actors Cabaret by Joe Zingo and Mark Van Beever. They've done a bang-up job. A dark, sexy production anchored by honesty and smarts, this play conveys with uncommon candor the intellectual confusion and glandular turmoil of a gaggle of parochial-school teens. *Spring Awakenings* is foul of mouth and independent of heart, and it puts to shame all those mealy cautionary tales about "safe sex" and the pitfalls of puberty.

At the troubled core of *Spring Awakening* is a pair of star-crossed lovers: Melchior (Trevor Eichhorn), a bright, young atheist eager to trample the status quo, and Wendla (Sophie Mitchell), a lovely, wounded girl desperate for emotional connection and carnal knowledge. These two popular, charismatic students flit and dance around their mutual desire like two spinning magnets, oscillating between attraction and repulsion; they are sweet, scared, pure and doomed. Eichhorn expertly channels the furious vulnerability of the bookish boy geek, always armed with his Stendhal and his scowling sexual charm. And Mitchell is a dream of a performer; with her sharp, fragile beauty and strong singing voice, she radiates that certain indefinable something — complexity, depth, range — that makes for a great actor.

Orbiting Wendla and Melchior is a constellation of kids — from the sexually frustrated and suicidal Moritz (Van Beever), to the free-spirited Ilse (Mandy Rose), to Martha (Alexis Myles), sadistically abused by her father — each of them struggling

like crazy to survive in a world perpetually long on lies and weak on compassion. *Spring Awakening* is downright Charlie Brown-like in its depiction of authority, which hovers and harangues — *wah wah wah wah wah* — from every available angle. There is parental neglect and abuse, puritanical repression, religious hypocrisy, pedagogical chicanery and all manner of bigotry and bullshit. Personifying the adult world's near-monopoly on idiocy and oppression are Maida Belove-McCarthy and Bruce McCarthy, who between them fill all the grown-up roles, from teacher and preacher to principal and parent.

There is nothing remarkable about the structure of this musical, which strings together its subplots like a professional checklist for high-school guidance counselors: premarital sex, masturbation, homosexuality, pregnancy, rebellion, alienation, depression, suicide, death. What elevates *Spring Awakening* is the talent of its cast and especially its creators, Zingo and Van Beever, who have taken Steven Sater's original book and lyrics, boosted by Duncan Sheik's excellent score, and turned something they considered "disjointed," "weak" and "jarring" into a coherent and enlightening whole. This takes vision and guts.

The results are pretty damn captivating. Drawing inspiration from sources as incongruous as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Pink Floyd's *The Wall* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Spring Awakening* is a brave, funny, sensual and deeply serious look at the world of teens. Unlike so many "issue" productions, it is neither patronizing nor pandering. The songs are bold, catchy and distinctive, avoiding the monotonous wash of glee that just screams "musical." *Refreshing* is an oft-dropped cliché in the world of theater, but here it fits. This is sex ed with teeth and a monster beat. Parents could do worse than let their kids attend this crash course in reality.

In fact, worse would be ignoring the lessons of *Spring Awakening*, which proves that the cosmic law of adult misconduct still holds true, from the halls of Planned Parenthood to the phones of the suicide hotline: For every inaction, there is an equal and opposite catastrophe. **EW**

Spring Awakening plays through Nov. 5 at Actors Cabaret, 996 Willamette; actorscabaret.org or 683-4368.