



San Jose Rep's 'Spring Awakening' a master class in eclectic collaboration



[David John Chavez](#), San Jose Theater Arts Examiner

September 8, 2011



Wendla (Eryn Murman) and Melchior (Jason Hite) fight their urges in San Jose Rep's production of "Spring Awakening," through Sept. 25th in Downtown San Jose

What makes the newest production of "*Spring Awakening*" at San Jose Repertory Theatre so unique?

Is it the international rock star status of choreographer Sonya Tayeh, bringing all her "*So You Think You Can Dance*" swag into her newest artistic realm, the musical theatre genre? That definitely can't hurt. How about a San Jose State theatre student, who might have been starring in his or her high school musical a year ago, and is now working with a nationally known artistic team and a heaping of new Broadway blood?

Whatever way you look at this production, uniqueness is definitely at the forefront. The acting is a blend of youthful undergrads, established community theatre veterans, and sizzling, young Broadway talent.

Director Rick Lombardo, also the Rep's artistic director, is kicking off his third full year at the helm, and is always extremely clear about what his vision for the Rep is. Not only is he a believer in putting on the highest of high caliber art, he is also consumed with creating that art with everyone who wants to get involved. In order to find evidence of that vision, one needs to look no further than at one of his priorities when he arrived in San Jose in 2009 – working a hell of a lot more with California's oldest public university, the one that sits right across the street.

"One of the reasons I picked the show was because of our new affiliation with San Jose State," said Lombardo. "It was a given from the beginning, to find State students to work opposite some of the young Broadway stars in this production. Our goal, Sonya and I, was once we got started, we wanted to take all of these kids and make it one ensemble."

"*Spring Awakening*" is based on the original play "*Frühlings Erwachen*," by German playwright Frank Wedekind. The story is focused on the plights of young people who are consumed with the awakenings that their bodies and minds are experiencing. Subjects such as teenage sex, masturbation and homosexuality were taboo subjects to the umpteenth degree in 1890's Germany, and the show did not receive its first production until 1906 in Berlin.

Exactly 100 years from that first production, the Broadway musical took the theatre world by storm. Another in the long line of musicals in the 2000's that headed straight for a young, hip demographic driven by Duncan Sheik's sharp alternative rock, the show garnered eight Tony awards in 2006, including best musical, best book by Steven Sater and best score by Sater and Sheik. To further shove a feather in the musical's cap, a Grammy Award for best musical show album was presented to the show in 2008. It also helped launch the careers of a few stars of the television show "*Glee*," Lea Michele and Jenna Ushkowitz.

Lombardo's own directing lately at the Rep has been focused on newer works. His last three shows "*Black Pearl Sings*," "*The Dresser*" and "*Love in American Times*" were a west coast premiere, a classic British play and a world premiere, respectively. So Lombardo is facing a very different task with his newest work, something that is extremely well-known to many audience members before they even walk through the theatre doors.

"The only way I can deal with that is to forget that," said Lombardo. "I am approaching everything as if I'm directing the very first production of the show. I am focused on what's in the text, what are the songs about and what way will I find to tell the story.

"Our production is radically different (then the Broadway or touring productions). If the audience comes in expecting to see the Broadway staging, they are going to be very surprised."

But in a very good way. Landing Tayeh as the show's choreographer manifested itself from a perfect opportunity. A simple email from Lombardo to Tayeh led to a meeting, which led to the collaboration. Lombardo said that Tayeh was looking to do more musical theatre choreography, so a match was made. And Lombardo, who is definitely a fan of "*So You Think You Can Dance*," certainly was able to grasp a new, up-close admiration for Tayeh and her dazzlingly visceral contemporary and jazz choreography.

"I was a fan from afar from watching her, and now I am much bigger fan," said Lombardo. "She doesn't think of dance in terms of steps. For her, it's about creating movement, and intention of the moment for this piece, which is exactly what I needed.

"I think when the audience comes to see the show, our goal is that they would never really know where the director stopped working and the choreographer started working. We want this show to feel completely organic."

What is extremely organic is who this production speaks to. Whether it's a young person who is experiencing the angst and confusion that is puberty, or an adult that looks back and laughs at their own awkwardness during this period, the theme of the show speaks to anyone and everyone.

"The show is about the universal experience we've all had" said Lombardo. "The characters think they're the first generation that had their bodies wake up on them, whether it's a first wet dream, disagreements with parents or religion, but we've all been through that.

"Everything we are doing with the show is to make sure we are giving full value and honor to making sure we are expressing that experience, what it means to be in that moment between childhood and adulthood."

EXAMINE IT FOR YOURSELF

San Jose Repertory Theatre presents "***Spring Awakening***"
Book by Steven Sater
Music and lyrics by Sater and Duncan Sheik
Directed by Rick Lombardo
Choreography by Sonya Tayeh
Through Sept. 25th
San Jose Repertory Theatre
101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA 95113
Tickets range from \$17.50 - \$79
For tickets, call (408) 367-7255 or visit the Rep's official [website](#).

*David is a member of the [San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle](#). Email him at dchavez04@att.net
Become a subscriber to David's theatre column by going to the top of the page and clicking "subscribe."
Follow David on twitter [@davidjchavez](#)
Become a fan of San Jose Theater Arts Examiner on [Facebook](#).*