

British Theatre Guide

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Spring Awakening

Music by Duncan Sheik, Book and Lyrics by Steven Sater, based on the play by Frank Wedekind
Novello Theatre
(2009)

When you get blown away by an artistic experience, a book, album or play, it is often a mistake to revisit it. All too often, what had seemed sensational first time around disappoints.

It is a delight to be able to report that the West End transfer of *Spring Awakening* is, if anything, even better than the show's incarnation during the [short run](#) at the Lyric in Hammersmith. Michael Mayer and his team work even better together and there can be little doubt that this show is here to stay.

It is rare that so many different elements fit together perfectly and even more so when, with two exceptions, the whole of the ridiculously young (16 to 24) cast are practically untried on a professional stage, let alone one in the West End.

That is part of the attraction, since they bring a real freshness to an evening that requires it. *Spring Awakening* could all too easily descend into a well of depression, as it explores the pains and pleasures of the teenage years, effortlessly tapping into the psyches of anyone in the audience who has ever been young.

The fact that Frank Wedekind wrote about life in *fin de siècle* Germany seems completely irrelevant, as the story is as relevant today to anybody that has ever been a youngster, as it must have been when it was written (but not seen due to its subject matter).

The writer explores many aspects of growing up and, in particular, the burgeoning of sexuality. This primarily focuses on the nihilistic intellectual Melchior played by Aneurin Barnard, a young man who has the good looks, acting talent and mellifluous voice of a prospective movie star, and Wendla. Charlotte Wakefield in that role emits an aura of innocence and purity in a performance that now seems far more assured, from the moment that she bravely opens the show with her solo, "Mamma Who Bore Me".

This couple is contrasted with Iwan Rheon's frustrated, sex mad Moritz, in this version a wild punk outsider with a bad case of depression. Rheon could easily become an offbeat punk rock star if he chooses to, with his quirky stage presence and anarchic hairstyle.

The trio come of age in a world of repression, symbolised by two fine character actors playing all of the older parts with just the right degree of wit, Sian Thomas and Richard Cordery.

The leading performers receive great support from their impressively assured compatriots. In particular, it is easy to pick out award-winning Welsh blues singer Hayley Gallivan and, in a different, more upbeat style, Lucy Barker, both of whom do themselves proud.

A really strong Book is complemented by some of the most impressive production qualities currently to be seen on a London stage. Bill T. Jones' choreography is sensational, looking as perfectly drilled as an army brigade at The Trooping of the Colour. Duncan Sheik's music, played live on stage, veers between melodic rock and hardcore punk with the ability to bring a tear to the eye or excitement to the soul.

Visitors can easily find themselves humming a couple of the songs, "Totally Fucked" and "The Bitch of Living" for days after the show, while the elegiac "Left Behind" catches a tragic moment to perfection.

With fantastic lighting from Kevin Adams and irrepressible energy throughout, *Spring Awakening* seems like a sure-fire winner of every musical award going, to add to the eight Tonys that it collected in New York.

Unless you are shocked by teenagers doing what teenagers do or the language that they use, this is the kind of must-see musical that could well instantly become a must-see-again musical.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)