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Sex Sells Some But Abstinence Advertises More Attractively: *Spring Awakening*, Sex Education, and the Persistence of Hypocrisy

By Loren Hiser

Abstract

Spring Awakening (either as Steven Sater's musical hit, or as Frank Wedekind's 1906 diatribe against society) portrays teenagers who come of age questioning propriety, and what they deem to be socially and sexually acceptable. Both Frank Wedekind and Steven Sater's *Spring Awakenings* discuss the trials and tribulations of puberty, and portray the detrimental effects of not being properly educated when it comes to sex and sexuality. The cultural, educational, and familial censorship that breeds sexual repression and ignorance is the ultimate demise of the characters within *Spring Awakening*; but the true tragedy lies in how relevant this subject matter is in contemporary society.

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Girl meets boy. Girl loves boy. Girl ends up pregnant and boy gets sent away to a juvenile detention facility while the girl is forced into an ultimately fatal abortion at the same time that boy's best friend commits suicide. Not the most uplifting of tales, or the most morally sound. Originally condemned for its flagrant representation of German education in the late 1800s, Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening: A Children's Tragedy* portrays teenagers who come of age questioning propriety (what they deem to be socially and sexually acceptable) and the detrimental effects of not being properly educated when it comes to sex and sexuality. Although this tale might seem dated, the repercussions of sexual ignorance still have continuing currency (As evidenced by the success of Sater's musical version of the story, which premiered in 2006) in the wake of contemporary movements espousing abstinence-only education.

When Wedekind's play was first staged, many critics and theatregoers found its blatant and aggressive subject matter to be distasteful and morose. Sol Gittleman refutes the initial condemnations of Wedekind's *A Children's Tragedy*, writing that the criticisms find their foundation "on the assumption that the play was pornographic and obscene, and that its author nihilistically smashed the existing social order" (Gittleman 51-52). The musical adaptation however, which took the world by storm 100 years later, all too quickly became Broadway's favorite ingénue. Hailed by *The New York Times'* Charles Isherwood for its brilliant depiction of "the confusion and desperation that ensue when the onrushing tide of hormones meets the ignorance of children raised by parents too embarrassed or prudish to discuss what those new urges

signify” (Isherwood), the contemporary musical *Spring Awakening*, directed by Michael Mayer, was critically acclaimed for its use of honesty. While there is a stark difference between Wedekind’s original piece and Sater’s musical version, there are glaring resemblances, predominantly when it comes to sex and sexual repression.

Written sometime between 1890 and 1891, Frank Wedekind’s *A Children’s Tragedy* premiered on November 20, 1906 at the Berlin’s Deutsches Theatre under the direction of Max Reinhardt. Now acknowledged as “a withering attack on a rigid, hypocritical society that cares only about outward appearances and refuses to deal openly with natural sexual urges” (Cohen), *A Children’s Tragedy* follows the lives and yearnings of three German schoolchildren – Melchior Gabor, Wendla Bergman, Moritz Stiefel – and their schoolmates as they tackle the lustful yearning that accompanies adolescence and the blossoming of sexuality. According to *New York Times* reviewer Charles Isherwood, the reason it took 15 years to produce was because “even in a heavily censored form, [...] the subject of adolescent sexuality was controversial” (Isherwood).

The play had in its first English-language performance in 1917 as a matinee in New York City. Sexual education was just beginning and the United States became very wary, as Kristin Luker states, of “a group that the psychologist G. Stanley Hall christened ‘adolescents’ in 1904” (Luker 47). Understanding that sex before marriage was not an anomaly, but a reality in young people ages 14-21, the country was buzzing with worry. Luker recounts, “It was ‘sex’ o’clock’ in America, [...] between 1910 and 1914, articles in the public media on birth control, prostitution, sexual morals, and divorce became more numerous than ever before” (Luker 51). A production of Wedekind’s play could not have come to the States at a more volatile moment in history. *Spring Awakening: A Children’s Tragedy* was closed after a single performance, and the producers were forced to

go to the county court to get an injunction, which would allow them to reopen. Following this injunction, a Supreme Court Justice declared that *A Children's Tragedy* "had 'no proper place on the stage of a public theatre' and that it did 'infinitely more harm than good'" (*New York Times*, 3 May 1917), due to its "celebration of adolescent sexuality" (Luker 51), and its ardent assault on conservative morals.

