

Life is but a stage, and we're all players upon it

By John Orr, Daily News Arts and Entertainment Editor

09/17/2011

HATS OFF DEPT.: San Jose Rep has mounted a terrific production of the great rock musical, "Spring Awakening" that does almost everything right and offers some brilliant new touches, including Sonya Tayeh's choreography, which is a language to itself.

"Spring Awakening," which won eight of 11 nominated Tonys in 2007, is about the awakening of hormones in adolescents. It is based on an 1891 play by Frank Wedekind, born in Germany and raised in Switzerland, who rebelled so much and so often against the restrictive mores of his time that several of his plays were banned by various self-righteous authorities of the time.

It'd be nice to be able to say that, gee, in the last 120 years, we've really worked out our neuroses about the onset of puberty and talking about sex with our children, but ... no, all too many of us have not.

So, when buddies Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik set out to develop "Frühlings Erwachen" for the modern era, with a powerful punk-rock score, they were picking on what is still a very timely subject.

Maybe it always will be. It's hard to imagine a time when intelligent teenagers aren't questioning everything, and finding plenty to doubt about what their parents have told them, including a long line of lies involving cabbage patches and storks.

"Spring Awakening" puts the angst and the anger of adolescence right out there on the stage, with a screaming, stomping rock score that shakes the audience right to the heart. It's won so many awards, including eight Tonys, that forests have been leveled to print them all.

The now-retired national tour swung through San Jose Center for the Performing Arts in 2009, thanks to Broadway San Jose, and that was a terrific production.

Now San Jose Rep has put its own production on stage at its own mid-sized theater in downtown, and it is also terrific, and in some ways hotter and better than the national tour show.

It is powerfully emotional. This production really hits the heart.

A key improvement is the choreography by Sonya Tayeh. Fabulous stuff. Dance is language, and Tayeh uses it to shout in our faces about the yearning desperation of confused youth. The terrific cast assembled by director Rick Lombardo brings pain and passion and danger to the stage through Tayeh's choreography, pounding the audience with emotion. Her use of furniture is fabulous.

The cast writhes in agony, it writhes in ecstasy. When a heart is broken on stage, it breaks, also, in the audience.

Another touch I liked, that I don't remember seeing in the touring show, is the use of electric guitars in the hands of several cast members. The quibble about that is the guitars should have been louder. They needed to scream, and only mumbled.

The cast is great. A mix of Broadway vets and local stars, they all bring it. Eryn Murman, who has played every girl role in this show on Broadway and elsewhere, is fragile and passionate as Wendla, who asks her mom about babies, and who falls in love with the handsome Melchior, who is played here by a Bay Area theater gypsy, Jason Hite, who is quite good.

I was tickled to see two women in this cast whom I had seen previously at the little Bus Barn Stage Company in Los Altos: Ernestine Balisi and Monique Hafen. They both have major chops on stage. Balisi has tremendous intensity, which is exactly what "Spring Awakening" needs. Hafen is so pretty it's almost possible to miss what a good job she does in any character she plays. I suspect we have many years of great performances to enjoy from both of them.

Lowell Abellon has one of the prettiest voices in this production, a high tenor that helped some of the most touching tunes run even deeper.

The band, conducted by keyboards player Dolores Duran-Cefalu, was great. It was fun to see Pete Masek, who plays violin and guitar, kind of hanging forward from the band alcove, to watch the action in front of him when he wasn't called on to play.

Scenic design by John Iacovelli is impressive. A huge background, with giant projection screens in window frames. We see rocks in a stream as the actresses teeter through a line of chairs-become-stones on the stage. We see a Gibson guitar as Miguel Cervantes strums away at a Fender onstage.

There are steps up into the band area which serve as one of the entry points for actors. At one point Murman and Hite are both back there wailing away on guitars.

"Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young," says Albus Dumbledore in one of J.K.Rowling's brilliant Harry Potter novels.

"Spring Awakening" helps us old men remember. And may help some struggling teens deal.

Email John Orr at jorr@dailynewsgroup.com.