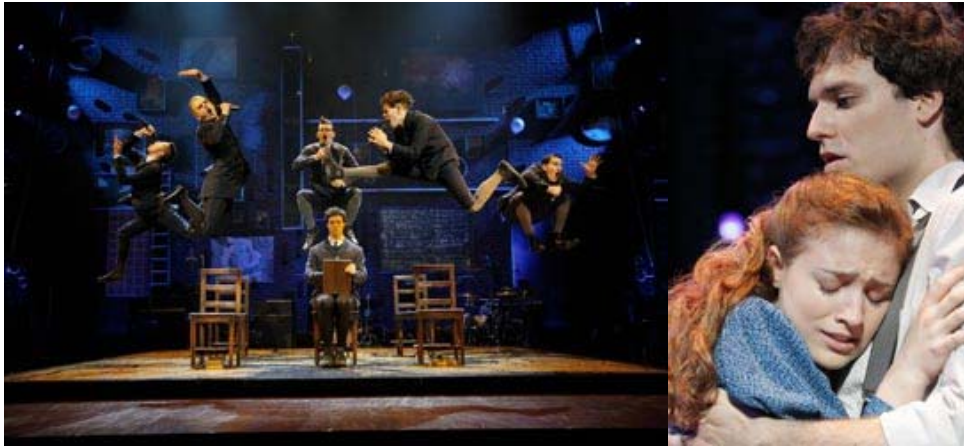


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Spring Awakening



How often do you go to a musical to be treated to lyrics like “you’re fucked all right and all for spite, you can kiss your sorry ass goodbye” in “Totally Fucked” as well as songs in which someone tells you to “just kiss some ass, man then you can screw ‘em all” in “The Bitch of Living?” Michael Mayer’s latest production of “Spring Awakening” for the Orange County Performing Arts Center continues the tradition of an irreverent “new” musical while adding some dramatic staging and strong individual performances.

The story takes place in Germany in the late 1890s, but Frank Wedekind’s play is transformed into a rollicking good time by the Steven Sater adaptation. Wendla (Christy Altomare), a teenage girl growing up in a repressed household, tries to ask her mom about sex, but all the answers she get are cryptic. She falls for the studious and rebellious Melchior (Jake Epstein), who makes love to her without using a condom. Bad idea. As Wendla faces the possibility of an abortion, Melchior gets into trouble in school for writing an anti-establishment pamphlet found in the room of his friend Moritz (Taylor Trench), who commits suicide after failing at school and refusing the love of his childhood friend Ilse (Steffi D.). Found amidst the depressing plot are various inspiring rock and roll songs, thought the lyrics don’t quite pull you out of your misery.

One of the best performances belongs to that of Hanschen (Andy Mientus). In addition to singing about “My Junk” in one song using quite expressive gestures under his pants, Mientus does a great balancing act in a scene with Ernst (Ben Fankhauser) in the song “The Word of Your Body.” Steaming with desire, Hanschen memorably boasts of his own “experience” while giving Ernst a little bit of his nastiness, singing “o I’m gonna bruise you, o you’re gonna be my bruise.”

Physical brutality is one of the many taboo subjects of “Spring Awakening.” After another performance of “The Word of Your Body,” Wendla asks Melchior to beat her with a stick so she can experience the joys of pain. Melchior refuses at first, but eventually becomes so obsessed that he beats Wendla senseless. Altomare and Epstein’s performances as the central lovers are believable but also veer towards childishness. In one moment, Epstein is asked to sit in a high chair to resemble being suspended from school, and in another, Wendla foolishly tells her mom that she didn’t know she could get pregnant by having unprotected sex. Yep, this coming from two rather grownup looking people playing presumably immature high schoolers. Epstein does quite well in the love scenes, but also seem less believable as the bookish rebel who is supposed to study all the time and write counterrevolutionary pamphlets. The Melchior character is unfortunately a lot more about messing around having fun rather than about theoretical revolutionary ideology. In their moments together, Epstein and Altomare pour forth a physical wantonness befitting of the musical.




The highlight of the musical, however, comes from Trench playing Moritz. Some of the best songs early in the work appear to be designed for Trench. With his crazy hairdo that gets straighten out during intermission

(seriously!), Moritz exchanges letters with Melchior's mother Mrs. Gabor (Angela Reed), his love-interest. Singing like a real rockstar in between the readings from the letter, Moritz spews out his frustrations, singing his guts out intoning "you wanna laugh, it's too absurd; you start to ask, can't hear a word," and finally concludes apathetically in the emotionally rebellious song "And Then There Were None."

Nothing embodies the teen angst more than Trench's role in "Spring Awakening." In the early part of the second half, Moritz meets his childhood friend Ilse, who first acts as if she's doing fine, hanging out with the right people. Soon, it becomes apparent that she's not as perfect as she seems as Ilse asks for company back home to play the games they played as kids. Moritz, however, is still dealing with "80 lines of Virgil, 16 equations, and a paper on the Habsburgs." While Moritz, with his new hairdo, sings rapturously, but angrily about his plight, Ilse reveals that she is being abused. Together, they sing about "spring and summer every other day," looking back to their youth in the song "Blue Wind." Trench's slightly stammering singing is perfect for the role, as he delivers a performance not about "awakening" but about "regretting" that he had not taken up on Ilse's offer, because, as he said "all I had to do was say yes."

Perhaps the most memorable scenes from "Spring Awakening" is indeed about looking back to a day when one didn't have to worry about abortion, when one didn't agonize over the suicide of a friend, when it was "spring and summer every other day," and before one was awakened.

"Spring Awakening" is showing at the Orange County Performing Arts Center (<http://www.ocpac.org/home/Events/EventDetail.aspx?EventID=887>) in Costa Mesa, California until November 29, 2009.

	
Spring Awakening - Vocal Selections	Spring Awakening
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