

Spring Awakening Awakens Again

Spring Awakening, the rock musical based on Frank Wedekind's controversial 1891 play, has always pushed boundaries. From its exploration of teenage sexuality to its raw and emotional score, the show has resonated with audiences since its 2006 off-Broadway debut and the Tony-Award®-winning Broadway production. In 2015, Deaf West Theatre, a company based in Los Angeles that produces deaf-centered productions, created a renowned Broadway revival. That production took the musical to a new level, sparking conversations about accessibility, representation, and the power of storytelling itself. Not only was it one of very few Broadway productions with Deaf and Hearing performers, it was also the first time an actor using a wheelchair appeared on Broadway, Tony®-winner, Ali Stroker. Academy Award-winner Marlee Matlin was also in that production.



Our production is inspired by the Deaf West production, which was conceived by director Michael Arden and actor Andy Mientus, but has been custom-built for Skylight by a diverse team of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing artists on both sides of the proscenium. The entire show is communicated in spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL) simultaneously. Not one line of the script has been changed, by the way. This unique approach becomes a potent metaphor for the show's themes of communication, repression, and the yearning to be heard.

Deaf actors portray key characters like Wendla, Moritz, and the mothers of Wendla and Melchior. Hearing actors voice these characters, seamlessly weaving spoken English into the fabric of the performance. This dual-language experience adds depth and texture to the story.

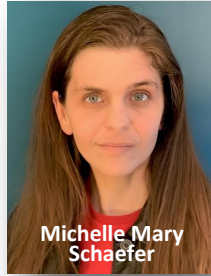
Moreover, the production cleverly incorporates the history of oralism in deaf education, mirroring the stifling societal norms that restrict the characters' self-discovery. The audience witnesses both the beauty and frustration of communication barriers, creating a powerful empathy for all characters, regardless of hearing ability.

Spring Awakening has always been a musical about awakening – to sexuality, to identity, to the complexities of the world. This production pushes those awakenings further, challenging preconceived notions of communication, accessibility, and what it means to truly connect with a story. From its original production, to the Deaf West revival, to this production, *Spring Awakening's* impact continues to resonate, leaving an indelible mark on the history of musical theatre and the fight for a more inclusive future.



Our Dazzling DASL Team:

Artistic Director and Co-Director Michael Unger in conversation with Co-Director Alexandria Wailes and our DASL (Directors of Artistic Sign Language) team: Michelle Mary Schaefer and Mayra Castrejon-Hernandez.



MICHAEL UNGER: Can you explain what a DASL (Director of Artistic Sign Language) does on a production like *Spring Awakening*?

ALEXANDRIA WAILES: From experience, the actual scope of the DASL's workload varies from project to project. On a musical such as *Spring Awakening*, the goal is to tease through the modalities of communication within the relationships between the characters and their interactions. This approach keeps it more honest in the storytelling. For example, in our production, Hanschen is played by a hearing actor who doesn't know signs. Ernst is played by a hard of hearing actor who communicates in both signs and speaking. In the relationship between the two characters, they both want something. How this may show up in Hanschen is that he learns to sign to better communicate with Ernst because his attraction is his motivating factor to do so. The DASL works closely with the directing team, the choreographer, and the music director to clarify moments, intentions and how a word may be drawn out in song. The DASL works with the company of actors in different manners. For those company members who are already fluent signers, it becomes more a collaboration with the DASL being the 'sounding board' to bounce ideas off with. For the newer signers, the DASL teaches them the signs and guides them in the nuances of the language whenever necessary. In both cases, the DASL individual/team has a more subjective viewpoint of the storytelling and works alongside the other creatives to best share that story.



MICHELLE MARY SCHAEFER: As a DASL, I have translated the entire script and lyrics from English to ASL to ensure it expresses accurately, clarity for the actors to sign onstage. There are so many layers with this process, due to the profound language/lyrics that *Spring Awakening* reveals. Some lines/lyrics are so abstract, so I had to do extensive research to analyze the best approach to ensure that the Deaf and Hard of Hearing audience members would understand and enjoy the show equally among with their hearing peers.

MAYRA CASTREJON-HERNANDEZ: A DASL in rehearsal translates the script into Sign Language and ensures that the storytelling is more visual and artistic.

MU: Does involving Deaf and Hard of Hearing actors (and ASL) change the message of this show?

AW: Having a company of actors that are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing taps into history that is not often addressed on the stage. That is the history of education, especially of deaf students. How language deprivation has impacted generations of deaf people. By language deprivation, I specifically mean education provided with the best teaching resources, including sign language rather than acute focus on speech, hearing and lipreading abilities. Taking a child out of the actual learnings of math, science, social studies to spend hours on "training" of lip reading and speech does not usually set up the child for success. However, this is part of our deaf history in America (and around the world).

