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Coming of age - ‘Spring Awakening’

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From left: Logan Bard, Daniel Legere and Robert Brangwynne in Some Theatre Company's production of the musical "Spring Awakening." (photo courtesy of CK2 Photography/Tricia Kenny)

Some Theatre Company presents challenging musical

ORONO - Some Theatre Company is bringing a story of sensual innocence and adolescent confusion to raucous, rocking life in Orono.

"Spring Awakening," a musical based on a century-old German play of the same name and featuring book and lyrics by Steven Sater and music by Duncan Sheik, offers an exploration of a time when the physical and emotional sensations of the youth were misunderstood and unknown by the very people who were feeling them.

Directed by Elaine Bard with music direction by Christina Belknap, the production is running at Orono's Keith Anderson Community House through April 30.

The action takes place in Germany in the late 1800s. Wendla (Silvia Baxter) is a young girl who is just starting to realize that there is so much about the world that she simply doesn't know. Her parents, rather than deal with her as an adult, instead insist on ignoring her curiosity and continuing to treat her like the child she no longer is.

Meanwhile, Melchior (Logan Bard) is a young man whose intelligence and inquisitiveness make him a bit of a handful in the strict authoritarian schools even as he excels. His classmate Moritz (Robert Brangwynne) doesn't have Melchior's natural gifts, and so finds himself struggling - both with the high academic expectations and the stern and harsh strictures of the system.

We watch as these teenagers - along with their friends - slowly begin to discover who they are. This self-exploration wends its way through some basic truths of growing up. However, these kids have not been equipped to deal with the realities of those truths. Things like puberty and sexuality (hetero and homo alike), pregnancy and abuse (physical and sexual) are thrust into their lives - and they haven't the slightest idea of how to deal with them.

Melchior and Wendla serve as the foundation of "Spring Awakening" - they are the ones around whom all others orbit. There's an enthusiastic energy to Bard's performance that suits Melchior, a fearfulness glimpsed beneath a veneer of well-intentioned but ultimately false bravado. Baxter's Wendla feels more reserved, played with an inquisitive glint in her eye. She counterbalances that reserve with a big, broad power to her musical performance; an engaging dichotomy. Both display flashes of purity that are beautifully undermined by the tragedy of circumstance.

But while those two are the show's foundation, the true spirit of "Spring Awakening" must, well, SPRING from the ensemble. There's an oddness to the show, a dissonance borne of the fact that it's a 19th century

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narrative featuring 21st century music. It’s a combination that requires a certain degree of commitment to the cause on the part of the performers for there to be hope for anything resembling verisimilitude.

Brangwynne’s Moritz offers a nicely awkward counterpoint to the self-assured Melchior, throwing off an emo vibe that clicks beautifully with the character along with an inherent sweetness that elicits our empathy even as he spirals downward. Sarah Smaha is a bohemian vision as the ethereal Ilse, while Hannah Box brings a quiet power to the damaged girl Martha. But really, everyone in the cast - young men (Conor Kenny, Daniel Legere, Jacob Siegel and Jacob Sutherland), young women (Erryn Bard, Taylor Lavoie) and adults (Corissa Bither and Sam Kunz) alike - has a highlight to call his or her own.

A lot of those highlights are delivered by the musical numbers. Of particular note are the swaggering male enthusiasm of “The Bitch of Living” and the haunting power of “The Dark I Know Well,” along with the oft-reprised “Mama Who Bore Me” and “The Word of Your Body” (another highlight is a song whose title we can’t actually print - first word “Totally,” second word rhymes with “Ducked”). Music director Belknap and choreographer Becca Hodgdon have done well by their charges, creating catchy, kinetic performances.

With such a young cast, Elaine Bard has given herself a directorial challenge. It would be easy for teenagers to fear such challenging and controversial material; the director has clearly created a space where the performers feel comfortable exploring the complexity of the story’s thematic content. That comfort allows for these youthful actors to put forth performances powerful beyond their years. The show has a certain wildness that demands to be tamed, but not broken; Bard has helped her cast find that line.

Bard also wears multiple hats in terms of the production team. She designed the simple, yet oddly evocative set, consisting largely of wooden pallets that present an undeniably striking stage picture; additionally, she handled the costume design, creating a sort of German patchwork that worked nicely. The lights - designed by Gerry Bard - are the final piece of the puzzle, helping to deepen and define the playing space.

It might feel that kids today learn too much too soon - and maybe that’s true - but it’s easy to forget that young people were once kept utterly in the dark about not only their very natural (and very human) burgeoning sexuality, but the simple basics of emotional connection.

Too much knowledge might merit our concern, yes - but so too does too little.

“Spring Awakening” offers its share of challenges - to audiences and performers alike - but they are challenges worth undertaking. A tip of the cap to Some Theatre Company and this bright-eyed, engaged young cast for making the effort to tell this story.

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