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Dublin Theatre Festival 2014 - Youth shines in a troubled Spring Awakening

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Spring Awakening by Dublin Youth Theatre
Dublin Youth Theatre

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Rating: ★★★★★

Since its inception in 1977 by Educational Psychologist, Paddy O'Dwyer, Dublin Youth Theatre has become one of Ireland's foremost youth theatre programmes. Its combination of youth and experience and its ambition to deliver productions of high, artistic standards have been a recipe for frequent success. Ambition is once again in evidence in its daring production of *Spring Awakening*. But on this occasion achievement falls short of ambition in a troubled production with some excellent performances.

Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, written in Germany between 1890 and 1891, explores the traumas facing pubescent teens struggling with their sexual and personal awakenings in a world dominated by fear, shame and repression. With its themes of sexual desire and ignorance, child

abuse and rape, homosexuality and suicide and an overbearing and immoral education system, *Spring Awakening* charts the troubled waters of troubled teens and the tragic consequences that can often ensue.

As a young girl takes to the stage, she curtsies politely to the audience then starts singing in German. Presently the rest of the cast join her in song, looking eerily like the Von Trapp family, to celebrate Wendla's fourteenth birthday, a young girl annoyed at being made wear a long dress. Later we meet the highly stressed Moritz Stiefel, terrified of failing his exams, and his philosophical friend, Melchior Gabor, whose mother believes in a more liberal approach to education. We learn of Martha, beaten regularly by her parents, Georg and Hans and their secret, homosexual relationship. As we follow these and other characters through a loose narrative, dark themes emerge including rape, suicide and the inhuman demands and pressures put upon the young.

Using a shortened adaptation of Francis J. Ziegler's problematic translation of Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, the whole didn't tie together as well as it might. Direction by György Vidovszky struggled with this and was something of a mixed bag. Vidovszky excelled at wonderfully choreographed group scenes that were visually striking and innovative. But in between there was a slackness of pace, a lack of cohesion and an inconsistency in choices. The physical foregrounding on stage of the homosexual relationship was a brave and successful choice that hit home. In contrast, the hurried rape scene, culminating in a beautifully crafted moment, was hidden at the back of the stage and distracted from by a clever fish in a bowl routine and lost much of its impact as a result.

Set design by Sarah Jane Sheils, while ambitious, proved to be problematic. A long table with hand basin attached, and several, open backed shelves cluttered with an array of glass jars and other paraphernalia, gave the sense of a mad scientist's laboratory and never effectively evoked either mood or location. Indeed the whole felt far too busy with the stage appearing cramped and restrictive, becoming visual distracting as a result. Projections of live camera feed and photographs onto the stage left wall were difficult, if not impossible, for much of the audience to see.

If play and production were problematic, performances were another story entirely. With its cast of seasoned veterans working with young aspiring actors, performances throughout were always brave, credible and engaging. Paul Harris as the suicidal Moritz Stiefel, and Peter Newington as the troubled Melchior, were utterly convincing as two friends struggling with life, sex, exams and the insanity that surrounds them. Ferdia Murray and Conor Murray, as Georg and Hans respectively, sensitively and convincingly conveyed the budding sexual relationship between their characters. Lily Lee as the bohemian Ilse, Ali Dempsey McMahon as the abused Martha, Caoimhe Coburn Gray as the faithful friend, Thea, were all remarkable and lit up the stage. As did Martha Breen, who as the tragically ignorant Wendla, a young woman desperate for answers, gave an outstanding performance. All of whom were ably supported by cast members Seán Talbot, Adam Byrne, Ruairi Bond and veterans Alan Howley, Clelia Murphy and Fionnuala Murphy, along with DYT founder, Paddy O'Dwyer.

If DYT's *Spring Awakening* makes too many demands of its audience, it is still to be applauded for

taking a risk. Sometimes risks don't pay off, but that's no reason not to take them. It is only by being encouraged to take risks that young performers discover their own creativity. DYT does this, and does it incredibly well. *Spring Awakening* might not have been all it could have been, but its willingness to risk, to challenge its young cast and to tackle meaningful works make this a worthwhile production. Reminding us of the critical importance of sex education, suicide prevention and of nurturing and listening to young people make it a deeply meaningful one.

Spring Awakening, produced by Dublin Youth Theatre runs as part of The Dublin Theatre Festival at The Axis Arts Centre until Saturday, October 11th

Doors open 7.30 p.m. Matinee on Saturday at 2.30 p.m.

Tickets: €15.00

For more information go to <https://www.dublintheatrefestival.com>



Chris O'Rourke

Tulsa Theater Examiner