

This musical may be your

'Spring Awakening' opening at Lake Michigan College on Friday, hopes to get difficult conversations started

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — In the opening scene of "Spring Awakening," a teenage girl asks her mother how babies are born.

Her mother does everything to avoid the question, setting off a series of tragic events in the lives of confused high-schoolers struggling to navigate adolescence.

"Her mother is reticent to give her any facts," says Paul Mow, who is directing the Lake Michigan College Performing Arts Department's production of "Spring Awakening," which opens Friday night for three performances in The Hanson Theatre of LMC's Mendel Center. "She says, 'Isn't it great that the stork has brought your sister another baby girl?' She says, 'Mom, don't you think it's a little late for me to still believe in the stork? Can't you tell me the truth?' And she says, 'All you have to do is love your husband,' and leaves it at that. And it spirals out of control from there."

Nothing short of radical when it was written in 1891, Frank Wedekind's provocative coming-of-age story was banned around the world and not performed in its original form until many decades later. The musical adaptation, which won eight Tony Awards in 2007, softens a couple of plot points and adds a rock musical score, but it still spotlights the ongoing struggle between adults and teens when talking about the topics of sex and sexual desire. "Spring Awakening" deals with the material in frank terms, which is why it comes with a parental advisory.

"It's a cautionary piece of musical theater," Mow says. "The music is fantastic and very singable and the songs are almost like different types of poetry that are sometimes angst-ridden rock and sometimes soothing pop. ... I tend to gravitate to more realistic theater rather than escapist theater, and 'Spring Awakening,' even in the music, certainly doesn't bring an escapist shield on reality."

"Spring Awakening" tells the story of star-crossed lovers: a beautiful teenage girl named Wendla (Lauren Kunkel) with a curious heart and few facts, and the headstrong

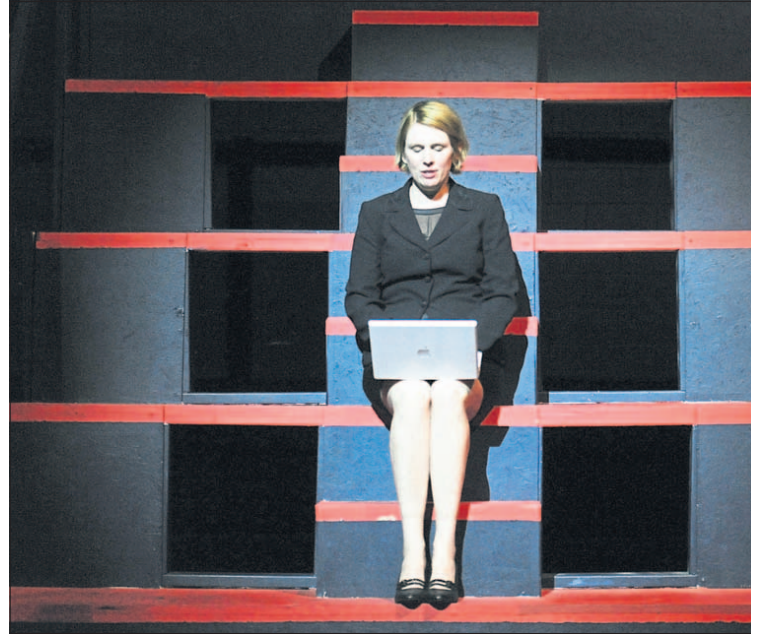
and brilliant Melchior (Jake Zapor), the fearless object of her affection. Kept in a state of ignorance by their parents, beaten down by teachers and preachers, and getting tentative and confused messages from their peers, the teenagers portrayed in "Spring Awakening" are all lost and at risk.

There's Moritz (Josh Blair-Bogert), whose haunting sexual dreams and academic failures fuel his suicidal thoughts; Martha (Meredith George), who is being abused by her father; Ilse (Leah Tirado), Martha's sister who runs away from the abuse and lives in an artists' colony where she is free to explore every impulse; Anna (Rebecca DePumpo), an optimistic yet naive classmate who has a difficult time understanding Martha's trials; Thea (Lauren Tibbitts), Wendla's best friend who is innocent and pure and strives to stay that way at all costs; Hänschen (Nathan Neidlinger), who uses his looks and intelligence to captivate the easily manipulated Ernst (Tait Martinez); Georg (Jason Cope), who is overcome with lust for his piano teacher; and Otto (Leo Carmody), who struggles with feelings he considers inappropriate.

Through these characters, the play explores sexual desire, depression, homosexuality, sexual abuse, pregnancy, abortion and suicide in a repressed society where information is suppressed. Some of the characters come to terms with their lives; others self-destruct, but the consequences are troubling for all.

"It breaks a lot of rules of conventional theater," Mow says. "There's a lot of profanity. The sexuality is rather in your face. I think it purposefully makes the audience feel uncomfortable and encourages us to look at our own lives by breaking conventional rules and rethinking norms. It teaches us ultimately about how embracing our own vulnerability can get rid of these crippling shields of establishment and lead to more whole-hearted living."

This is the second time Mow has directed "Spring Awakening." The first was in 2012 for The Beckwith Theatre Company in Dowagiac, with a pair of encore performances in The Oak Room at The Citadel in



Meagan Francis rehearses for Lake Michigan College's production of "Spring Awakening."

Benton Harbor. Unlike that production, which stayed true to the Broadway version, setting the tale in late-1890s Germany, for this incarnation, Mow decided to place the story in present day.