While critics in 1917 found Wedekind's work indecent and offensive, some political activists found his work to be a ground-breaking social commentary. Emma Goldman in particular found his comments on the "shackles of propriety" to be not only audacious, but also inspiring. She writes, "more boldly than any other dramatist, Frank Wedekind has laid bare the shams of morality in reference to sex [...] Never was a more powerful indictment hurled against society, which out of sheer hypocrisy and cowardice persists that boys and girls must grow up in ignorance of their sex functions" (Goldman 86). What Goldman perceived, and what critics of the time failed to realize, is that Wedekind's *A Children's Tragedy* was not a pornographic production, but a social commentary on the lackadaisical nature of sex education at the turn of the century. *Spring Awakening: A Children's Tragedy* is, according to Alan D. Best, "not a tragedy of sex but a social tragedy of adolescence" (Best 72): a failure of sex education. "Sex Ed," though the name seems like a misnomer, provided inadequate information at best. Most programs, what few of them there were, provided inaccurate and altogether incorrect information to young people, and regressive action in the area of sex education was taking away what little knowledge adolescents had access to. This then laid bare the clear need for social reform, and the need to stop withholding information from adolescents and subsequently blaming them for being ignorant. As Elizabeth Boa states in her book *The Sexual Circus: Wedekind's Theatre of Subversion, A Children's Tragedy* is "a case

not of guilty knowledge, but of guilt before knowledge” (Boa 41). It is not that the children knew what they were doing and decided to do it anyway; on the contrary, none of them had any idea about the repercussions of their actions in the first place, and they ultimately internalized a self-hatred for a transgression they did not knowingly commit.

While Wedekind was criticized for transparently discussing adolescent sexuality in the early 20th century of *Spring Awakening*, Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater’s contemporary adaptation was seen as the darling of the Broadway stage, hailed for its inventive use of music and lyrics, and its ability to tackle difficult subject matter in an accessible manner. Opening at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre on December 10, 2006, the musical won eight Tony awards (including Best Musical). However, what the critics who praised the 2006 production have failed to notice is that the issues that forced Wedekind’s show off the stage had not altogether disappeared from Sater’s reimagining. Wedekind addressed particular issues of repressive sex education in his play, and specific omissions in Sater’s musical seem to, unfortunately, be a product of the similar social repression that Wedekind condemned. Sater’s adaptation is part of education’s exclusionary problem, and while critics, such as John Heilpern of *The New York Observer*, applaud the ways in which Sater tackles “the darker side of growing up” (Heilpern), they ignore the blatant omission of issues that leave audiences in the dark about sex and sexuality.

Censorship was certainly an issue for both *A Children’s Tragedy* and *Spring Awakening*, and Sater was incredibly aware of the contemporary connotations of Wedekind’s original content, writing in his preface, “In our show, the scenes set out the world of nineteenth-century repression, while the songs afford our young characters a momentary release into contemporary pop idiom. [...] The time jumping structure of our show is meant, thus, to underscore the sadly enduring relevance of our theme”

(Sater IX). Although he was aware of the persistent significance of the themes, Sater seems to have nevertheless neglected to stage them in his own play to satisfy the needs of a contemporary society. Abortion, rape, and child molestation are polarizing subjects for a contemporary audience, because these issues are, unfortunately, strikingly relevant.

Rape is one of the issues that Sater censored in his adaptation. Melchior, in Wedekind's original, rapes Wendla in the hayloft, as Wendla cries, "Don't kiss me, Melchior! — Don't kiss me! [...] Don't — don't, Melchior!" (Wedekind 88). In the musical adaptation Melchior and Wendla have instead, as the audience perceives, consensual sex. After berating Wendla for consent, Melchior asks, "yes...?" to which Wendla finally replies, "yes" (Sater 61). Sater says, in his preface, "In Wedekind's script, Melchior 'date-rapes' Wendla. We wanted to see him make love to her" (Sater X). Because contemporary society has an overwhelming fascination with love stories it would not do to besmirch the romantic idealism behind losing one's virginity. Rape, presumes Sater, would be offensive to these clichéd ideas, and offensive to someone in the audience. According to the U.S. Department of Justice in 2011, "One in four women are victims of rape or attempted rape, 84 % of those women knew their attacker, 57 % of the rapes have happened while on dates" (McKay 38). If one in four women in the United States are victims of rape or attempted rape, the margin of cross-over between survivors and possible ticket holders would be too great to go unnoticed. Sater's sex scene in the modern interpretation of *Spring Awakening* blurs the lines of consent, making the scene not centered around rape, but instead around the nostalgia that surrounds first loves and sexual experiences. Jonathan Franzen condemns Sater's adaptation in his introduction to Wedekind's play, stressing that "the casual rape of Wendla Bergmann by the play's central character, Melchior Gabor, becomes a thunderous spectacle of ecstasy and consent,"

(Franzen X) ignoring Wedekind's original intent, which was to educate on the reality of rape.

