

## Intro

SPRING AWAKENING, a musical written by Steven Sater and composed by Duncan Sheik, tells the story of a class of teenagers rebelling against an oppressive education system that leaves no space for true inquiry, a restrictive sexual code that makes them ashamed of their desires and a repressive societal structure that denies them agency. The musical is based on a play written in Germany in 1891, but has many contemporary resonances. The musical explores this powerful story through an expressionistic style - which asks us to bring the hidden, electric inner life of the teens to the stage in music and dance with a contemporary rock score. We see and hear the world through their eyes.

## Origin

In December 2006, SPRING AWAKENING the musical opened on Broadway at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in New York City. The coming-of-age indie-rock musical was adapted from a German expressionist play FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN, written by playwright Frank Wedekind in 1891. No one thought it could be a Broadway show at first as ticket sales were disastrous during previews—until the 2007 Tony Award Nominations came out. With 11 Tony Nominations including Best Musical, the show blew up in every way, and the rest is history.

For the young performers in the show, many of them were grappling with the same pubescent and life confusions that troubled the characters written down by Wedekind a century prior. “It was like the audience was awakening to the show at the same time the actors were discovering what they were doing,” said Jonathan Groff, who played Melchior in the original production. The show was a sensation and developed an ardent teenage fan base. Esther Zuckerman writes in a 2018 *Vulture* article reflecting on the impact of the show, “Sheik’s melodies tapped into the parts of my brain that loved Richard Rogers and Death Cab for Cutie in equal measure, and Sater’s profane, anxiety-laden words were perfect for the times I was feeling hopeless, desperate, and a little dangerous.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## Why the adaptation?

Aside from the artistic values in the story’s retelling, Tony-winning playwright-lyricist Steven Sater upon reading the original play found it to be a sort of “opera-in-waiting” and in the preface to the published text he writes, “Wedekind’s play is full of the unheard, anguished cries of young people.” Sater first picked up Wedekind’s FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN in a German bookstore in 1999. Upon reading this “random old play,” he was deeply touched by the subject matter at hand. “The deafness of adults to what’s going on in the hearts of young children,” Sater said, “that longing and desire and frustration of young people... The adult refusal to heed those children’s frustrations result in tragic consequences.” Months later, in the wake of the school shootings at Columbine<sup>[2]</sup> its subject felt all the more urgent. Sater set out to write a musical that was different, with songs that do not forward plot, but take people into “what can only be felt” through this highly emotive and expressionistic narrative.

Duncan Sheik, at the time a newly Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter, was extended

the offer to compose for the project. Hesitant at first, Sheik was disinterested in writing traditional Broadway music. "If I were to do anything in musical theater, I want the music to be relevant to the culture at large," Sheik stated. This sentiment immediately resonated with Sater's view that the original play was "racy" and "punk rock": "The place these unheard yearnings of young people...have been expressed and relieved for generations has been rock music."

### **So, why now?**

"This show is such a gift to young performers and the young audience," Groff states in an interview on the event of the release of the 2022 HBO Documentary *Spring Awakening: Those You've Known*, as it brings light to important issues like abuse and teen suicide. "It saves lives, it changes lives."

In 2017, 13% of US teens ages 12-17 (3.2 million) reported to have experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year. In 2018-2019, 13% of US children ages 3-18 years (just over 8 million) reported that they had a current, diagnosed mental or behavioral health condition. Adolescent interpersonal violence victimization, which includes dating violence, sexual violence, and bullying, are prevalent as well. Data from 2019 suggests that approximately one in eight students reported any dating violence, and one in four reported any bullying victimization. Meanwhile, suicide is the second leading cause of death among high school-aged youths 14-18 years after unintentional injuries; suicide rate among adolescents and young adults aged 10-24 in the US increased 57.4% from 6.8 per 100,000

in 2007 to 10.7 in 2018.

When COVID-19 hit the world, the physical and mental health of teenagers declined rapidly. In 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy issued a 53-page advisory warning the public of the looming mental health crisis. His report cited mental health statistics from 2019, which shows that one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from a decade ago. While the many factors that threatened youth mental health existed pre-COVID, "the pandemic era's unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced," wrote Dr. Murthy. "This is a moment to demand change," Murthy concluded, "...to protect, strengthen, and support the health and safety of all children, adolescents, and young adults—and ensure everyone has a platform to thrive." "The things that we confront in this show are not things you can learn in school. And they are important," said Lauren Pritchard, one of Groff's co-stars who played Ilse in the original Broadway production. "They're things that help people survive, and live, and know that they have worth. These stories will live on forever."

Today, young people have to grapple with the added complexity of social media, climate disaster, and increasing inequality. With the recent release of the Netflix series "Adolescence" it's clear that there's a hunger for stories that help us talk about the complexity head on.

## Wedekind History and Context

Frank Wedekind (1864 - 1918), originally Benjamin Franklin Wedekind, was a German actor and dramatist at the forefront of expressionist theatre from the late 18th to early 19th century. Born in Hanover, Germany, Wedekind lived and worked in Munich for most of his adult life. He died in Munich in 1918 at age 53.

