

San Jose Rep taps San Jose State for acting talent

By [Karen D'Souza](#)
kdsouza@mercurynews.com

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When the high-voltage rock musical "Spring Awakening" explodes at San Jose Rep this week, it marks more than just the beginning of the fall season. It also represents a bold new collaboration between the Rep and San Jose State University coming into its own.

In an unusual partnership that began last season, top drama students now have the chance to make their bones as interns and understudies at the Rep. Some lucky aspiring actors are even being tapped as full-blown members of the cast. It's a master class that money can't buy.

"I'm thrilled about this new relationship. It is magic, and for the students who are ready, it is the finest kind of learning you can imagine," says San Jose State theater and film Professor Amy Glazer. "The bar is high. Students are now exposed to professional behavior, standards and aesthetics."

Three undergraduates have been cast in supporting roles in the pulse-pounding musical "Spring Awakening," their natural exuberance adding an extra jolt to the sexually charged coming-of-age story. Adapted from a dark 1890s tale that was banned in its day because of its themes of molestation, suicide and abortion, this edgy Tony award-winner has become a cult favorite among the next generation of Broadway buffs. Hard-core fans -- tweens and teens who call themselves the Guilty Ones (a reference to one of the show's alt-rock songs) -- make a point of seeing the show multiple times during each run.

"That's the really scary part of doing this musical -- it has a cult following," says sophomore Kristen Majetich, who plays Martha, a girl molested by her father, "and they know the show by heart."

Like the divas-in-training on TV's "Glee," these students get to sing their hearts out in the spotlight. It's a chance of a lifetime to find their voices at a time when many of their peers are tweeting the day away.



Artistic director Rick Lombardo gives direction during rehearsal for "Spring Awakening" Thursday, Aug. 25, 2010, at the San Jose Repertory Theater. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)



SJSU student Ernestine Balisi performs a scene during rehearsal Thursday, Aug. 25, 2010, at the San Jose Repertory Theater for its production of "Spring Awakening." Balisi is one of three San Jose State University theater majors who have been cast in the production. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

"We give them the opportunity to work side by side with Broadway veterans," says Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo, who conceived of the project, a first for the Rep. Although the concept isn't new, it's rare in the Bay Area. San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater and Berkeley Repertory Theatre draw young actors from their in-house training programs, instead of partnering with college drama departments.

Lombardo says these newbies shine so brightly that you'd be hard-pressed to tell them from the old hands in the cast. (This production boasts top-notch talent, including choreographer Sonya Tayeh of "So You Think You Can Dance" fame.) The director says all three apprentices can memorize dialogue and nail dance steps with the best of them.

"It's not about lowering the standards of what we do," says Lombardo, who also cast San Jose State students in "The Dresser" last year. "They've got to hold their own."

Being young and baby-faced is a real advantage, because "Spring" grapples with the angst and ecstasy of adolescence, a theme these three aren't far away from.

"Just having them in the building raises the energy level," Lombardo says. "Their enthusiasm is infectious."

But if nailing the sexy decadence of the show and belting out the irreverent rock songs (such as "Totally F---ed") came easy for these students, it took awhile for them to wrap their minds around the social and emotional repression of the 19th century.

"We had to do a lot of research to understand what it was like back then," says Majetich, 22. "Children weren't treated like people then."

Clustered together during a rehearsal break, the undergraduates -- Majetich, Manuel Rodriguez-Ruiz and Ernestine Balisi -- chat about everything from bling to Broadway like BFFs. Although they have different levels of experience (Rodriguez-Ruiz is making his professional debut, while Majetich has paid her dues at the Sacramento Theatre Company and Balisi was a child actor at American Musical Theatre), all three say they feel fortunate to have made the cut at auditions.

Rodriguez-Ruiz, a 19-year-old sophomore, comes off as thoughtful and a tad shy.

"I'm the youngest person in the building," admits Rodriguez-Ruiz, who plays two schoolboys, including the innocent Ernst. "I had no idea what it would be like working with professionals. We staged the whole show in a week. Everything goes so fast."

While the parts these rookies landed may not be leading roles, the learning experience is still huge. From grueling tech rehearsals to stomach-churning opening-night jitters, these students may well learn more in one Rep production than in a whole semester of note-taking.

"I never knew how time-consuming it is. You work from 10 to 7, and when you get home, there is more to do. You have no life," says Balisi, 24, who plays the naive Thea. "I bow down before people who do this for a living."



SJSU student Manuel Rodriguez-Ruiz performs a scene during rehearsal Thursday, Aug. 25, 2010, at the San Jose Repertory Theater for its production of "Spring Awakening." He is one of three San Jose State University theater majors who have been cast in the production. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

Majetich's forceful personality will be a plus playing the tormented Martha, who is sexually abused by her father. She says this collaboration will give the university's drama program a big boost. The chance to get a foot in the door at the Rep is a powerful recruitment tool.

"This business really is about who you know," says Majetich, a senior who plans to pursue acting as a vocation. "This is an amazing way to make connections."

The bubbly Balisi, a senior aiming for a career in arts education, couldn't agree more.

"This program gives students at State a goal, something to reach for," she says. "It's a chance to work with your idols."

Certainly this trio already has a rowdy cheering section back on campus.

"When students get cast, we all go crazy," Glazer says. "In the middle of a class, Kristen got the message from Bruce Elsperger (the casting director), and we all started screaming."

And this program isn't just a big break for the students, who get school credit for the production. The Rep now has a way to create instant buzz within the student body. Nothing sells tickets like word-of-mouth even in this social media era.

"Hundreds of students stroll past the Rep every day," Lombardo says, "and we are always looking for new ways to get them to step inside."

'Spring Awakening'

Book and lyrics by Steven Sater; music by Duncan Sheik; based on the play by Frank Wedekind

When: Preview performance Tuesday; opening night is Wednesday. The play runs through Sept. 25.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Tickets: \$35-\$79 (student discounts available),

408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com



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