

## Review: 'Spring Awakening' at San Jose Rep

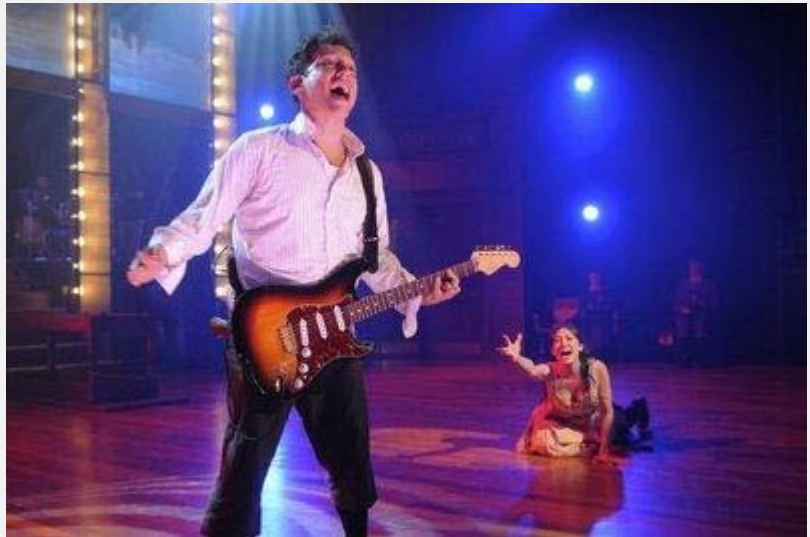
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All too rarely in theater, there is a moment when the looks on the faces of the audience -- and on the faces of the actors -- tell you they know something special is happening on the stage.

One of those moments happened Wednesday at the opening night of "Spring Awakening," the first show of the San Jose Rep's new season. For two hours, a superior piece of modern musical theater had been delivered in a joyous production by a skilled, passionate cast. And as the ensemble hit the last, soaring notes of the show's final anthem, "The Song of Purple Summer," everyone on both sides of the lights felt the magic.



(l to r) Moritz (Miguel Cervantes) sings about leaving it all behind while Ilse (Zarah Mahler) begs him to come back in San Jose Reps production of Spring Awakening. ( Kevin Berne Images 2011 )

"Spring Awakening" itself has been something special since it first opened on Broadway in 2006. The winner of eight Tony Awards, it not only became a hit but also developed a rabid following -- called the Guilty Ones -- whose numbers grew as the show went on the road in national tours.

Based on an 1891 story of adolescent angst and sexuality by early German Expressionist playwright Frank Wedekind, the show is a daring and vibrant mashup of 19th-century themes, modern sensibilities and an exhilarating alt-rock score crafted by Duncan Sheik (the driving music) and Steven Sater (the artful, evocative lyrics). Raging against societal restraints, it fairly explodes off the stage as it tackles surging hormones, masturbation, homosexuality, suicide and sexual abuse with a mix of high drama and humor.

"Spring Awakening" has been through the Bay Area twice with national tours since 2008, but this is the first local production by a regional theater company. At least in the Rep's version, it suffers not at all from the transition -- and actually benefits from moving from the cavernous San Jose Center for the Performing Arts (where it played three years ago) to the intimacy of the Rep.

Credit for that starts with the sharp staging of Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo and the fierce choreography of Sonya Tayeh, best known for her masterful dance pieces on television's "So You Think You Can Dance." So seamless is their collaboration that it's hard to tell in any given scene where Lombardo's work leaves off and Tayeh's begins. Together, they've created a vibrant production that grabs you from the first moments of the opening "Momma Who Bore Me" and simply refuses to let go. (This is the first full stage production for Tayeh. It shouldn't be her last.)

In addition to Tayeh, Lombardo has put together a particularly strong team for the production: John Iacovelli, who designed the impressive set; David Lee Cuthbert, a frequent Lombardo collaborator who is a lighting and multimedia

whiz; Dolores Duran-Cefalu, who leads a crack rock band plus a string ensemble through the music; and Steven Schoenbeck, who handled the crisp, clean sound design.

But as potent as the production work is, it is the cast -- made up of a couple Broadway veterans, young regional performers and several students from San Jose State -- that really delivers the goods. The actors have clearly connected with the material, and their work had such energy -- and clarity -- on opening night that it's hard to believe the rehearsal time for a Rep show is measured in days, not weeks.

Jason Hite (Berkeley Rep's "Girlfriend") brings great stage presence and a strong voice to the central role of Melchior, the smartest kid in the class, who is torn between the rules of society and class and a burning desire to challenge the status quo. He brings nuance to the softer moments (the haunting "The Word of Your Body") and a true ferocity to the production's second-act showstopper, the title of which can't be repeated in a family newspaper. (Let's just say the first word of the title is "totally" and the second word starts with an F.)

Eryn Murman, the one veteran of the Broadway version of "Spring Awakening," brings great sensitivity to the character of the doomed Wendla, whose innocence is her ultimate undoing. Miguel Cervantes (from the Broadway production of "American Idiot") is compelling (and funny) as the spiky-haired misfit, Moritz, whose life of torment comes to an abrupt end.

While the three leads take center stage most often, this is really an ensemble piece and, collectively, the actors shine throughout the show. In particular, Zarah Mahler (the Rep's "Love in American Times") is mesmerizing when her outsider Ilse delivers the lovely ballad "Blue Wind." As Martha, Kristen Majetich, one of the San Jose State students, brings raw energy and anger to her song of sexual abuse, "The Dark I Know Well."

"Spring Awakening" is not for the easily offended (if it were a film, it would be rated PG-13 for brief nudity, sexual content, language and adult themes). But it is a powerful evening at the theater and a blockbuster kickoff to the Rep's season.

Contact Charlie McCollum at 408-920-5245.

### **'Spring awakening'**

**Musical by Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater based on the play by Frank Wedekind**

**Through: Sept. 25**

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

**Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes (one intermission)**

**Tickets: \$35-\$79 (with special prices for students).**

**408-367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)**