

‘Awakening’ is bold and bracing

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Theater Critic

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National tour of the Tony-winning musical, which was adapted from an 1891 play about German students in emotional straits.

Some wag once defined relativity this way: When you spend an hour kissing a sweetheart, it seems like a minute. When you spend a minute on a hot stove, it seems like an hour. On that scale, one year of high school in the musical “Spring Awakening” must seem like the kind of geologic time in which glaciers move from one landmass to another.

The setting is Germany in 1891, as it was in the Frank Wedekind play of the same name. Yet the adolescents here seem trapped in an unending period of loss, longing, confused emotions, repressed feelings and suppressed sexuality.

Anyone who has passed through such a firestorm will find it vividly revived by this national tour. The final “Song of Purple Summer” reminds us that those who can endure parental abuse, cruelty from classmates or teachers and overpowering depression may see the ice inside themselves thaw at last. But winter will be long and hard before that happens.

Composer Duncan Sheik and playwright/lyricist Steven Sater divide our sympathies a bit more evenly than Wedekind (who, if I’m not mistaken, stares down from a small photo mounted on the back wall of the set, which is a vast brick schoolroom).

Not all the adults here are venal. The young people can be silly and self-pitying. But the message is the same: If you crush natural curiosity and desires to create a false sense of order, you can damage a child permanently.

If the show has a hero, it’s the rash but open-minded Melchior (Matt Shingledecker, a confident understudy who took the lead Tuesday and did a sensitive, powerful job).

He encourages anxious Moritz (Taylor Trensch, equally good in goofiness or rage) to follow his sexual desires. Melchior also tells naive Wendla (touching Christy Altomare) to seek tenderness instead of violent sensations, but both story lines lead to trouble. The person likeliest to succeed here is crafty Hanschen (creepy Andy Mientus), who can hide his beliefs and rise to prominence by playing any game required.

Sheik and Sater treat songs as interludes where action stops and characters speak directly to us. That makes the modern pop music less disconnected from its setting: Songs roil around as violently or sweetly as the kids’ feelings do. (For once, a cast really does look like it’s been recruited from high school, especially the girls. And the onstage instrumentalists are a tight band.)

This tour replicates the Broadway direction of Michael Mayer and choreography of Bill T. Jones, and I wondered whether they had something larger than adolescent angst in mind.

The stomped segments of the dancing sounded a bit like the thunder of jackboots to me, and Hanschen’s über-Aryan blondness – he’s a Draco Malfoy lookalike – suggested sneering Germans we’ve seen in photos from the Third Reich.

Any students in this group who reached adulthood would be in their late 50s when Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany in 1933. Could Mayer and Jones be implying that, when someone in power stamps down individuals and demands unthinking obedience to authority, the Nazi Party is the likely result?