



Out & About

IN THE VALLEY & ON THE COAST

The South Bay's Premiere Entertainment Guide

Spring Awakening at San Jose Repertory Theatre



Teenagers dance to the song of one of their peers in San Jose Rep's production of Spring Awakening. Photo: Kevin Berne

Should a naïf, Disney's Goofy say, happen to buy a ticket to San Jose Rep's new production of **Spring Awakening**, wander into the theatre and think, "Gawrsh...I wonder what this is about," he would be warned of "mature themes, including sexual situations, partial nudity, and strong language" posted on prominent, unmistakable signs at all entrances into the auditorium. And that ain't all. Masturbation, child abuse, cruelty and death are all given their moments, as well as the joy of sexual discovery and the bliss of nature.

Spring Awakening, based on the 1892 play by Franz Wedekind, won eight out of the ten Tony Awards for which it was nominated (including a win for Best Musical) and the Rep's production clearly shows why. The show is utterly transfixing. Set in the strict, culturally and socially repressive Germany of

the late eighteenth hundreds, **Spring Awakening** tells the story of teenage sexuality bursting against the willful ignorance and strictures of Teutonic Puritanism. With emotions burdened by inchoate notions of sin and shame, minds shackled to unquestioning, rote education under a pedantic martinet, the teens of the play struggle toward unhappy adulthood.

When emotions become too strong to bear, the characters pour forth their passion in rock songs fraught with yearnings, regret and tenderness. Rock and roll wedded to a Nineteenth Century story? A glaring incongruity? Resoundingly no! Under the keen direction of Artistic Director **Rick Lombardo**, the brilliant book, lyrics and music by creators Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik prove that rock music is **the** expression of sexuality and desire and organically fits the story like sausage into casing. There is no overstating the case, **Spring Awakening** is a great piece of musical theatre.

Leading the cast of terrific young performers, **Jason Hite** as the intellectually brilliant Melchior is a magnetic star. With boundless energy (true of all in the cast), he pours his passion into every moment on stage and sings with raw abandon yet, in the sweet moments of yearning, produces an achingly exquisite, pure falsetto.

Matching him in the passionate quest for feeling and fulfillment, **Eryn Murman** as Wendla stamps out the territory of the show with the opening number "Mama Who Bore Me" with a skirt-twisting, aching-for-knowledge emotionality that connects palpably with the audience. The power of nature pulls the two youths together with formidable inevitability.



Melchior (Jason Hite) struts to the front as the rest of the teens dance in the background in San Jose Rep's production of Spring Awakening. Photo: Kevin Berne



The girls (lead by Eryn Murmyn as Wendla, center) demand to know the truth about the birds and the bees in San Jose Rep's production of *Spring Awakening*. Photo: Kevin Berne

When Melchior, disgraced by the school authorities, responds with the extended aside "Totally Fucked," he is backed by the entire ensemble, giving this universally understandable moment a full-throated, foot stomping, show-stopping treatment.

The choreography of **Sonya Tayeh** marvelously expresses teenage angst and bottled energy with sometimes plodding movement, sometimes frenetic, sometimes in unison and sometimes like randomly fired synapses. The visible, upstage musical ensemble lush with strings is superb and when Melchior or Moritz pick up a guitar to wail along, that adds yet another appealing dimension (and well known metaphor) to the evening.

John Iacovelli's scenic design with its open stage and easily moved set pieces helps keep the action brisk. Splendid projections create place and mood as do the giant doors left and right inscribed with "Jungen" and "Madchen" emphasizing the separation of the sexes.

Spring Awakening runs through September 25.

Broadway veteran **Miguel Cervantes** gives a powerful, poignant performance as the repressed, driven Mortiz. So distracted by his imaginative longings, he struggles in schools and fails, which blasts his life off on a hopeless trajectory. Handschen (slyly seductive **Joshua James**) and an easily won Ernst (a pliant **Manuel Rodriguez-Ruiz**) show that the forces of sexuality swing more than one way. Martha (**Kristen Majetich**) reveals family secrets with "The Dark I Know Well."

With chameleon sureness and fine comic sensibility, **Cindy Goldfield** and **Todd Alan Johnson** represent a variety of adult characters ranging from somewhat sympathetic to insensitive to cruel.



(l to r) The boys (lead by Miguel Cervantes as Mortiz, center) sing about the hardships of living in San Jose Rep's production of *Spring Awakening*. Photo: Kevin Berne