



MUSIC BY DUNCAN SHEIK
BOOK AND LYRICS BY STEVEN SATER

PRODUCED BY MTSU THEATRE AS A PART OF
THE CENTER STAGE SERIES

KT Turner
Senior Seminar

SPRING AWAKENING

Student Critique: April 3, 2019 Performance

Spring Awakening was the final show as a part of the 2018-2019 Theatre season at Middle Tennessee State University. Featuring music by Duncan Sheik with the book and lyrics provided by Steven Sater, *Spring Awakening* is a modern take on themes presented in the play *Spring's Awakening* by the German playwright Frank Wedekind. I attended the major's preview performance on April 3, 2019, and overall, I was impressed with the technical aspects of the show. This show follows what happens when parents don't tell their children the truth and the consequences of allowing children to be unmonitored. There were several graphic themes of explicit sexuality, rape, and abuse, and in general, the content was far too heavy for my personal tastes. I was forced to seriously detach myself from the content of the performance and to view it from a purely critical perspective. Because I wasn't interested in the content of the piece, I was able to give thought to the elements of the production, including directing, design, and acting.

Directing

MTSU brought in a guest artist to direct the piece, Heather Ondersma of Vancouver Children's Theatre. Heather was brought into the process fairly late in the game, arriving on the scene in October of 2018. Because of this, she says, she relied heavily on the research of designers, lighting in particular, to guide the vision and concept of the play. In the Design Panel for the large section of the Intro to Theatre Class, she explained that the musical was a very complicated show that dealt with several heavy topics. In her words, the show is about coming of age and discovering maturity and sexuality as well as dealing with death and suicide. In terms of staging, I think there was an incredible use of the stage. There appeared to be a few different

styles of blocking and choreography used. I noticed traditional staging, viewpoints, motif choreography and some instances of what appeared to be actor-driven blocking.

The stage and the scenery were used in a very lovely fashion. There was a balance between occupied and empty space in each scene and there was never really a time when any one part of the stage seemed too crowded. This musical is a mash-up of two separate realities. One reality is that of 19th Century Germany which is depicted in the book scenes that were practically taken right from the original play by Wedekind. These scenes were stylized, reminiscent, and poignant. The other reality is that of the contemporary modern world pouring out of the music in the piece. The music has a rock and roll, poppy vibe to it that is incredibly catchy though the topics covered in the songs were bleak and ultimately depressing. The choreography and the blocking during the musical selections were just as contemporary/modern as the music playing.

There was one section of the show that really bugged me. At the end of Act 1, the character of Wendla finds the character of Melchior in a hayloft. She tries to make him feel better for hitting her (as she'd foolishly asked him to do) and they begin to become intimate. As it was presented in this production, the event was consensual in nature. However, the nature of the event, the text preceding the event, and the events that occur after indicate that this was indeed rape. What bothers me is that this, quite an important element of the show, was downplayed in such a way as to make choices, dictated by the books scenes, that follow this event not make sense. In general, it seemed that the direction of the piece strengthened as the production progressed. I believe that the storytelling was the weakest part of the production,

which to me is very disheartening. Even still, the production was beautifully staged and designed.

Design

Collaborative design efforts can make or break any show. The overall production design for *Spring Awakening* was no exception. The design process for this show was led by an unusual forerunner: the lighting design. Because of how Darren, the lighting designer, executes his research, Heather was able to latch on to it as soon as she came on board. The other designers followed lighting's lead and developed their individual designs based on Darren's research.

My initial thoughts on the lighting design were all positive. I thought that the number of fixtures in the air was appropriate for what I knew Darren was going to do. The addition of the haze provided a mysterious, dreamlike quality. Throughout the production, the lighting design sought to make a clear distinction between the so-called "book scenes" that were based on the original play by Wedekind and the songs, which had a more rock and roll vibe. The book scenes had a more naturalistic, classical feel to them, until towards the end of the show when the scenes and the music began to mesh more and more. The songs were treated as a concert, adding in vibrant and saturate colors and textures, giving the pieces a more contemporary feel. The most memorable lighting moment in the piece happened to be during one of Moritz's songs. The lighting was cyan and a magenta-toned purple with a bit of haze. When the spotlight hit the actor, the composition was complete and it was absolutely stunning.