"Directing it again certainly has added a whole new level of perspective for me," Mow says. "I updated it, so we have these characters using their phones and tablets to further show our disconnect with each other. I think both kids and adults hide behind these devices and social media and text messages instead of being accountable and saying things to each other's faces. ... I think this piece of theater, more than anything I've ever worked on, helps us examine, particularly in our adolescence, this inability to really connect, that only seems to be growing."

It is something Zapor, who is in his third year teaching at New Buffalo High School, says he sees daily.

"We are glued to our phones and glued to our technology and we aren't aware of what is going on around us; what maybe our peers are going through," Zapor says. "I also think

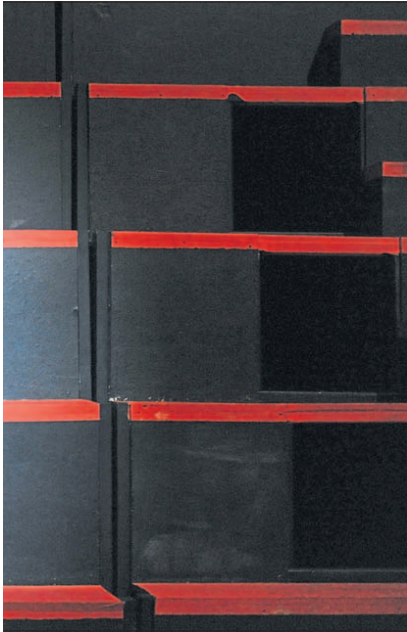
that when we do hear about suicide or ab... it's through the little screen of our phone and I think that creates some distance."

"None of these characters really ask each other for help," Tirado adds. "There's this facade that everything is OK. ... While you may think that these issues are new, having done this work, which originated in the 1890s, is a wonderful piece of evidence that, no, being a teenager is really difficult, especially when they are coming into their own and have no idea what those things mean."

Tirado, whose own Chicago-based theater company, ICU Ensemble focuses on social topic drama, created a program that goes into schools to talk about mental illness and mental health. She says the questions she receives in that capacity are, at times, startling.

"There was a high school student I was talking to just the other day who didn't even understand her own anatomy and she's going to be going off to college in the fall," Tirado says. "It's really disturbing that despite this history that we still haven't changed. We are constantly trying to protect our young

wake-up call



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PAUL MOW
director

Jeffrey Booker, and Mary Jo Schnell, executive director for The OutCenter, which provides support to the LGBT community and their families.

“I think it’s almost irresponsible to do a show like this and just walk away,” Mow says. “If any one of these issues is reaching an audience member, whether they are going through it themselves or they are a parent and their kid has thought about suicide or just come out of the closet or are dealing with these things and just don’t know how to talk about it, we really want to say to them, ‘We are going to be there to help.’ I think it’s going to start a lot of conversations, and I certainly hope it does.”

“In my work, I find a lot of kids who just want somebody to listen to them,” Tirado adds. “Once they have that opportunity to ask questions and feel like they are going to be respected and not judged, they feel better equipped to find support, to ask for help and ultimately learn how to deal with their anger, their anxiety, their depression. They just want to be able to have that conversation. ... So while there is a parental advisory, I think it is so important that high school students come to see this because they will quickly realize they are not alone. ... Even though it is a bit risqué and controversial, I want to tell parents it’s OK to let these students come; it’s OK to open the door to these conversations. I think we will all be better for it.”

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ABOVE: Cast members rehearse for “Spring Awakening.” Pictured in back, from left, are Jason Cope, Jake Zapor and Nathan Neidlinger, and in front, Leo Carmody and Tait Martinez. **ON THE COVER:** Lauren Kunkel, left, plays Wendla and Jake Zapor plays Melchior in “Spring Awakening.”

IF YOU GO

What: Lake Michigan College Performing Arts Department presents “Spring Awakening”

When: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Hanson Theatre, Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15, \$10 for students and seniors, free for students with a current LMC ID card

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Symposium: A free panel discussion will be held at 5:30 p.m. after the Sunday performance. Members on the panel include psychologists Larry and Sandy Feldman, Lakeshore High School principal Brad Brunner, Boys & Girls Club/Benton Harbor Teen Center Director Jeffrey Booker, and Mary Jo Schnell, executive director for The OutCenter, a local organization that provides support to the LGBT community and their families.

Advisory: “Spring Awakening” contains explicit content and is not suitable for young children, parental discretion is advised.

se, but we are doing so without giving them ne enough education to protect themselves.”

Because of that message, the adults in this ch theatrical world, the men all played here by his Paul Stortz, including the fathers of Ilse, ve Häschen, Moritz and Melchior, and the ng women all played by Meagan Francis, including the mothers of Wendla, Melchior ; a and Martha, are depicted as inept at best.

“It goes back to this cycle of learned behavior,” Mow says. “If parents aren’t open and vulnerable, how can we expect these kids to be open and vulnerable and not feel al shameful about these feelings? As parents es and teachers, we can make a difference if we rd let down our guard and give every kid a e-chance through connection and dialogue.”

Because of the difficult subject matter, and as the conversations this play is meant to inspire, Mow has organized a free symposium o-following Sunday’s performance. Members he on the panel include psychologists Larry all and Sandy Feldman, Lakeshore High School Ve principal Brad Brunner, Boys & Girls Club h, and Benton Harbor Teen Center Director