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Spring Awakening: A Play



Synopsis

First performed in Germany in 1906, Frank Wedekind's controversial play *Spring Awakening* closed after one night in New York in 1917 amid charges of obscenity and public outrage. For the better part of the twentieth century Wedekind's intense body of work was largely unpublished and rarely performed. Yet the play's subject matter—teenage desire, suicide, abortion, and homosexuality—is as explosive and important today as it was a century ago. *Spring Awakening* follows the lives of three teenagers, Melchior, Moritz, and Wendl, as they navigate their entry into sexual awareness. Unlike so many works that claim to tell the truth of adolescence, *Spring Awakening* offers no easy answers or redemption. Today, one hundred years after the play's first performance, a new musical version of this essential modern masterpiece is being hailed as the "best new musical . . . in a generation" (John Heilpern, *The New York Observer*). Franzen's version of the text "for so long poorly served in English" is unique in capturing the bizarre and inimitable comic spirit that animates almost every line of this unrelentingly tragic play. There couldn't be a better time for this thrilling, definitive new translation.

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Customer Reviews

... in just one century! There's little doubt in my reading mind that Benjamin Franklin Wedekind (conceived in San Francisco, born in Germany, miseducated in Switzerland) meant to shock the socks off the bourgeois public when he wrote 'Frñhlings Erwachen' in 1891. It's a play about teenagers -- yes, Virginia, there were teenagers in 1891 -- doing things that even adults couldn't do on a conventional stage; there are explicit scenes of rape, suicide, homos*xuality, and mast*rbation. One teenage girl is a debauched artists' model, and a childish playmate! One 14-year-old girl is beaten and abused by her father, and another envies her for it. The latter pesters her mother for the 'secrets of reproduction', finds herself incomprehensibly pregnant after the rape, and dies in an ab*rtion. "Spring Awakening" was first staged in Germany in 1906, in a heavily censored version. It played in New York for one day in 1917 but was condemned as obscenity. I wonder, would an audience in 2009 find this play horribly shocking, or would we smugly guffaw at the 19th Century moralities that it mocks. I have a feeling that the world has been so thoroughly Wedekinderized since 1891 that we'd need real blood and nudity on stage to be sufficiently shaken up. When the central character, the boy Melchior, is sent to the reformatory, for instance, he joins a circle of boys competing for a coin by trying to be the first to spurt s*men on it. That might startle even a New York audience toughened up by David Mamet. Gnarly stuff, eh? Nevertheless, Wedekind meant his play to be uproariously funny, and it is. The scenes in which the adults - parents and teachers - reveal their utter hapless in consequentiality are fresh and witty still.

This plays reveals a common theme at the time, the enslavement of young people in Germany within their boarding schools. Tñrless is the most famous victim of this environment. But here we are dealing with Moritz and Melchior, proving that M&M's is not the best of medicine in life. This total control of the young people's life that has only one objective, to study, to learn Latin and translate Greek, goes along with an absolute desexualization of their psyche in the name of an extreme puritan vision of ethics and life. This causes a depressive existential vision in these teenagers who look for some satisfaction anyway they can, some erotic information and literature, some friendship among themselves as a surrogate of the love they need and are deprived of, even banging up the first girl they find on their road and who knows nothing about love or rather intercourse. This produces a drama, of course. One fourteen year old boy, Moritz, commits suicide in his boarding school that expels his best friend, Melchior, who had passed some information about the physical activities they are all dreaming of, and had impregnated a certain Wendla who will die of an overdose of an abortive drug given to her by her own mother. This sexual information is considered

as the unethical trigger of the suicide. Melchior's family then decides to send him to a house of correction where he discovers real evil and convinces himself he is the most guilty human being in the world. He is then tempted by crime or, because of some remnant of ethics, by suicide to put away his good for nothing person. This dilemma is set up on the stage after Melchior's escape from the house of correction in the last scenes in the graveyard where the suicidee Moritz is buried.

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