Spring Awakening
by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik
Directed by Joanne Gordon
University Players
March 15-30, 2013

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Winner of eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Original Score, Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater’s *Spring Awakening* is an edgy retelling of Frank Wedekind’s controversial 1891 play of the same title. Marrying 19th century teenage angst with a modern rock score, the musical explores the alienation of growing up in a society that represses knowledge and sexuality with disastrous consequences.

Groundbreaking for its time, Wedekind’s tale, subtitled “ A Children’s Tragedy,” was originally banned in the nineteenth century as a result of its candid portrayal of such taboo topics as rape, abortion, and suicide. The play centers around the coming of age of four teenagers – Wendla, who longs to understand the facts of life and the bewildering feelings stirring inside her; Melchior, a handsome and intelligent boy who has learned about sex from books; Moritz, Melchior’s less academically inclined friend who is rattled by his erotic dreams and his failure in school; and Ilse, a girl who has fled home and now leads a Bohemian lifestyle. The trials these adolescents face are echoed by their classmates, who are dealing with issues that range from incest and abuse to confronting their homosexual identities.

When childhood friends Wendla and Melchior reunite by chance in the woods, they find themselves overwhelmed by a desire for one another which they do not fully understand. Betrayed by their parents and teachers, the teenagers struggle without guidance to understand the changes occurring in their bodies and their minds. Their exploration and young love lead to an inevitable tragic finale.
By Adam Freeman Pockross

In 1891, when Frank Wedekind wrote his first play, Spring Awakening, the world was not quite ready for so provocative a work. Revolutionary in both content and structure, Spring Awakening would wait fifteen years for its first staged production, and many more years until it would be produced in its entirety.

Spring Awakening pushed social taboos in a way no play had done up to that point. For example, no play had touched the subject of erections and ejaculations, especially not the erections and ejaculations of teenage boys. Because of its risqué material, Wedekind had to pay all costs once he was finally able to find a publisher.

In 1906, famed German director Max Reinhardt staged the play in Berlin under the watchful eye of the local censor. Though it was officially banned in 1908, the Prussian Administrative Court, who declared it “impossible not as a serious work” officially licensed it. Though the first version of the play was produced in America in 1912, in English wasn’t in New York City. Moments before curtain, the City Commissioner of Licenses, claiming the play was pornographic in nature, announced it could not be performed. Only after an injunction from the Supreme Court of New York overruled the City Commissioner did the show go on, with renowned anarchist Emma Goldman and famed opera singer Geraldine Farrar both in attendance. It was a good thing they caught that show, because there wasn’t another one, as the play failed after that single performance. After World War I, censorship lifted and Spring Awakening was freely produced, including a famous production in Berlin in 1929 with Peter Lorre. In 1931, a single performance by the Sunday Theatre Club in England allowed the play to run once without interruption. But it was still far too radical for its day.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Spring Awakening, like most everything else, saw dark times. Though it was never officially banned (Wedekind was neither Jewish nor Communist), it also wasn’t pro-Nazi, and since the subject matter was considered shocking, most producers didn’t touch it for fear of putting themselves under the magnifying glass. So it was basically left alone. Since the war, however, the play has been produced frequently in Germany.

In 1958, after many forgotten years, Spring Awakening was again performed in America. The University of Chicago Theatre performed Spring Awakening with a new translation from English critic and playwright Eric Bentley, which he worked on in consultation with Wedekind’s daughter, Kadidja. In 1963, the English Stage Society allowed two Sunday night performances “providing there was no kissing, embracing or caressing” between the two boys in the vineyard scene, the words ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ were omitted and without the masturbation game in the reformatory” (OSBORN).
In the News:
The Birth of Spring Awakening the Musical

‘Spring Awakening’ Brings Teen Angst to Broadway
By Neda Ulaby

Critics are hailing the new show Spring Awakening for reinventing the Broadway musical. Based on a 19th-century German play that was controversial for decades, Spring Awakening deals with teenage sexuality and includes incest, sadomasochism and rape.

Strikes a Chord with Teens

The musical is set in 1891, but the songs themselves are indie-rock modern in sound — and timeless in content. In one scene, German school boys in drab uniforms and brutally parted hair conjugate Latin verbs. Suddenly, one boy leaps up, pulls a microphone from his jacket and sings. The idea is that we’re hearing teenagers’ inner thoughts -- and those haven’t changed much over generations.

“The songs connect our time to their time. But issues don’t really change; they just get swept under the rug,” says 15-year-old Zuri Washington, who has seen the musical three times.

Music Bridges Centuries

While Spring Awakening is as much rock concert as musical, the actors speak in formal, 19th-century dialogue when they’re not singing. The actors are kids, most of them between 15 and 20 years old. So when they sing about growing up, it feels dangerously immediate. And when they aren’t performing, they are treated like rock stars by the fans who mob the stage door after every show.
The music is by Duncan Sheik, who had a few songs on the rock charts in the mid-‘90s (“Barely Breathing” was his biggest success.) His musical theater background was limited to a handful of shows in high school. Sheik says most rock musicals are just dressed up in leather pants. He defied convention by writing indie rock songs for Awakening and trusting them to flow organically into the story. Most critics say he has succeeded.

