

Spring Awakening challenges religion, establishment



[MJ Kasprzak](#), SF Christian Examiner
September 19, 2011



Sonya Tayeh, choreographer of the San Jose Rep's Spring Awakening
Credits: Jenguin's photostream, Flickr

The former eight-time Tony Award winning musical, *Spring Awakening*, is in production at the [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#) through Sunday, 9/25/2011. For tickets call Inside Sales (408-367-7232) or the box office (408-367-7255).

However, *Spring Awakening* features shocking material that may not be appreciated by all audiences. It takes a trip through the worst struggles of childhood in a world that pulls them in various directions, and showcases how similar things were in the late 19th Century German setting of the original writer (Frederick Wedekind) and modern teens. Thoughts of the teens are expressed through modern music added by Duncan Sheik (lyrics by Steven Sater) much as a Shakespeare soliloquy.

It also openly challenges and even blames religion among other parts of the establishment for much heartache in the lives of the adolescent characters.

One child commits suicide, and the school administration more interested in its reputation than the child's well-being is clearly to blame for failing him. But they blame a friend for giving him a "corrupt" essay that was too sexually explicit and send the child to a reformatory. The strict morals of the church at that time obviously have a strong influence on the decisions of the establishment, from parents to teachers to actual clergy.

But it is more complex than that. Religion is the doctrine of faith, and as man-made as any other doctrine. There are many church doctrines that we know have been harmful, just as any single-view doctrine. Whether that is tied to religion or any other philosophy (including the absence of religion, or a political doctrine such as Marxism, fascism, etc.) is the fault of people, not the faith.

On the other hand, the closest this work comes to challenging faith rather than religion is in its main character admitting that his studies made him an atheist. In another scene, a mother will not tell her daughter how children come to be, leaving the daughter ignorant of that possibility when she does have sex.

There is no doubt this work pushes an agenda, but it is not as much anti-religious as anti-establishment in general. In fact, its main agenda seems to be to shock.

The song at the moment the school corners the student on the essay given the suicidal teen friend is entitled "Totally f*****!". Another child admits to suffering physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. There is a scene in which one boy is masturbating, though the only nudity is a rather unnecessary glimpse of Wendla's breast and Melchior's hip in another fairly innocent sex scene.

In my opinion, it tried too hard to be shocking. Much of its message could have been delivered (and not just to a liberal audience, but not turned off some of the very people it claims are part of the problem) better without crossing any perceived lines. The song could have been titled "Totally Screwed" and the nudity left out, etc.

However, it is a theatre's job to take risks, perform cutting-edge material and provide the hottest shows available. Considering its critical acclaim and audience response prior to coming to San Jose, the Rep was right to choose this play, and could not deviate from the score nor follow the same staging. The latter fact made the third performance in the Bay Area distinct enough to justify it from an artistic standpoint, as did recent rises in teen suicide on the Peninsula.

The Rep's performance and artistic influence is exemplary. The acting, dancing, singing and music are incredible. The set design is simple but versatile, with video screens to enhance it. Costumes are simple but appropriate for the time.

The choreographer was Sonya Tayeh, of *So You Think You Can Dance?* fame. She and director Rick Lombardo collaborated *with* the actors to obtain the final staging. They also clearly adapted to experiences of the previews, since they had both agreed that the actors should not use microphones but they were in use by the time I saw the production.

The Rep even took a deep and learned view on the topic, though one almost exclusively limited to academia. A 26-page handout was distributed at their *Insight Night* talking about everything from teen suicide to masturbation. But most interesting to me was the psychology professor from San Jose State examining the challenges facing teens today.

As children's cognitive power grows, they begin to be able to see from another's perspective and thus become more conscious of how they are viewed by others. This leads to some of the struggles in the play, as well as attention to trends, desire to be accepted, etc. When parents are confronted by problems such as depression, their response is often to tell children why they should not feel that way rather than to try to find out why they feel the way they do.

Most values are established by their parents and other environmental forces, but children also stake their individualism by differing on key values. Children want to be listened to (something Tayeh said influenced her choreography) rather than spoken to, and have a tendency to want to be treated like a child when being approached as an adult and vice versa.

In other words, the only problems I had with the performance were part of the original work of art. It would be ridiculous to give negative marks to the Rep for not changing the basics of a play people are expecting to see to fit one's own preferences--I also prefer non-musical theatre, but that does not make them subject to blame for it being a musical. It was well-performed and has substance behind its need to be irreverent; if the latter is not an issue for you, I recommend seeing the production.

However, I do not recommend it for those who are squeamish--if you do not want to see harsh lessons of life or have the tragedies of some childhoods examined, nor care for swearing, sexual themes or the briefest of nudity, do not come to watch it. Either way, we as Christians can all take a lesson from it--if we do not talk about sex, depression, and other difficult manners with the younger generation, the world will fill in the gaps.