

A mighty *Spring* awakens at San Jose Rep

By [Chad Jones](#)

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Jason Hite is Melchior Gabor in the stunning production of Spring Awakening at San Jose Repertory Theatre, with direction by Rick Lombardo and choreography by Sonya Tayeh. Below: Hite is surrounded by Miguel Cervantes as Moritz and Eryn Murman as Wendla. Photos courtesy of San Jose Repertory Theatre

The original production of *Spring Awakening*, the musical based on the 1891 play by **Frank Wedekind**, was so vivid, so powerful and so widely seen throughout the Bay Area, it's rather astonishing that **San Jose Repertory Theatre** has the cheek to produce the show's first regional production. Ah, but what cheek. Director **Rick Lombardo**, also San Jose Rep's artistic director, choreographer **Sonya Tayeh** (a guest judge and choreographer on *So You Think You Can Dance*) and musical director **Dolores Duran-Cefalu** have done such original work that they make the show their own.

They haven't reinvented it exactly, but they eschew a major component of Broadway director **Michael Mayer's** production – the kids here don't whip out microphones for every number – and Tayeh's choreography, while muscular and energetic like **Bill T. Jones'** original, is much more emotional and evocative.

For fans of *Spring Awakening*, and I definitely count myself a fan, this production is a revelation if only because it allows you to see the show afresh and fall in love with it all over again. The fact is that Wedekind wrote a provocative play about society's dangerous repression of teenage minds and bodies. Then composer **Duncan Sheik** and book writer/lyricist **Steven Sater** wrote an equally provocative and ultimately more astonishing musical adaptation of it. This is a beautifully written show, and as the play now begins to make its way through theaters large and small around the country, it will be fascinating to see how it filters through a wide variety of theater artists.



In San Jose, Lombardo and his team delivers a production that pulses with youthful energy and talent. The impressive cast boasts young professionals as well as students from nearby San Jose State (part of a new partnership between the two organizations), and they all attack the challenging material with gusto.

The cast is headed by **Jason Hite** as Melchior, the teen heartthrob of the provincial German town where the story is set. Hite, so brilliant in **Berkeley Repertory Theatre's** *Girlfriend* two seasons ago, imbues Melchior with the necessary arrogance and intelligence but also finds deep wells of passion and emotion in the character. His scenes with **Eryn Murman** (a swing in the original Broadway production) as Wendla – most notably the famous switch scene followed by the hayloft seduction – are charged with innocence and sensuality. As the resident heartthrob, Hite's Melchior brandishes an acoustic guitar in several numbers (looking not unlike a young Elvis) and rocks his way through a rabid "Totally Fucked" and a tender "Those You've Known."

As Mortiz, Melchior's shaky best friend, **Miguel Cervantes** (from the cast of *American Idiot*) displays a powerful voice on "And Then There Were None" and duets memorably with **Zarah Mahler** as Ilse on "Don't Do Sadness/Blue Wind." Because he's the anti-hero, Moritz plays an electric guitar (a very nice touch).

Representing all the (mostly oafish) adults are **Cindy Goldfield** and **Todd Alan Johnson**, both of whom seem relish the comedy of the horribly snotty teachers. Goldfield is especially funny/touching as Wendla's mother, who cannot bring herself to have "the talk" with her curious teenage daughter.

Duran-Cefalu's seven-piece onstage band plays expertly, switching effectively from tender, string-laced ballads to raging rockers. The one real drawback to this excellent production is the sound design, which renders everything with a muffled tone, obscuring some lyrics and other musical details and dampening some of the show's energy.

John Iacovelli's effective set is essentially a large hall – a gymnasium perhaps? – with chairs and a large table that is used to represent a schoolroom, a coffin and a hayloft, among other things. The most active piece of the set is lighting and media designer **David Lee Cuthbert's** projections through the large windows that ring the top of the set. From the opening number, "Mama Who Bore Me," the projections are busy with fine art images of mother and child. It's too much projection too soon and distracts from Murman's performance of the song.

Throughout the play's 2 1/2 hours, the projections are either gorgeous or too much. There are moments when the video is perfectly integrated, as when a father wonders what his son is doing making all that noise in his room. A giant keyhole appears on screen, and then a giant eyeball peaking through. Other times, the projections compete too much

with the performers, especially when they're executing Tayeh's dynamic, beautifully detailed choreography, which really deserves our undivided attention.

In the end, San Jose Rep's *Spring Awakening* captures the show's humor, its passion and its bursting need to express beauty and pain in equal measure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Spring Awakening continues through Sept. 25 at San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Tickets are \$12.50-\$79. Call 408-367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com.