“It’s doing something entirely new. it’s really trying to push the genre forward. I actually hope it will inspire other musicians from the pop and rock worlds to experiment with writing for theater,” says Charles Isherwood, who reviews theater for The New York Times.

Isherwood says Spring Awakening had previously been censored because of its treatment of topics such as abortion and homosexuality. Those themes are well-trodden now, yet the musical does feel daring — especially in a scene when a girl asks a boy to beat her and another that offers a gleeful number about masturbation.

Tough to Stage

Playwright Steven Sater, who wrote the lyrics and book, met Sheik in Buddhist circles eight years ago. Sheik says it really does make sense for two Buddhists to write an angst-ridden teen musical about the fatal consequences of repression.

“Buddhism is about life in all its complexity and intensity,” Sheik says. “I think for us, as Buddhists, it’s acknowledging what the human condition is.”

But the two had difficulty getting the musical staged. After the Sept. 11 attacks, Sater says, producers believed that audiences wanted frothy, escapist fare: “With our German story and our rock CD, people just couldn't make it out.”

Then Tom Hulce, the star of the movie Amadeus, signed on as one of Spring Awakening’s executive producers. What attracted him to the play, he says, was the source material’s voluptuous stew of adolescent feelings: “Shame and self-worth, and what it means to love someone, and what it means to lose someone, and the thrill and almost outlaw sense of getting to partake of something that is forbidden. And then the responsibilities of that.”

Hulce says the play belongs in an era where prurience and sex are still deeply intertwined, and where bad kids, sad kids and kids who don’t quite belong still have precious little to guide them.
Frank Wedekind was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1864. His mother was a singer/actress who had toured her way from Chile to San Francisco where she met Wedekind’s father, a physician and a political radical, who had fled the suppressed political revolts of 1848. Together they moved back to Hanover where they had Frank.

The conservative unification politics of Otto Von Bismarck proved to be too much for Mr. Wedekind’s radicalism, so he moved the family to a castle in Aargau, Switzerland, in 1872, where Wedekind grew up the second oldest of six children. It was a close, intellectually enlightened family. By the end of his high school years, Wedekind was writing plays, poetry and songs, which he’d play on his guitar. Of note during this time is that there were a disturbing number of suicides in Aargau, including two boys named Rotner and Ruetschi who shot each other dead in 1880. According to Wedekind’s boyhood friend, Sophie Haemmerli-Marti, Wedekind, having come upon the scene soon after it occurred, “knelt by the bench, dipped his handkerchief in the blood, and wanted to die on the spot” (BENTLEY). Wedekind had to be talked out of suicide by his friend Schibler, after which the two of them decided to take an oath of blood to start their lives anew in memory of their fallen classmates. Wedekind rallied. He went on to do his university studies in Munich, where he further pursued his interest in the arts. He wrote about theatre, ballet, and literature as a contributor to some local newspapers and journals.

When Wedekind returned home, his father wanted him to study law. Wedekind wanted to pursue writing. The rift eventually turned violent when Wedekind hit his father. He fled for Munich to become a professional writer when he was 19. The famed German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann dramatized the event in his play Das Friedendesfest (The Coming of Peace: A Family Catastrophe, 1890), beginning a life-long feud between Wedekind and Hauptmann. Though he was now free to pursue his writing, he had to support himself. Wedekind began working in advertising. He also worked as a freelance journalist and as the private secretary of an art dealer, which allowed him to travel extensively around Europe. Wedekind’s father died in 1888, and though they fought, his father left sufficient inheritance for Wedekind to settle in Munich. It was here he found the bohemian district of Schwabing, which would be a great influence upon the playwright, enlightening him to the wonders of the cabaret and the circus, both of which would greatly inform his work. It was at this time in his life that Frank Wedekind wrote Spring Awakening.

As the money from his father ran dry, Wedekind started writing more for hire, working for a satirical journal Simplicissimus, founded by Wedekind’s publisher, Albert Langen. The journal was committed to new and controversial works, which, in line with Wedekind’s themes from Spring Awakening, criticized the authoritarian school system and the flawed sexual education practices of the day. Other contributors to the journal included Thomas and Heinrich Mann, whom Wedekind befriended, and who would both go on to great fame and prestige in German literature. In 1898, the German King Wilhelm II objected to an article Wedekind had written for the publication about the king’s recent trip to Palestine. Wedekind spent six months in jail for the allegedly treasonous article.
In 1906, Wedekind married Tilly Newes, an actress from his repertory company who played the role of Lulu in his plays Erdgeist (Earth Spirit, 1895) and Die Buchse der Pandora (Pandora’s Box, 1903). The couple had two daughters “who would later remember their father treating children with exceptional respect, as if there were no significant difference between children and adults” (FRANZEN). That same year, the company premiered Spring Awakening, directed by the famed director of that time, Max Reinhardt. By this time, Wedekind had become more and more interested in acting, developing his grotesque and exaggerated style from his love of the cabaret and the circus. He was cast in the production, and many later productions, as “The Masked Man.”

