



FEATURES



Michael Mayer

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Keen Angst Director Michael Mayer on turning an acerbic, suppressed German classic into an American rock musical

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BY DAVID BALZER March 18, 2009 21:03

Spring Awakening
Featuring Matt Doyle, Steffi D, Christy Altomare, Blake Bashoff.
Book and lyrics by Steven Sater.
Music by Duncan Sheik.
Choreography by Bill T Jones.
Directed by Michael Mayer. To Apr 19, \$20-\$99. Canon Theatre, 244 Victoria. 416-872-1212.
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Director Michael Mayer is on the phone from Vienna, where Spring Awakening is set to premiere at the Ronacher, a refurbished 19th-century theatre that, last summer, hosted another Tony Award-winning musical, The Producers. The ironies are as hilarious as they are strange: both musicals, utterly American creations, have been translated into German for an audience without whose history and culture they never would have existed.

"It's just language; it really is," says Mayer earnestly. "It's a universal story. [Austrians] have an ownership over this material in a way. They all study it in school, so they know it."

Mayer is referring to the 1891 Frank Wedekind play on which the musical is based — a work not well-known in North America outside academe, but an indisputable classic of world theatre. Wedekind was

indeed the iconoclast the musical and its marketing machine suggest he might have been (his play was censored for decades after its writing), but his vision was quite far from that of 21st-century Broadway. His darkly comic work is more like Michael Lehmann's 1988 film Heathers, with its rebellious, selfish teens ridiculed as products of a repressed adult society that, sadistically, wants both to infantilize and to titillate them.

And so, if there are those who fear Spring Awakening the musical is too provocative for the stage, there are also those who fear it isn't provocative enough. Just ask Jonathan Franzen, who, in the introduction to his 2007 translation of Wedekind's play, says the musical's "main selling point [of] teen sex" is a way of again censoring the original, of exploiting yet flattering its intended audience by giving them the familiar corporate message that "young consumers are always right, whether as moral heroes or as moral victims."

"Franzen just gets it wrong, as he gets so much wrong," counters Mayer. "Wedekind is a jumping-off point; if we wanted to do the play we would have done it. But that wasn't the goal." Mayer points to the music: written by singer-songwriter Duncan Sheik, with lyrics by book-writer Steven Sater, it draws dynamically from idioms as diverse as gospel and alt-rock, clearly giving agency to the play's teen heroes — who, in a loose narrative, cope with abuse, masturbation, homosexuality, abortion and suicide — but, as Mayer notes, having "no impact whatsoever on their situation. If they're frustrated before they sing, they're still frustrated after they sing." Mayer cites Brecht, one of Wedekind's fanboys: the music alienates us from the action, just as the post-punk aesthetic of the musical contrasts with its setting, which remains, however stylized, 1890s Germany.

In this way Spring Awakening represents a refreshing kind of mega-musical in an age saturated with aggressively branded adaptations. Mayer recalls his own illustrious Broadway career being defined by adaptations, from super-faithful renditions of Marivaux (Triumph of Love) and Charles Schulz (You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown) to the more interpretive Thoroughly Modern Millie (based on the 1967 Julie Andrews film) and Spring Awakening.

"I think something like Hairspray is pretty cool," he says. "They really wanted to make that into a musical; they thought it would be a great idea, not that it would sell a lot of tickets. There are other shows out there that I think are more blatantly cynical in their approach, but with Spring Awakening, for better or for worse, and wherever you stand on it, we had a burning desire for years to tell this story and our intent was never to make money.

"God knows, it's not a sellable title," he adds. "We didn't put any stars in it. All we were trying to do was tell our story. And I think that that passion ended up translating pretty well."

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