MC-H: If anything it gives the show more inclusivity. In the 1800's they would oppress deaf people by not allowing signed communication. But in this show communication plays a huge part because everyone is making efforts to learn each other's language.

MU: If this show makes a statement about the Deaf/Hard of Hearing experience past/present/future what might it be?

MS: Rights for us, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, has been a long constant battle even in 2024. We keep advocating for accessibility, opportunities, and are often ignored by those who are willing to ignore their own choice rather than realizing and empowering the changes together. We are so capable, and I always say there is no DEI without folks who are Deaf, Disabled and full accessibility. Back in 1880, the Milan Conference turned our lives upside-down, and Alexander Graham Bell studied eugenics and his goal was to stop sign language, Deaf clubs, Deaf marriage etc. A high percentage of us are born to Hearing parents, and society needs to come to realize that learning ASL is the best way to connect to all of us. Technologies may be cool, with auto generated captions, but remember oftentimes it's inaccurate. Hearing aids and cochlear implants don't make us hearing. They can break or not work at all and the signing glove will not interpret everything that a Deaf person signs; it's missing regional language, classifiers, facial expressions. So don't just say, "I wish I knew ASL." Try learning it. Connect with us. If many in the cast of *Spring Awakening* can do it in a short amount of time, you can too!



AW: There is not one statement being made, but rather the importance of not marginalizing people and letting shame shape education and exchange of information. Humans have a history of passing down stories of how powerful, beautiful, scary, and sometimes mundane the world around them is. When oppression and shame interfere, the sense of the world around an individual becomes distorted and more complicated than it may be for the person doing the oppressing, suppressing and projecting their own shame onto others. Teaching boundaries, consent and self-respect is crucial, but not at the expense of denying a person's access to language and communications. What are the patterns and cycles that have proven to be successful. What are the patterns and cycles, from generation to generation, that need to be changed?

MU: What accommodations need to be made in rehearsal when having Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Hearing actors in the room?

MS: There is no one accommodation that fits every Deaf and Hard of Hearing person in rehearsals. We should never assume their accessibility needs. Due to *Spring Awakening* and its nature of cast and production being large, we have several ASL interpreters providing access.

AW: During rehearsals, the biggest accommodation is patience. There is a difference in how information is communicated in a bi-lingual production. There are interpreters, of varying experiences of sign language, facilitating conversations between the signers and non-signers in the room. In rehearsals, so many areas of focus may happen simultaneously, but how this information is received, processed, and then shared looks different from individual to individual. It takes time to find that groove and it is challenging when there are many changing variables from day to day.

MC-H: We must give actors time. And Interpreters are a must, of course or else it's not all inclusive.

MU: Anything else you'd like to add?

MS: I want to take the time to thank Michael, Alexandria, and Skylight Music Theatre for this profound production to make a difference for all of us, the cast, crew, creative team, and the audience. And I hope to see more theatres and films opening their mind, eyes, and heart to include us, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, in productions. Anything is possible and when it does happen it's magical.

MC-H: I want to thank the non-signers for learning our language in ASL and the signers and deaf people who helped teach the Artistic Sign and the ASL.

AW: I hope after watching this production, audiences realize the importance of being okay with not knowing what they didn't previously know. And then, ask questions and be ready to do some research if answers aren't exactly readily available. I hope that curiosity is piqued, and more conversations are had about the unknown. I hope audiences enjoy the music, lean into the storytelling, learn a few signs, and become more aware that different lived experiences can absolutely share the same universal truths of love, longings, dreams, shame, oppression, and the desire to leave a better world than what was inherited.



Spring Awakening: Important Content Notice and Resources

Welcome to *Spring Awakening*! We are excited to share this powerful and moving musical with you. However, it is important to acknowledge that the show explores sensitive themes that may be disturbing for some viewers.

- **Sexual content:** The musical explores teenage sexuality and desire in a frank and honest way. Some scenes may be sexually suggestive or contain partial nudity.
- **Abuse and violence:** The characters face physical and emotional abuse, including sexual assault and suicide. These scenes can be difficult to watch.
- **Mature language:** The dialogue and lyrics use mature language that reflects the characters' struggles and emotions.

We understand that these themes can be triggering for some individuals. If you are concerned about the content, please be aware that resources are available.

Feel free to visit their websites to learn more and to support these important organizations.



Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee (PSGM) is a coalition of volunteers representing local agencies and organizations as well as the general community. www.preventsuicidemke.com



Sojourner Family Peace Center provides an array of support aimed at helping families affected by domestic violence achieve safety, justice and well-being. www.familypeacecenter.org



Courage MKE offers group homes for displaced Milwaukee LGBTQ+ youth. They are committed to supporting all aspects of their identities including gender, sexual orientation, and race. www.couragemke.org



Wisconsin

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