Wedekind’s literary canon spans about 30 dramas and pantomimes, 17 prose tales, 21 essays, and almost 150 satirical poems. He received little more than personal recognition for his work until Erdgeist became locally popular around 1905, though the play was not published in its uncensored entirety until 1962. Its sequel, Die Buchse der Pandora (Pandora’s Box) was produced in 1903 and then banned a year later. Aside from Spring Awakening, Wedekind’s other works may be best known for the projects they inspired, such as Alban Berg’s opera, Lulu, and G.W. Pabst’s film version of Pandora’s Box.

In 1918, Wedekind died from acute appendicitis. A virtual riot occurred at his funeral, which was attended by some of the day’s leading literary luminaries as well as a host of Germany’s young bohemians who had found a leader in Frank Wedekind. Thomas and Heinrich Mann were both there, as well as Bertolt Brecht, whom had been duly influenced by Wedekind, embodying Wedekind as the central figure in his first drama, Baal (1918). According to Ward B. Lewis, “Wedekind’s work manifested those concepts of anti-Aristotelian theater, open form, and alienation which further developed in Brecht’s theater, thereby influencing the drama of the entire twentieth century.”
Introduction to the Characters: Context

*Spring Awakening* is a coming of age story about a group of teenagers in a very specific time and place that reverberates universally within all coming of age stories.

In the introductory notes of the script, Sater and Sheik articulate this vision:

> The action of the play is set in a provincial German town in the late nineteenth century. When singing, however, the Boys and Girls assume the manner of contemporary teens. The lights shift with the songs, and we enter the private and timeless world of the character who is singing. That character may be joined in his or her solitary song by other voices that fill out the chorus of longing.

Character Descriptions

**Melchior Gabor**—a charismatic and intelligent rebel. Melchior reads voraciously, gaining access to knowledge about sex and revolutionary viewpoints that the adults try to keep from the young people.

**Wendla Bergman**—a sheltered teenage girl and childhood friend of Melchior Gabor.

**Moritz Stiefel**—Melchior's anxious and moody best friend. Moritz angsts over his grades and is haunted by recurring sexual dreams which he cannot understand.

**Martha**—a teenage girl regularly beaten and sexually abused by her father.

**Thea & Anna**—friends of Wendla and Martha.

**Ilse**—a childhood friend of Moritz who has been expelled by her family. Lives in an artists' colony where she is free from societal repression, but exposed to drugs, alcohol, and the sometimes-violent whims of the Bohemian artists who let her stay with them.

**Hanschen**—a suave and self-assured classmate of Melchior and Moritz who seduces Ernst.

**Ernst**—shy, naïve, and in love with Hanschen.

**Georg & Otto**—classmates of Melchior and the boys.

The following articles will focus on putting the world of the characters into the context of our modern world, much in the same way that Sater and Sheik gave a modern voice to the inner yearnings of Wedekind’s characters through rock and roll.
Both Wedekind’s original and Sater and Sheik’s updated version of Spring Awakening share the same themes of adolescent sexuality, repression, and social control, and though separated by over 100 years, the central tensions of Wedekind’s play persist to the present day. Perhaps most notably, discussing the sexual health and behaviors of young people is still taboo in large swaths of American society, as evidenced by the persistence of abstinence-only-until marriage sex education programs.

Though unsuccessful in the 2012 presidential election, the Republican Party of the United States is the political home for nearly half the country’s population. The 2012 platform of the Republican Party declared, “We renew our call for replacing ‘family planning’ programs for teens with abstinence education which teaches abstinence until marriage as the responsible and respected standard of behavior.” The federal outlines for Title V abstinence-only sex education programs similarly assign value judgments to abstinence. Instituted as part of welfare reform in the mid-1990’s, programs funded by Title V must “[teach] abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children,” inherently implying that engaging in sexual activity should be viewed as abnormal.

