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All About Theatre delivers energetic take on provocative teen musical 'Spring Awakening'



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If you think community theater can't rock, "Spring Awakening" at All About Theatre will prove you wrong. With a driving rock score powered by an impressive orchestra and a cast that builds to explosive energy, "Spring Awakening" is messy, moving and alive — a reminder of why supporting local theater matters.

Santa Cruz is fortunate to have a summer season rich with professional theater, from the acclaimed productions of Santa Cruz Shakespeare to the large-scale musicals of Cabrillo Stage. Yet alongside these polished companies, community theater plays a vital role. It is the place where emerging actors gain stage experience, young directors test their vision, and aspiring technicians learn their craft. Not everything may be perfectly refined, but community productions are where ideas blossom — and where future talent is cultivated.

[All About Theatre](#), long established as a children's theater company, is now expanding into all-adult productions, staged at the Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center. Its current production of "Spring Awakening" is an ambitious step in that direction, tackling one of the most daring and emotionally charged musicals of the past two decades.

Based on Frank Wedekind's 1891 German play of the same name, it is a work so provocative in its treatment of adolescent sexuality, abuse and more that it was banned from the stage for decades. Subtitled "A Children's Tragedy," the play exposed the dangers of silence and repression in a way that scandalized its first audiences.

More than a century later, the musical adaptation opened on Broadway in 2006, winning eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical, Best Book and Best Original Score. With music by Duncan Sheik and book and lyrics by Steven Sater, the adaptation preserves the play's core themes, pairing its period setting with a contemporary rock score to highlight how relevant those struggles remain.

Set in 19th-century Germany, the story follows teenagers as they wrestle with questions about love, identity, and sexuality that adults refuse to answer. At the center is Wendla (Valerie Rose Estrada), who longs to understand love and her changing body; Melchior (Oliver Volk), a rebellious intellectual who challenges authority; and Moritz (Trevor Miller), his tightly wound friend who collapses under the weight of expectation and shame. Their fates intertwine with classmates navigating their own secrets and awakenings, which lead to life-altering consequences, all set against a score that contrasts their repressive world with modern, explosive music.

The score *is* the show's most potent weapon, and Michael McGushin's musical direction and flawless eight-piece orchestra provide a dynamic backbone for the show. The cast brings strong energy to the material, along with some exceptional vocals that range from tender to defiant. Numbers like "Mama Who Bore Me" and "The Bitch of Living" give voice to frustrations the characters cannot articulate in their daily lives, while ballads such as "Touch Me" and "Left Behind" slow the pace with moments of vulnerability.

Delivering the evening's most affecting performances are Valerie Rose Estrada, whose beautiful vocals capture both the innocence and raw clarity of the character Wendla; Trevor Miller (Moritz) balances humor, desperation and pathos with ease; Melissa Martinez (Martha) has a rich voice that gives her role striking emotional depth; and Sofia Rosas (Ilse) provides a haunting presence.

Oliver Volk (Melchior) anchors the story with conviction. However, his vocals were uneven in the lower and higher registers and sometimes difficult to discern. Yet, his physical energy was undeniable.

Amid the ensemble are talents whose work commands attention, such as Michael Sacco (Otto/Hanschen), Vinny Fortunato (Ernst), and Brissa Ibarra (Adult Women), who embodies the stern female authority figures who shape — and often stifle — the world of these young characters.

Directed by Edie Flores, the production leans into the emotional intensity of the material, featuring beautifully staged moments, such as the numbers "The Mirror/Blue Night," with glowing lanterns, and "Those You've Known," which resonates with tenderness and loss. Erin Rose Solorio's choreography highlights the tension between control and release, and Bessie Zolno's intimacy and fight direction handles sensitive material with care.

The production really gains momentum in the second act. The cast seems to find its full energy in the explosive, rebellious anthem "Totally Fucked," which had the audience cheering and fully engaged in the characters' world. The finale, "The Song of Purple Summer," ultimately offers a fragile sense of hope.

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As is often the case on opening night, there were minor technical mishaps — microphones not fully balanced, actors occasionally caught outside the light — but these were small issues. Both cast and crew are likely to settle in as the run continues, smoothing out the rough edges.

This production is solid, the music is terrific, and the cast ultimately delivers an emotional punch. All About Theatre's "Spring Awakening" is a worthwhile addition to the Santa Cruz theater landscape. It might not carry the polish of larger "professional" troupes, but it offers something essential: a space where actors, directors and technicians grow, and there's a lot of talent on that stage to keep your eye on in future local productions. Supporting community theater means supporting the future of the arts in Santa Cruz. Experiencing this ambitious and heartfelt show is one way to do precisely that.

All About Theatre's production of the Tony Award-winning musical ["Spring Awakening"](#) plays at the Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center in Santa Cruz through Sept. 14.