

## 'Spring Awakening' review: Heat wave in San Jose

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

Tuesday, September 13, 2011



Kevin Berne

Tuneful Jason Hite is teen rebel Melchior in San Jose Rep's "Spring Awakening."



**Spring Awakening:** Rock musical.

Book and lyrics by Steve Sater, adapted from the play by Frank Wedekind. Music by Duncan Sheik. Directed by Rick Lombardo. Through Sept. 25. San Jose Repertory, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 25 minutes. \$12.50-\$79. (408) 367-7255. [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).

Teenage sex takes center stage to open San Jose Repertory's 31st season. Adolescent angst gets its spotlight moments, too, as do the tyranny and abuse of teachers and parents. But it's the budding and rampaging hormones that generate the most heat in "Spring Awakening."

That would be true if Artistic Director Rick Lombardo had staged Frank Wedekind's 1891 drama of sexual repression. It's just as apt given Lombardo's perhaps bolder choice to open his season with composer Duncan Sheik and author Steven Sater's rock-musical adaptation, seen here in tours of the Tony-winning Broadway version at the Curran Theatre in 2008 and San Jose Center for the Performing Arts in '09.

Lombardo's staging, part of the first wave of regional theater productions, takes a new look at the material. It's less explosive and overwhelming than director Michael Mayer's and choreographer Bill T. Jones' original, but it makes up for that in enhanced intimacy.

Musical director Dolores Duran-Cefalu's sharp rock-and-strings septet is less overpowering, as befits the venue. John Iacovelli's set of institutional arches, upholstered in David Lee Cuthbert's rural landscapes and hyperactive video, creates a less oppressive ambience but one that feeds into the modern import the score applies to Wedekind's 19th century tale.

The individual characters, especially the supporting ones, come through more distinctly. The choreography by Sonya Tayeh (of "So You Think You Can Dance") is less aggressive and acrobatic, but pulses with an energy that arises from quivering loins.

Eryn Murman, of the Broadway company, is a luminous Wendla, delivering her "Mama Who Bore Me" plea for basic sexual information with urgent charm. Jason Hite's no-less-tuneful Melchior embodies the driven teen intellectual rebel. Their romance simmers with the sensual electricity of a first touch, edgy transgressions and sweet consummation.

A strong Miguel Cervantes keeps the overwritten angst of suicidal Moritz reasonably in check. Cindy Goldfield and Todd Alan Johnson expertly handle all the adult roles. The supporting cast is generally adept, with potent ensemble

numbers and standout work by Zarah Mahler as the fallen Ilse, Kristen Majetich as incest-victim Martha, and Monique Hafen.

The intimate look exposes some of the songs' weaknesses, the over-indulgence in angry attitudes and over-reaching for shock effect. But it also undercuts some of the cop-out impact of the Hallmark-sentiment finale and the lack of character development. Seen up close, the actors can inhabit these kids with an urgent individuality that makes Lombardo's gamble pay off.

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