Though Republican politicians are correct in their assertion that “Abstinence from sexual activity is the only protection that is 100 percent effective against out-of-wedlock pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases,” their reliance on abstinence-only education contrasts starkly with the reality of Americans’ sexual lives. According to a 2006 study by the Guttmacher Institute, 99% of Americans have had sex by age 44, and 95% did so before marriage. The study further reports that contrary to public perception, the rate of premarital sex has not changed dramatically over the past 50 years; nearly 90% of women born in the 1940’s had sex before they were married. The author of the study, Lawrence Finer, suggests that instead of funding abstinence-only-until marriage programs, it would be “more effective to provide young people with the skills and information they need to be safe once they become sexually active—which nearly everyone eventually will.”
It would come as no surprise to Wedekind that current research bears out his belief that a lack of information has dire consequences. A University of Georgia study shows that “increasing emphasis on abstinence education is positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and birth rates” and the Harvard School of Public Health notes a “strong consensus that effective teen pregnancy prevention strategies should be multifaceted, focusing on delay of sexual activity especially in younger teens while promoting consistent and correct use of effective methods of contraception for those youth who are or plan to be sexually active” (Lavin et al). Research indicates that abstinence-only programs are problematic for STI prevention as well, with multiple studies indicating that the programs misrepresent information provided to adolescents.

In the United States, access to reproductive and sexual health information and resources varies widely by state and community. Teenage pregnancy rates are nearly a third higher in rural areas than in cities, largely due to lack of access to health centers or clinics. Though teen pregnancy rates have dropped dramatically over the past decade, American girls still have one of the highest teen birthrates among developed nations. Beyond pregnancy, only eight states require students to be provided with inclusive information about sexual orientation; three states in fact require negative information about sexual orientation to be taught. The struggles of Wedekind’s characters are far from a thing of the past.


“Premarital sex is nearly universal among Americans, and has been for decades.” Guttmacher Institute. Dec 19, 2006.

Republican Party. “We Believe in America: 2012 REPUBLICAN PLATFORM.” GOP.com


When Wendla tells Melchior of Martha's physical abuse at the hands of her father, he first reacts in disbelief –

"Wendla, that kind of thing doesn't happen anymore. Only in stories."

Unfortunately, in America child abuse is far more widespread than most American adults even realize. A recent study by Yale University found that over 4500 children under the age of eighteen were hospitalized in 2006 due to abuse, and 300 died as a direct cause of that abuse. In fact, child deaths due to abuse from family members is higher in the United States than anywhere else in the world. According to UNICEF, 20,000 children are believed to have been killed in their homes by family members over the last decade, and 27 children die from abuse or neglect every week in the United States. This gives the United States the highest rate of abuse per capita in the industrialized world.

These figures are horrifying, but the truth is many cases of abuse and neglect go unreported, much like Martha's abuse, and the long arm of abuse goes much further than just the act itself. Consider the following statistics:

- A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds
- More than five children die every day as a result of child abuse.
- Approximately 80% of children that die from abuse are under the age of 4.
- It is estimated that between 50-60% of child fatalities due to maltreatment are not recorded as such on death certificates.
- More than 90% of juvenile sexual abuse victims know their perpetrator in some way.
- About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children, continuing the horrible cycle of abuse.
- About 80% of 21 year olds that were abused as children met criteria for at least one psychological disorder.
- Abused children are 25% more likely to experience teen pregnancy.
- Abused teens are less likely to practice safe sex, putting them at greater risk for STDs.
Martha is also the victim of incest, which she recounts in the song “The Dark I Know Well,” Ilse joins her, recalling her own traumatic abuse, indicating that the occurrence is widespread. Indeed, a recent article in The Atlantic revealed that due to its taboo nature, incest is one of the most underreported crimes in the nation, and is committed more often than sexual abuse by a non-family member.

The statistics are shocking and frightening. According to the article, one in three-to-four girls and one in five-to-seven boys have been sexually abused by the time they reach age 18. And like other forms of abuse, the effects are far-reaching: 95% of teen prostitutes and at least one-third of female prisoners were abused as children. And incest is “the single biggest commonality between drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, teenage and adult prostitution, criminal activity, and eating disorders.”

The Jerry Sandusky case made headlines last year when it was revealed that there was a coverup by Penn State officials of the assistant football coaches’ sexual abuse of minors on school property. The scandal of rampant sexual abuse in the Catholic Church makes headlines regularly, and a rash of teacher-student sexual abuse cases have been reported recently in the Los Angeles Times. Incest rarely makes the news, but accounts for far more sexual abuse cases than the non-relative perpetrators we hear about regularly.

Wedekind, and now Sater and Sheik, tackle this taboo in Spring Awakening, but fail to offer any answers. Martha suffers mostly silently, while Ilse has run away from home. Mandatory reporting laws now exist, but will that be enough?

http://www.childhelp.org/pages/statistics

http://jezebel.com/5882911/just-how-bad-is-child-abuse-in-america-very


http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/01/america-has-an-incest-problem/272459/
Standardized testing becomes the great divide in schools policy

Use of standardized tests in schools is growing, but so is push-back – an issue playing out in L.A. school board elections.

By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

In Texas, more than 10,000 people joined a recent rally to protest it. In Seattle, high school teachers launched a boycott over it. And in Los Angeles, school board candidates are arguing over it — a debate considered so crucial to the future of education reform that outside donors have poured millions into the campaigns.