Rape is one issue that causes audience members to clench their teeth in discomfort; abortion is another. In his preface, Sater asserts, "Wendla's abortion was, in a sense, transported into our own century: a century in which a 'bourgeois idea' such as abstinence is still widely preached as the only form of safe sex" (Sater XIV). Wendla meets with Mother Schmidt, an illegal female abortionist, onstage in the Wedekind version of the story; after her mother chastises her for a pregnancy of which Wendla does not understand the cause or consequence (Wedekind 136-141). The Masked Man informs Melchior of his lover's untimely passing, telling him "it was the abortion methods of Mother Schmidt that killed her" (Wedekind 81). In Sater's adaptation, all of the action of the abortion takes place offstage, and the word "abortion" is never said; Sater makes his audience do all the work of inferring what happens to Wendla. As her mother drags her offstage, Wendla is brought to meet "the doctor," (presumably male) in a back alley— which perpetuates the "back-alley abortion" idiom. Sater's decision to insert a silent abortion while using it as a central plot point disseminates contemporary society's approach to abortion: acknowledge but ignore. Shrouded in secrecy, this turning point operates to reinforce the fact that while this musical is praised for exploring sexuality, it simply mimics and reinforces the restrictions of our time. Sater's approach to Wendla's abortion mimics the hush-hush attitude that abstinence-only curricula have about the consequences of sex. Wendla's mother reprimands Wendla's poor decision-making— decision-making she could not have known was irresponsible— while Wendla, confused by the significance of intercourse, begins to cry as she whimpers, "My God, Why didn't you tell me everything?" (Sater 80) Wendla's botched abortion, which leads to her death, is ultimately her

mother's cross to bear, because she refused to educate her daughter on the realities of sex and sexuality.

While Sater strongly censored himself in terms of Melchior raping Wendla and Wendla's abortion, his approach to child molestation is stifled even more. Child molestation is an issue that plagues not one, but two characters in *Spring Awakening*. In Wedekind's original, Martha discusses her family life with Wendla and the other schoolgirls, and confesses to them that her parents savagely beat and molest her. In Sater's adaptation, the same discussion occurs, but Martha and Ilse (who, in Sater's adaptation, is also molested) sing about the horrors that happen behind closed doors. The girls, in their diatribe against molestation, cry, "there's a part I can't tell about the dark I know well" (Sater 45). The song, while hauntingly beautiful, does nothing more than discuss how this issue cannot be discussed. And although this song brings to light an issue that continues to ail contemporary society, it is nothing but talk. As David Rooney of *Variety* admonishes, "Sater's lyrics tend at times to stray toward purple, prosaic vagueness" (Rooney).

What is remarkable about each of these performances—Wedekind's *A Children's Tragedy* and Sater's *Spring Awakening*—is that there is universality behind Wedekind's original themes, apparent in the fact that the issues prevalent in 19th Century Germany remain prevalent in contemporary American society. Issues of unwanted pregnancies, abortion, homophobia, rape, suicide, and child abuse were all matters that sparked heated debate in 19th century Germany, and still resonate as issues that catalyze impassioned deliberation in 21st century United States, especially when it comes to sex education.

Abstinence-only sex education programs are designed with one singular purpose: to prevent teenagers from engaging in any kind of sexual activity. These programs promote self-restraint from any sexual

indulgence outside of marriage (that is, heterosexual marriage, as most abstinence-only programs identify same-sex marriage to be sacrilegious). These programs do not, in any way, encourage the use of contraceptives or discuss contraceptive methods, other than to stress their failure rates. According to the SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) Fact Sheet, “Many federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs rely on fear, shame, and guilt to try to control young people’s sexual behavior. These programs include negative messages about sexuality, distort information about condoms and STDs, and promote biases based on gender, [and] sexual orientation.” It seems that *Spring Awakening* is not simply a cautionary tale for what has happened, but what continues to happen.

Abstinence-only sex education programs now make up over twenty percent of sex ed in public schools in the United States, according to a survey of 4000 teachers done by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (Livni). Cris Mayo, an advocate for sexual education reform in public curricula states, “Sex education is currently one of the most controversial and politicized aspects of school curriculum. It engages adults with distinct cultural, political, and economic agendas in heated and acrimonious debates in which student voices are largely unheard” (Mayo 2). Many students in contemporary society still do not have a complete understanding of “where babies come from,” and the implications of sex. They are not given proper answers to probing questions, and are often forced to try and figure it out for themselves, a practice that often leads to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. The *Spring Awakenings* then, either as Sater’s musical or Wedekind’s play, continue to each exist as psychological and social commentaries on what can still happen when adults tasked with providing knowledge, fail.

Wendla and Melchior function as vessels that demonstrate the consequences when younger members of society must rely on an abstinence-only sex education model. This model, which teaches students that sexual expression before or outside of heterosexual marriage will have detrimental social, psychological, and physical consequences, neglects to discuss the controversial but imperative topics of abortion, rape, and sexual orientation. The themes staged by Wedekind and Sater can thus be seen not as indictments of the past, but as indictments of the social contexts of each; condemning the sex education curricula of both Victorian-era Germany and today. Alexander McKay, an advocate for a new approach to sex education writes, in his discussion of the current American Sex Ed model, “We have to reject the dogmatic sexual philosophy that states that it is always dangerous to encourage open discussion of sexuality with preadolescents [...] The way out of our sexual impasse is to reject traditional restraints on children’s sexual education and to accept the importance of socializing our children to sexuality” (McKay 63). A revolutionary conversation started by Frank Wedekind over a century ago takes yet another backseat to the needs of a morally conservative society. Sater takes a step back from the incendiary work Wedekind started, and begs us to ask the question, have we really progressed?

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