

CLARICE SMITH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

ORGANIC AND COLLABORATIVE: UMD SCHOOL OF THEATRE, DANCE, AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES PRESENTS SPRING AWAKENING

This blog post is by Emily Schweich, a sophomore Broadcast Journalism major.



Spring Awakening photo by Blinkofaney/BrightestYoungThings

Spring Awakening proves that the tumultuous experience of adolescence transcends place and time. Based on a 19th century play by Frank Wedekind, the rock musical follows a group of adolescents in a provincial village, balancing angst with optimism, and naiveté with curiosity, struggling to reconcile society's agenda with nature's desires. The UMD School of Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies' production, directed by five-time Tony Award-winner Brian MacDevitt and acclaimed choreographers Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig, explores this dichotomy between institution and nature.

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One thing the village teens have in common – they've all "got [their] junk." Wendla (Megan Morse Jans) has a repressive mother who won't tell her where babies come from. Moritz (Daniel Smeriglio) is having erotic dreams – to him, they're a sign of insanity. He's struggling in school and fears his father's wrath. Martha (Natalie Carlyle) has an abusive father; so does Ilse (Jenay McNeil), who has been homeless since her family kicked her out of their home. Melchior Gabor (Zac Brightbill) is the most enlightened teen; he learned about sex from books and has radical dreams of transforming their society. But when the adults find out that he's told the other students about sex, he's "Totally F***ed."

The leads had pleasant voices and executed some tender moments. Smeriglio's desperate "Don't do Sadness," sung just on the brink of his character's breakdown, was especially moving, and McNeil lit up the stage with her beautiful final number, "The Song of Purple Summer." But the standout performances were given by a chorus of dancers unique to this production – the "Elementals." Dressed in neutral-colored, flowing, loose dresses and tunics, their hair swept up into disheveled hairstyles, the Elementals were more than conventional backup dancers; they told the undercurrents of the story.

"They're part angel, part ghost, part earth, part sky, part fire, they're kind of like the essence of nature, in many ways," MacDevitt said in a February interview. "The conflict is between patriarchal repression and living naturally, losing control and letting nature take over."

Unlike the traditional choreography in the Broadway production, Pearson and Widrig took a more organic approach. The Elementals took a class in the fall to develop their own choreography, a creative process that proved incredibly effective. Their movements were fluid and

organic as they personified sensual dance partners in “Touch Me” and told the heartbreaking story of abuse in “The Dark I Know Well.” They often moved and danced in slow motion, struck natural poses and limbered over scenery. In one scene, they even portrayed inanimate tombstones in a cemetery. This inventive choreography was truly memorable.

As a rock musical, *Spring Awakening* has a soundtrack that sounds more like a Green Day album than anything out of 1800s Germany. In some performances, this disparity between music and setting can seem anachronistic, but the University of Maryland’s performance felt fresh and organic. The versatile set captured the essence of both the stark rooms where the teenagers lived and the promise of a lush and colorful Eden outdoors. The Elementals beautifully embodied the teens’ passions and desires, and the entire production was emotionally compelling.

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