The growing use of standardized tests to assess students and teachers is sparking a push-back nationwide in what has become one of the greatest divides in educational policy. Even as the federal government and major school districts in Chicago, New York and elsewhere continue to promote testing, counter-pressure is growing to step back from it.

In California, Supt. of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has recommended the elimination of state standardized tests in English and math for second-, ninth- and 10th-graders because they are not required by the federal government, a proposal that would require approval by the Legislature and governor. He is also exploring the possibility of using one test for multiple purposes, including high school graduation and readiness for college.

“I do believe we should have fewer tests, and I think the pendulum may be swinging in that direction,” Torlakson said. “There’s a frustration I hear from teachers, parents and administrators that there is too much testing and too much time spent preparing for testing.”

The use of standardized exams began to accelerate under the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind law, which required more frequent assessments to monitor how well schools were helping all children read, write and do math at grade level. Since then, the federal government and major foundations have also encouraged districts to use student test scores to evaluate teacher quality — often offering lucrative grants to do so.

Testing has also emerged as an issue among the major forces funding campaigns in Tuesday’s L.A. Unified school board races, which have drawn national attention and more than $4.4 million in outside funding so far — including $1 million from New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to support candidates who favor using test results in teacher evaluations, among other policies.
“These school board campaigns have become a referendum on the role of testing in the teacher evaluation process,” said Dan Schnur, director of USC’s Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics. “These races will have some impact on the way Los Angeles schools are run but are likely to have a much larger impact on the national debate.”

But Schnur said any wholesale backing off of standardized test scores is not what Californians actually support. In a USC Dornsife/Times poll on education in 2011, Californians said they backed the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations but believed they should not make up the majority of an instructor’s rating.

Using test scores in evaluations has been embraced in L.A. Unified by Supt. John Deasy and his school board allies — and fiercely fought by United Teachers Los Angeles, which is financially participating in two of the three races.

In the 4th District covering the Westside and western San Fernando Valley, for instance, incumbent Steve Zimmer has fought one of Deasy’s favored evaluation methods for individual teachers, called value-added, which uses a mathematical formula to estimate how much an instructor contributes to student performance after controlling for race, English ability and other factors.

Challenger Kate Anderson, an attorney and parent, supports value-added — along with Deasy’s recommendation to use student test scores and other data for 30% of a teacher’s evaluation. She has received at least $1 million from the Coalition for School Reform, a political action committee launched by outgoing L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to support Deasy and data-driven approaches in teacher evaluations and other policies.

In the 2nd District, incumbent and board President Monica Garcia is a strong Deasy ally who supports value-added and its use in teacher evaluations. She is being challenged by union-backed candidates who believe standardized tests are being misused and overused.

The nation’s biggest backlash against standardized testing is taking place in Texas, where most students are required to pass 15 exams to graduate. More than 10,000 people recently rallied in Austin, the state capital, to demand fewer tests and more school funding. And nearly 900 school districts representing more than 90% of Texas public school students have passed a resolution to reduce testing and mandate no fixed role for test scores in teacher evaluations.

Earlier this year, teachers at Garfield High School in Seattle launched a boycott against their school district’s standardized test — a protest that drew support from around the nation and even Australia. Mallory Clarke, a ninth-grade reading teacher, said the exam was a waste of valuable instructional time because it did not test what the state requires students to know, had a high margin of error and produced no useful data about how to help students improve.
The Seattle Public Schools district is rolling out a new teacher evaluation system this year that will use the district test results as one measure of instructor effectiveness, but Clarke and other teachers said that did not figure into their opposition to the exam.

Seattle Supt. Jose Banda said, however, that many other teachers found the test useful and that the union had agreed to use results in its performance reviews. “In this day and age, if you’re an effective teacher, you have to look at some form of student data,” he said.

In other parts of the country, parent groups are promoting a movement to “opt out” of standardized tests — an option in California, where the annual state exam is not required. Legislators in Kansas, New Mexico and elsewhere are reviewing their state testing laws. And a school district in Charlotte, N.C., last year scrapped 52 end-of-year standardized tests for students as young as kindergartners, which it had spent $2 million developing, after widespread protests.

“We are at a defining moment, with a groundswell of opposition building to high-stakes standardized testing,” said Diane Ravitch, an educational historian and vocal critic of the use of test scores in teacher evaluations. “There is no stopping it.”

HERR KNOCHENBRUCH: Look at that. Melchior Gabor, a young man of distinct intellectual capability.
FRAULEIN KNUPPELDICK: Thoroughly distinct.
HERR KNOCHENBRUCH: A young man who could be our finest pupil.
FRAULEIN KNUPPELDICK: Our finest, Herr Knochenbruch.
HERR KNOCHENBRUCH: But there he is, polluting himself, cavorting about with that, that ...
FRAULEIN KNUPPELDICK: Neurasthenie inlbecile, Moritz Stiefel?
HERR KNOCHENBRUCH: Thank Heaven the upper grade only holds sixty.
In *Spring Awakening*, Moritz chooses to end his own life rather than deal with the fallout of not moving forward in school. Unfortunately, many American teenagers choose the same drastic response to their own troubles every year. Consider that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds and the sixth leading cause of death among 5-14 year olds. Thousands of young people are taking their lives rather than continue to deal with the problems they are facing in school and at home.

