

San Jose Rep: 'Spring Awakening'

With music by Duncan Sheik and choreography by Sonya Tayeh, the Tony Award-winning rock musical tackles several taboo subjects.

by [Anna Pan](#) on Aug 31, 2011

Harry Potter's teen angst in *The Order of the Phoenix* is comparable to that of the German adolescents in the eight-time Tony Award-winning [Spring Awakening](#), opening on the first of September at the [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#). The production is choreographed by famed *So You Think You Can Dance* choreographer Sonya Tayeh.

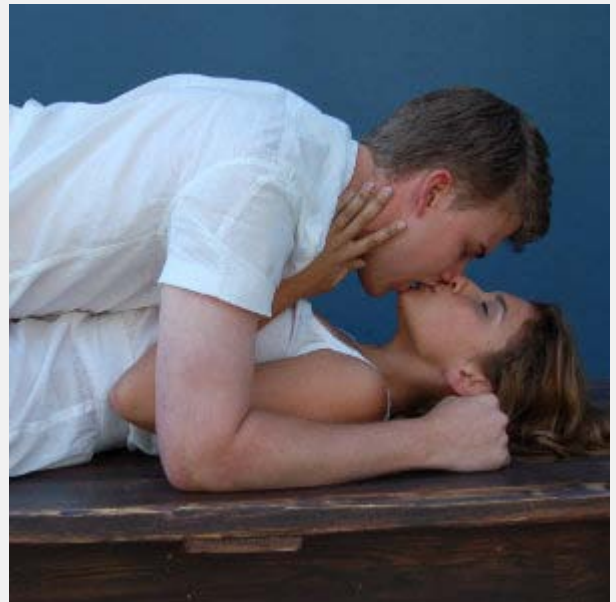
This musical reinterpretation of Frank Wedekind's play is set in 19th century Germany and deals with controversial content such as abortion, suicide, homosexuality, physical abuse, masturbation, religion, rape, murder and depression. The young adolescents are repressed by corrupt teachers, strict parents and societal expectations, constantly forced to suppress their opinions and urges.

All of the teenage characters struggle with these taboo subjects in their own way. Wendla, the lead role originated by Lea Michele (*Glee*'s Rachel Berry), is troubled that her mother is still hiding the truth about consummation. The self-deprecating Moritz battles his academic stress and depression, desperately trying to hide from unbearable shame and disappointment. Moritz, a popular and intelligent smooth-talker, tries to mentor the two friends by teaching them the sweet taste of rebellion, which triggers more trouble down the road.

Confusion and loss of innocence cloud the thoughts of the powerless teens as they remain trapped in an in-between stage where they're not old enough to understand the complexities of life but not young enough to be exempt from all responsibilities. The musical calls the danger of ignorance into question as well as highlighting the emotional toll of large gaps between generations.

The songs touch on mature topics; the youthful cast releases their emotions through "Touch Me," "Totally F***ed," "Mama Who Bore Me," and "The Bitch of Living." But *Spring Awakening* wasn't dubbed Best Musical for its risqué song titles alone. Duncan Sheik's masterfully composed melodies are hauntingly melancholy and blend with Steven Sater's lyrics and libretto, which are packed with weight in symbolism.

The San Jose Repertory's cast is a mix of young Broadway veterans with talented San Jose State undergraduate students. The production stays true to the original in most senses, but a few creative choices set it apart. For one, Tayeh's choreography involves extremely physical staging. "Sonya is brilliant at this; she's one of the hot, hip, young choreographers of today," says director Rick Lombardo. Secondly, the Rep's Melchior plays the acoustic guitar onstage. And thirdly, the Rep will show off its technical side with five jumbo video screens displaying large-scale images, videos and animations during the performance to enrich the experience.



Melchior (Jason Hite) and Wendla (Eryn Murman) heat things up in San Jose Rep's production of 'Spring Awakening'.

"There's so much heart in it," says Lombardo. "People know *Spring Awakening* for its sexual awakening, but I'm surprised everyday in rehearsal by how moving it is from moment to moment. We really try to tell the story of what it means to take that journey from pre-adolescence to adolescence and how delicate, fragile and vulnerable that time is."

Fans of *Rent* are usually enamored with *Spring Awakening* because of its similar rock style, but the fan-base of *Spring Awakening* is diverse because of its relatable sensibilities. As Lombardo puts it, "Every generation goes through thinking that they're the first generation to go through puberty. Everyone goes through the same anxieties, fears and sensations. That's why the show is timeless."

[*Spring Awakening*](#)

Runs September 1-25

San Jose Repertory Theatre, San Jose

\$17.50-\$79

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