

BAY TIMES

LGBTQ News & Calendar for the Bay Area

Wow! San Jose Rep Scores Big with Spring Awakening

Published: September 22, 2011

By Jeanie Smith

San Jose Rep has opened its season with a brilliant winner of a show - Spring Awakening, the hit musical based on Frank Wedekind's 1891 play by the same name. Don't for a second think this must be old - focused on emerging sexuality and societal taboos, the show fairly leaps off the stage with vibrant relevancy and still pertinent questions for our society. Terrific acting, singing and dancing by an energetic and tireless ensemble; superb production values; and fresh, creative interpretation in the staging all add up to a magical evening's entertainment.

Wedekind wrapped up just about every taboo subject he could think of - masturbation, homosexuality, sexual abuse, gender inequity, extramarital sex, suicide, abortion, and teen pregnancy - into one intense script about young people coming of age and going through puberty in a society hell bent on repressing their instincts and individuality.

Banned in his own time, the play went on to enjoy later success, but really garnered attention in 2006 when Duncan Sheik (a driving rock music score) and Steven Sater (book and lyrics) brought their musical update to Broadway, winning numerous awards and spawning several national tours. Their adaptation reveals the humor, retains the drama, and demonstrates how little has changed in 120 years. It also became a cult phenom; young people follow the show in droves, calling themselves the Guilty Ones.

San Jose Rep's version pays homage to the Broadway version, but veers into new territory with original staging by director Rick Lombardo and evocative, precise choreography by Sonya Tayeh - best known for her remarkable work on TVs "So You Think You Can Dance". Lombardo and Tayeh must have gotten along great working together, because their work is seamless - all the movement is of a piece, both fascinating and consistent throughout, absolutely stunning and inventive. Their work is aided by a massive high-tech set by John Iacovelli that gives the show a smart, contemporary and epic feel; lighting and multimedia effects by David Lee Cuthbert; and a small onstage orchestra/band led by Dolores Duran-Cefalu.

Perhaps all that would come to naught without an amazing ensemble of performers, and this show has that in spades. Jason Hite is outstanding as Melchior, the bright, precocious and inquisitive young man who encounters hypocrisy and tragedy at a tender age. He has the bravado and in-your-face gutsy rebellion, but also the tender vulnerability of young love and self-doubt.

Eryn Murman, the only veteran of the Broadway production in this cast, partners well with Hite as the curious Wendla, performing with nuance and nerve. Her voice has a liquid velvet quality that carries surprising strength. The seduction scene with Wendla and Melchior was superbly and tastefully done, filled with all the necessary conflicting emotions.

Miguel Cervantes delivers charm and humor in the otherwise sad role of Moritz, the misfit who can't please his father. His rock solo has power and punch.



Melchior (Jason Hite) struts to the front as the rest of the teens dance in the background in Spring Awakening. Photo by Kevin Berne.

All the ensemble performers are excellent - not a weak link on stage. In particular, Zarah Mahler shines as the outcast Ilse, Kristen Majetich gives a solid portrayal as Martha, and Monique Hafen shows both comic and serious skills as Anna.

It's rare for me to gush about a show, but this one deserves all my gushes and then some. If you haven't already picked up the phone to order tickets, do it now. Even if you saw the show on tour, or in New York, you'll love this impressive version and its reminder of why the show is a huge hit.