Hanschen and Ernst, who are exploring a homosexual relationship in *Spring Awakening*, fortunately make it out of the play relatively unscathed, largely due to the fact that they are keeping their relationship a secret from their oppressive society. Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adolescents in America as a group to not fair as well. According to The Trevor Project, a nonprofit organization devoted to the prevention of suicide among LGBTQ youth, teenagers among this group are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers.

The American Academy of Childhood and Adolescent Psychology offers the following suggestions for preventing suicide:

Parents should be aware of the following signs of adolescents who may try to kill themselves:
- change in eating and sleeping habits
- withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- drug and alcohol use
- unusual neglect of personal appearance
- marked personality change
- persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- not tolerating praise or rewards

A teenager who is planning to commit suicide may also:
- complain of being a bad person or feeling rotten inside
- give verbal hints with statements such as: I won’t be a problem for you much longer, nothing matters, It’s no use, and I won’t see you again
- put his or her affairs in order, for example, give away favorite possessions, clean his or her room, throw away important belongings, etc.
• become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression
• have signs of psychosis (hallucinations or bizarre thoughts)

If a child or adolescent says, I want to kill myself, or I’m going to commit suicide, always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional. People often feel uncomfortable talking about death. However, asking the child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Rather than putting thoughts in the child’s head, such a question will provide assurance that somebody cares and will give the young person the chance to talk about problems.

If one or more of these signs occurs, parents need to talk to their child about their concerns and seek professional help from a physician or a qualified mental health professional. With support from family and appropriate treatment, children and teenagers who are suicidal can heal and return to a more healthy path of development.

MORITZ: So, what will I say? I’ll tell them all, the angels, I got drunk in the snow, and sang, and played pirates ... Yes, I’ll tell them, I’m ready now. I’ll be an angel.

Ten minutes ago, you could see the entire horizon. Now, only the dusk—the first few stars ... So dark. So dark. So dark ...
OMAHA — The abandonments began on Sept. 1, when a mother left her 14-year-old son in a police station here.

A state law sought to make places like Alegent Health Immanuel Medical Center in Omaha havens for unwanted infants.

By Sept. 23, two more boys and one girl, ages 11 to 14, had been abandoned in hospitals in Omaha and Lincoln. Then a 15-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl were left.

The biggest shock to public officials came last week, when a single father walked into an Omaha hospital and surrendered nine of his 10 children, ages 1 to 17, saying that his wife had died and he could no longer cope with the burden of raising them.

In total last month, 15 older children in Nebraska were dropped off by a beleaguered parent or custodial aunt or grandmother who said the children were unmanageable.

Officials have called the abandonments a misuse of a new law that was mainly intended to prevent so-called Dumpster babies — the abandonment of newborns by young, terrified mothers — but instead has been used to hand off out-of-control teenagers or, in the case of the father of 10, to escape financial and personal despair.

The spate of abandonments has prompted an outcry about parental irresponsibility and pledges to change the state law, which allows caregivers to drop off children without fear of prosecution. But it has also cast a spotlight on the hidden extent of family turmoil in the country and what many experts say is a shortage of respite care, counseling and especially psychiatric services to help parents in dire need.

Some who work with troubled children add that economic conditions, like stagnant low-end wages and the epidemic of foreclosures, may make the situation worse, adding layers of worry and conflict.

“I have no doubt that there are additional stresses today on families who were already on the margin,” said Gary Stangler, director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in St. Louis, which aids foster children entering adulthood.
Mark Courtney, an expert on child welfare at the University of Washington, said that what happened in Nebraska “would happen in any state.”

“These days there’s a huge void in services for helping distressed families,” Mr. Courtney said.

When children are abused or neglected, they can be taken by the child-welfare system, and possibly enter foster care. When they commit crimes, they enter the juvenile justice system. In both cases, children and parents are supposed to receive counseling and other aid.

But when troubled children do not fit those categories, they often fall through the cracks, Mr. Courtney said. Even middle-income families with health insurance often have only paltry coverage for psychiatric services and cannot afford intensive or residential treatment programs. The poorest, on Medicaid, often have trouble finding therapists who will take the low rates. And some parents are reluctant to seek whatever help does exist.

Jim Jenkins, a computer network manager in Lincoln, suffered through years with his teenage son, whom he described as “out of control.”

“I can see some parents getting overwhelmed and deciding that giving up the child is the best thing,” Mr. Jenkins said.

The boy’s mother died when he was 8, and at age 13 he seemed to become a different person, Mr. Jenkins said, constantly in trouble at school, making threats that led to visits by the police.

“It was just a living hell for years,” Mr. Jenkins said. “I didn’t know where to turn, and I took it on myself that it was my fault.”

Finally, the police made him put his son in a hospital for troubled youth for several days, then told him about a respite program at Cedars Home for Children, which took the boy for a week, giving Mr. Jenkins, his daughter and his new wife a break and starting therapy for the boy.

“After a while, you realize this is not going to end today, there is no 30-minute solution,” Mr. Jenkins said.

But after years of therapy, his son turned a corner, has a diploma and plans to go to college.

“I was lucky,” Mr. Jenkins said, adding that a parent with more children, a less flexible employer and little money may just throw his hands up.

In July, Nebraska became the last state to enact a so-called safe-haven law. Such laws permit mothers to leave an infant at a facility with no fear of prosecution. Nationwide, more than 2,000 babies have been turned over since Texas enacted the first such law in 1999, according to the National Safe Haven Alliance in Virginia.

But Nebraska’s version was far broader than all others, protecting not just infants but also children up to age 19.
State Senator Arnie Stuthman, sponsor of the Nebraska bill, said some legislators had said they wanted to protect all children.

"The law in my opinion is being abused now," said Mr. Stuthman, who said he would push for a revision. "There are family services out there, but some people may lack the resources to take advantage of them, and we've got to take a hard look at what more we can provide."

Todd A. Landry, the state director of children and family services, denied that the involved families had not had access to aid — most of the children, for example, were in the state Medicaid program and some had received psychiatric care — and he noted that well-publicized hot lines could direct families to help.

"Some parents had accessed our services but weren't getting the results they wanted," Mr. Landry said.

"The appropriate response is to reach out to family, friends and community resources," he said. "What is not appropriate is just to say I'm tired of dealing with this and drop the child off at a hospital."

Mr. Landry said parents and guardians were mistaken if they thought they could walk away from their responsibilities. For now, such children will be placed in foster care or with relatives, but the courts could require parents to attend counseling and might even order them to pay child support.

He said economic distress was a major issue in only one case, that of Gary Staton, 34, the father of 10 whose wife had died.

Mr. Staton, who gave up all but his oldest child, an 18-year-old girl, remains something of a mystery. His wife died in February 2007 after giving birth to the 10th child. Both parents had sporadic employment.

For nine months, in 2004, the children were taken by child welfare officials because their home was filthy and disordered, and the gas and water had been turned off. The family has since received public aid with rent and utility bills while Mr. Staton, for unclear reasons, recently quit a factory job.

Their rented yellow wooden house in a low-income area of north Omaha was vacant last weekend and showed signs of disrepair, with part of the roof crumbling and a broken window covered with a blanket.

In a telephone interview, with KETV in Omaha, Mr. Staton mentioned the loss of his wife of 17 years.

"We raised them together," he said. "I didn't think I could do it alone. I fell apart. I couldn't take care of them."

"I was able to get the kids to a safe place before they were homeless," he said. "I hope they know I love them. I hope their future is better without me around them."

Stunned relatives offered last week to take in the children, and officials said they would probably go to two family homes as soon as background checks were complete.

Joanne Manzner, the stepmother of the deceased wife, said relatives had frequent contact with Mr. Staton's family, sometimes taking ch
children for a weekend to give him a rest, and were puzzled that he had not asked for help before taking such drastic action.

Officials and some private agencies differed this week about the adequacy of the state’s family programs.

“In Nebraska, as in a lot of states, we don’t have sufficient funding to provide a really strong mental health system for kids,” said Judy Kay, chief operating officer for the Child Saving Institute in Omaha, which helps families in crisis. “But we do have resources that many parents are not aware of or are not using,” including psychiatric counseling with fees tied to family income.

Some who abandoned children last month were aunts, uncles or grandmothers who had taken custody when the parents were incapable of providing care. Several families had prior contact with social workers and psychologists, but the children remained violent and unmanageable.

Judy Lopez, 48, and her husband took charge of her grandsons here more than three years ago. Both boys had been neglected and physically abused; now, ages 7 and 9, they have severe behavioral problems involving fighting, stealing and lying.

“Some days I just want to pull my hair out,” Ms. Lopez said, adding that like many other families, they were slow to seek aid.

The school suggested a free program managed by the schools and the Child Saving Institute, a local nonprofit organization, that combined counseling for parents and for the children. The boys see a therapist,

ILSE: You know, by the time you finally wake up, I’ll be lying on some trash heap.
Interview with director Joanne Gordon

MM: What moves you about Spring Awakening?

JG: I suppose most, the wonderful exuberance of working with undergraduates. We go four and a half hours at night and they keep me as young as I feel inside. We don’t sit down, we don’t stop jumping, we don’t stop laughing, we don’t stop crying, we don’t stop hugging. During the compulsory stage management breaks, the kids and I just stay in and they rehearse anyway. I love their passion—they’re still in love with the theater and so am I. Sharing that more than anything is what gives me joy.