Wedekind is known as an “ultra-radical” with a “quirky and insidious individuality.” He championed avant-garde artistic movements and strived to uncover the hidden emotional currents under the facade of reality through satire. Flipping through his works, one can quickly tell that Wedekind was a harsh critic of societal oppression and bourgeois hypocrisy in the paternalistic and authoritarian pre-fascist Germany, especially on the topic of sex and sexuality.

FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN (SPRING AWAKENING, SPRING AWAKENING, or THE AWAKNING OF SPRING, 1891) was Wedekind’s first major work and the source material for Spring Awakening the musical. The play’s explicit depictions of male masturbation, sexual violence, suicide, homoeroticism, and references to abortion stirred up immense controversies upon its release. Wedekind showed how the society and its youth could suffer tragic consequences due to the pretentious and moralistic repression at large. Much of the content seen in the play were actually derived from Wedekind’s personal life earlier on as a school boy:

“I started to write, without any sort of plan, merely aiming to set down whatever appeared to me. The plan emerged after the third scene and was compiled from my own personal experience or the experiences of my class-mates.”

(Wedekind’s quote from “Translator’s Preface,” *Diary of an Erotic Life*)

Directed by Max Reinhardt, FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN premiered on November 20, 1906 at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin with the subtitle *Eine Kindertragödie* (A Children’s Tragedy).

Thereafter, the radical exploration and portrayal of dawning teenage sexuality and angst often led to banning or censorship of the play. The play was eventually banned in Berlin in 1912. However, to its supporters’ delight, an enlightened judge of the Administrative Court lifted the ban. He considered the play’s merit valid despite Wedekind’s radical portrayals: “The play shows how the forces of real life affect innocent young people at the age of puberty, with particular reference to their own incipient sexuality and the demands made on them by life, and especially by their schooling. They perish in the ensuing conflict, because their appointed mentors, their parents and teachers, in the author’s view, fail to guide them with proper understanding, because they are prudish and lacking in worldly wisdom...

“Looked at in this light, and taking in account its overall tenor and subject, it cannot be denied that the play as a whole is a serious work: it deals with serious educational issues, and it seeks to state an attitude towards these issues.”

(Judge’s quote from “Translator’s Preface”, *Diary of an Erotic Life*).

## German Expressionism

German expressionism was an art movement that originated in the early 20th century (1910s-1940s) that emphasizes artists' inner experiences and emotions, which contrasts the goal of accurately capturing reality championed by its predecessors – namely, realism and impressionism. Unlike the delicate techniques required to achieve accurate depictions of reality, simplified shapes, broad strokes, bright colors, and sometimes even jarring and distorted abstractions can be found in German expressionism as the artists' tools to translate their inner feelings into artworks.

German expressionist artworks are products of their time. The movement was propelled by these artists' rebellious attitudes, particularly against traditional bourgeois art that dominated German culture and aesthetics at the dawn of WWI. With the looming threat of war, the movement quickly took on the role of social commentary and protest as artists produced shocking and emotive works that reflected and confronted their grim reality. In many ways, German expressionism was an early vessel of advocacy against conservatism politically, economically, and culturally. The movement spread to creators of other media as well, including novelists, playwrights, and poets. While Wedekind's *FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN* was not an expressionist work entirely, his radical attitude against cultural and political censorship put him at the forefront of avant-garde art, hence a symbol to those who later identified as expressionists. Wedekind tried to convey that tragic consequences could ensue repressed sexuality and self-expression. What does not fail to translate till this day is his radical criticism of societal oppression of free expressions, situating *FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN* as one of the first major works in the German expressionist movement.

## Visual Historical Resources

19thC Germany:

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/book-of-photographs-show-germany-in-the-19th-century-a-877730.html#fotostrecke-9ac2ce99-0001-0002-0000-000000092001>

Three School Girls in 19thC Germany:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dickinsonlibrary/2282097737/in/photostream/>

A Field Full of Children, 1927, Germany:

<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/81.47/>

German Expressionism:

[https://www.moma.org/s/ge/curated\\_ge/#slide06](https://www.moma.org/s/ge/curated_ge/#slide06)

## Visual References Contemporary Teenage Life

<https://www.huckmag.com/article/teenage-life-sian-davey-martha-photography>

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/gallery/2024/may/18/girls-night-the-teenage-ritual-of-preparing-to-go-out-in-pictures>

<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/hannah-modigh-the-milky-way>

## Articles

<https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/spring-awakening-rise-nbc-high-school-musical.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/11/opinion/teenagers-mental-health-america.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/theater/100000003893735/in-performance-spring-awakening.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/18/theater/marjory-stoneman-douglas-spring-awakening-cameron-kasky.html>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

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[1] <https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/spring-awakening-rise-nbc-high-school-musical.html>

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine\\_High\\_School\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre)