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Spring Awakening

by Winnie McCroy
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Austin P. McKenzie and the cast (Source:Joan Marcus)

"Spring Awakening" opens at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway with a mixed cast of Deaf West members and hearing actors, and the big marquee names Camryn Manheim and Marlee Matlin, though both pale in comparison in the face of the show's young talent.

The play is set in Germany circa 1891, and centers around a group of teenage students who are coming to terms with their burgeoning sexuality and societal repression.

Early in the show, young Wendla (Sandra Mae Frank, voice by Katie Boeck) dons a tiny white dress, which she says makes her feel like a 'fairy queen.' Her mother, played by Manheim, curtly informs her that the dress is too small, now that she is "in

bloom." (In all of her roles in this play, Manheim embodies the intolerant face of adult society.)

The exchange serves as a metaphor for the actions to take place: formerly children, these adolescents must now struggle against an ill-fitting world, one that has no room for childish games.

Wendla is smitten with Melchior (Austin P. McKenzie), a handsome young boy who runs away with her heart -- and with the production. This young Deaf actor is the heart and soul of the story.

Throughout the course of the two-hour, twenty-minute production, the audience watches these fresh young things navigate the world of adults, dealing with issues including puberty, masturbation, sadomasochism, domestic violence, sexual abuse, familial rejection, homosexuality, teen suicide, teen pregnancy and abortion. The results are predictably horrific, but the ending can be viewed as uplifting.

Director Michael Arden does an amazing job of bringing this story to the stage. The production uses a combination of ASL and supertitles, projected cleverly onto the classroom blackboard. Enhancing all of this are the many song interludes, where cast members and their instrument-wielding counterparts sing moving rock ballads about life, and the world, and the strange and wonderful changes in their bodies. Kudos to Duncan Sheik for the excellent rock music he's written to bring the issues of these 19th-century characters to our modern sensibilities.

Heavily affected by these changes is Moritz, played by the Deaf actor Daniel Durant. Plagued by wet dreams, Moritz begs Melchior to explain what is happening to him. When he learns about the wonders of puberty, his schoolwork suffers further, and he is booted out. His family shames him, and he eventually commits suicide with his father's gun.

Other characters run through the litany of other worldly woes, with Treshelle Edmond as the child whose father beats and sexually abuses her; Andy Mientus and Joshua Castille playing the handsome young gay boys; Katie Boeck as the inquisitive young girl who gets pregnant and dies in a back-alley abortion; and Krysta Rodriguez as the young runaway living with crazed Bohemians.

The story is moving, but not groundbreaking; audiences have seen it before in plays like "Rent" and "Dear Evan Hansen." What makes this production of "Spring Awakening" excellent is the young cast. Through a delicate balance of signing, speaking, supertitles and song, they bring the play to a hearing audience with nothing lost in translation.

A tangible example of this transfer is the inclusion of actor Ali Stroker, the first-ever Broadway actor in a wheelchair. Although it's historically significant that she appears in the show, what's even more significant is that her appearance is not remarked upon. She's not billed as 'the wheelchair girl.' Her disability is never addressed, neither as a cast member or as a character. She just sings and acts along with the other cast members, as it should be.

Big ups to the excellent scenic and costume design by Dane Laffrey, and Lighting and Sound Design by Ben Stanton and Gareth Owen, respectively.

In fact, the only letdown in this otherwise stellar production was the underutilization of Academy Award-winner Marlee Matlin. Playing several random adult characters, Matlin wanders through the set in a severely high-necked dress, scolding her charges via signing. And that's it.

In spite of the disappointment in missing out on the range of Matlin's acting, this production of "Spring Awakening" goes far creating wider understanding and acceptance of the Deaf community.

"Spring Awakening" runs through Jan. 24, 2016, at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W. 47th Street in New York. For tickets or information, visit <http://www.broadway.com/shows/spring-awakening-dw> or www.springawakeningthemusical.com

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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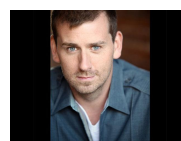
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