In terms of the piece, it speaks to them. The music speaks to them, the vernacular speaks to them, the issues speak to them. It’s wonderful working with kids who are deeply engaged in the subject matter and the form of the material.

MM: This show is kind of a pop culture phenomenon. Do you get the sense that that’s exciting to everyone in rehearsal?

JG: Yes, they’re excited. The fact is 160 kids came out to audition for this show and I’m using 36 of them, so they know they’re special and they know everybody wanted to be in it. They’re in the cool show. Also, it’s because the music and the issues are still relevant. All the taboos that are mentioned and were written about almost 200 years ago, certainly 150 years ago, are still pertinent in their lives. They still have repression and censorship and confusion at their age. Our society is still ruled by so much misinformation and distortion of information and perverse logic and the imposition of ethical and moral systems that have no relevance to their lives or reality. It speaks to them. It sings to them.

MM: This is your last show as Artistic Director and Chair of the Department.

JG: If I’m honest, of course, the piece that spoke out of me was B.S. [Bukowski-Sondheim]. People who know me well knew that in an extraordinary way it was a very confessional, autobiographical piece. This is much more the other side of me, the teacher side. I’m still thrilled that at 65 to be making theater that is exciting and relevant to my 18-year-old students. That’s pretty cool. I’m a hip old grandma.

MM: Spring Awakening on Broadway had some very unique staging devices, the microphones for instance. Is that playing in to how you’re staging?

JG: It’s interesting, Ashley [Boehne-Ehlers, Business Manager for Theatre Arts] stage managed a little production, where even though it was a minimal situation the intent was totally to duplicate the conceptual choices of the Broadway show. I have not consciously rejected them, but I’m in no way duplicating them because one of the things that the set design program at this school does is compel you to think very individually and honestly about what you’re doing. Our set is so radically, conceptually different. First of all, we’re staging in the round. Secondly, we have this huge structure which is both jail and jungle gym, which are the two sides of their world. They play, they laugh, they love; they’re repressed, they’re contained. What I’m trying to do is find my truth through those two parameters. All of the characters are either jailed in and oppressed and then break free and they play with abandon. The set to a large extent is demanding conceptually different choices. Fiscal realities also dictate that there’s no way I can switch from handheld to wireless. It was a cute convention, but I don’t think in any way essential to the meaning of the text. Where the Broadway production emphasized the period quality of the scene style and then the pop of the music, my emphasis is much more between internal and external. I feel that the music expresses the eternal longings and passions of the youth, and it doesn’t matter whether it’s in the vernacular of today or then, it’s what connects the play to the kids in cast and the audience today. The scenes frame it within the fact that this has been an eternal problem. The songs are that pressure valve.
MM: Exactly. They’re their internal monologues. They’re soliloquies.
How does the choice of staging in the round affect choreography and singing and vocal performance?

JG: It’s huge. Let’s face it, staging proscenium is the easiest staging of all. You’ve got one picture to make. Staging thrust is a little more difficult. Staging in the round is the most difficult of all. What it means is in rehearsal I never sit down because I keep traveling. The kids are used to this being a thrust, so they’re inclined to do it one way and I have to keep saying, “I’m behind you, what about me?” I have to see all the pictures in terms of sharing it, but on the other hand, having the audience wrap around makes that kind of involvement all the more exciting. The fact is that of the 36 actors, 24 are in costume, 12 are not. Yes, fiscally there’s an element to the choice of having the kids not in costume, but it makes a point, as it did in the Broadway production. I’m much more interested in engaging the mixture of periods, because with each eruption, I do believe that there’s a sense that this is an eternal problem. The problem is still relevant.

MM: Any last thoughts?

JG: It’d be pretty difficult to go back to Oklahoma after this.

Discussion Questions:
1. Throughout this guide, we have drawn several comparisons between modern America and the issues faced by the teenagers in Spring Awakening. How did your own experience growing up compare to that of the Spring Awakening characters? How can you relate to the characters? In what ways do you not relate?

2. Was the juxtaposition of the rock music to Wedekind’s 19th Century story successful in its mission to reveal the inner lives of the characters and emphasize the timelessness of the story? Why or why not?

3. Who is responsible for the tragic events in the play? Did Melchior have a responsibility to Wendla to explain to her what was going on? What responsibility to the adults have for the outcomes? Do Wendla and Moritz have any responsibility for their tragedies?

4. Wedekind’s original play did not specify that any of the adult roles should be portrayed by the same actor, whereas Sater and Sheik specifically designate that The Adult Women should be played by one woman, and The Adult Men should be played by one man. Why do you think they chose to do this? Is this choice effective?

Special Thanks to Jesika Wallace, Costume Designer, for use of her renderings!