The scenic design consisted of a plethora of forced perspectives, playing off the idea in the show that parents and society shape the views and outlooks of their children and can either

create or corrupt. The walls were insanely tall and forced a depth perspective. The entire set was covered in an airy greyish lavender paint treatment that could be easily manipulated by light. For texture, the walls were covered in rectangles that were ordered, but still chaotic in their placement. Areas of the wall were crumbling and/or broken symbolizing the destruction that was looming just ahead. In addition to how it looked, the set was also incredibly functional and flexible. The platform with the staircase was used in at least three different ways, providing the opportunity for multiple different locations simply by changing how the platform was placed on stage and the type of lighting used in that scene. There was a great deal of depth and height and usable space on the set that provided for flexible and productive staging. The paint treatment was absolutely lovely as well and gave the set pieces the power to be easily manipulated by light.

The greyscaled costumed design, in my opinion, was an excellent choice. Once again, that offers lighting the opportunity to practically work with a blank slate. I think that the costumes were beautiful: they were period, textured, and no two dresses were the same. During the performance, I noticed the red undergarments, as well as the other red accents during the show, and understood that the red color was meant to symbolize passion, sex, love, and/or intimate feelings for another person. The only time that I questioned the costume choices was at the very end of the show when the characters are singing the song about summer. The actors took off the black and white to reveal the red underwear underneath. After that, they removed the red underwear revealing underwear similar to what was just taken off, with the exception of color. These garnets were dyed a mix of light blue, purple, and lime green.

It is my understanding that up until the last moments of the show, the designers were all on the same page with the “greyscale” idea but drifted away from it at the last moment. The costumes went their own way and scenic went its own way, all in all hoping that light would be able to fix the closing moments in the show. In my opinion, this made the last few moments of the production a bit lackluster, evoking no small amount of disappointment. The general design of the production was overall very well executed.

Acting

Most, if not all of the acting in this production was very well done and highly effective. I believe that two of the casting choices were absolutely perfect: the casting of JR Knowles as Moritz and the casting of Dallas Boudreaux as Ilse. The two individuals were able to latch on to their characters in such a way that, as their friend, I was a little worried that their performance would start to seep into their actual lives. JR, I believe, gave the most convincing performance as someone who is breaking apart at the seams from the very beginning. The two as a duo during the “I Don’t Do Sadness/Spring and Summer” mash-up was, in my opinion, a match that Tucker won’t see again for a while.

The cast in general, led by graduating senior C McCabe and newcomer Anna Whorton, seemed to have an absolute blast doing what they were doing, and that gave the show energy and momentum. Even with the heavy subject matter and the knowledge of what was to come, the actors played the moments and committed one hundred percent to every bit of staging and character development that had been implemented throughout the rehearsal process. Seeing as though the characters in the show are supposed to be around 14-years-old, the actors did a

very good job, more or less, playing the roles of teenagers. The girls were chatty, hyper and giggly. The boys were awkward and rowdy. All were at various stages of mental, emotional, and hormonal development, and the actors were able to tap into that, seeming with ease for the most part. I also admire how all of the actors, including the “adult” characters, were able to cope with the heavy themes of the show and just keep pushing until the end. I was in awe during most of the end of the production, marveling at how these young actors were able to maintain composure and keep pushing through when I, as a lowly audience member, was extremely emotionally exhausted.

As stated previously, I do not like the content of this show and only watched it from a purely detached, technical perspective. Even still, I appreciated the artistry and the thought put into the piece as a piece of art. I think everyone involved worked hard to make sure that the final product was a magnificent tribute to the talent and dedication of this department. As the theatre season closer, it proved that we, as a department, always have more tricks up our sleeves that we’re just waiting to pull out. From the on-stage representatives, the actors, to the carpenters, like me, everyone put their best foot forward, and it truly paid off.