HISTORY (of the play): Radical Theatre

In 1891, when Frank Wedekind wrote his first play, *Spring Awakening*, the world was not quite ready for so provocative a work. Revolutionary in both content and structure, *Spring Awakening* would wait fifteen years for its first staged production, and many more years until it would be produced in its entirety.

*Spring Awakening* pushed social taboos in a way no play had done up to that point. For example, no play had touched the subject of erections and ejaculations, especially not the erections and ejaculations of teenage boys. Because of its risqué material, Wedekind had to pay all costs once he was finally able to find a publisher.

In 1906, famed German director Max Reinhardt staged the play in Berlin under the watchful eye of the local censor. Though it was officially banned in 1908, the Prussian Administrative Court, who declared it
“impossible not to recognize the piece as a serious work” (OSBORN), subsequently licensed it in its entirety.

Though the first German-language version of the play was produced in America in 1912, the first production in English wasn’t scheduled until 1917 in New York City. Moments before curtain, the City Commissioner of Licenses, claiming the play was pornographic in nature, announced it could not be performed. Only after an injunction from the Supreme Court of New York overruled the commissioner did the show go on, with renowned anarchist Emma Goldman and famed opera singer Geraldine Farrar both in attendance. It was a good thing they caught that show, because there wasn’t another one, as the play failed after that single performance.

After World War I, censorship lifted and Spring Awakening was freely produced, including a famous production in Berlin in 1929 with Peter Lorre. In 1931, a single performance by the Sunday Theatre Club in England allowed the play to run once without
interruption. But it was still far too radical for its day.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, *Spring Awakening*, like most everything else, saw dark times. Though it was never officially banned (Wedekind was neither Jewish nor Communist), it also wasn’t pro-Nazi, and since the subject matter was considered shocking, most producers didn’t touch it for fear of putting themselves under the magnifying glass. So it was basically left alone. Since the war, however, the play has been produced frequently in Germany.

In 1958, after many forgotten years, *Spring Awakening* was again performed in America. The University of Chicago Theatre performed *Spring Awakening* with a new translation from English critic and playwright Eric Bentley, which he worked on in consultation with Wedekind’s daughter, Kadidja. In 1963, the English Stage Society allowed two Sunday night performances “providing ‘there was no kissing, embracing or caressing’ between the two boys in the vineyard scene, the words ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ were
omitted and without the masturbation game in the reformatory” (OSBORN).

As its subject matter has become less taboo, the play has been produced more frequently in America and abroad. The most recent interest stems from a 2006 Broadway musical based upon the play. While there are many, often critically debated, differences between Wedekind’s original and Broadway’s popular recreation (which includes an original score by Grammy nominee Duncan Sheik), the musical received eleven 2007 Tony Award nominations while winning eight, including Best Musical.

More than a hundred years after its creation, Spring Awakening remains one of the most censored plays of all time, yet it remains relevant and vital, perhaps for the very reasons it was censored in the first place.

**HISTORY (at time of writing): Revolution’s Wake**

The Franco-Prussian War (July, 1870 – May, 1871) was a major conflict between France and Prussia (Prussia was the largest and most influential of the many states that comprise modern-day Germany). The
Prussians’ thorough victory over the French brought about the final unification of the German Empire under King William I and his Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck. It was a marked power shift in mainland Europe from France to Germany.

What followed is called the Gründerzeit, which literally translated means the Founding Epoch (era). Germany went into a speculative boom, where thousands of corporations were founded, cities welled in size, and nationalism over the new empire was abundant. All this was dramatically set against the surging force of the Industrial Revolution, where German technology and innovation was soon leading the way.

Though the aristocracy was still in power, new money was buying old land at an alarming rate, causing the aristocracy to constantly look over its shoulder at the vastly growing middle class. At the same time, the middle class was keeping an ever-watchful eye on the even more rapidly growing working class (all foreshadowed in Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto in 1848).
All the while a sense of German nationalism prevailed as the newly unified Germany became the superpower of mainland Europe. However, as often occurs after a boom, a downswing was inevitable. Economic crises in 1873, the 1880s, and the 1890s led to the rise of a militaristic, pre-fascist, authoritarian state, most notably embodied in the Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch, the civil code of Germany. Developed from 1881 until it became effective on January 1, 1900, the code encapsulated the official party line on how a man was supposed to live within the state, assuring an authoritarian, paternalistic culture.

Periods of social upheaval often cause the arts to flourish, since art, at its best, is a commentary on the times. While much of Europe experienced the same collisions of old and new, great art exploded across the continent.

In literature, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published Thus Spoke Zarathustra, famously and controversially declaring “God is Dead;” Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky published The Brothers Karamazov; Scotsman Robert Louis Stevenson published
Treasure Island and The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. At the same time, writers like Baudelaire, Flaubert and Zola were writing on highly controversial, even taboo, subjects.

Another key development of the age was the beginning of the ideas and practices of psychoanalysis, which were becoming widely recognized throughout the European intellectual scene. Austro-German Kraft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis in 1886 and Austrian Sigmund Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams in 1900, along with British doctor Havelock Ellis’s multi-volume Psychology of Sex released as a serial in between, put talk of sex into the air for the very first time.

Another critical contribution to the Zeitgeist (the ideas prevalent during the period) was the revolutionary writings of Charles Darwin, especially in his 1859 book The Origin of Species. In it, Darwin details the wildly new theory that population evolves from a process of natural selection. The work is controversial to its core, as it undermines the basic religious tenant of creation.
These currents floated about Wedekind at the time, setting the intellectual, artistic, and moral context in which *Spring Awakening* was written. However, the most important factor for how his work would be received (if not written), was what was happening on the stage.

In Germany, the two biggest playwrights of the day were Gerhart Hauptmann and Hermann Sudermann. Hauptmann’s first drama, *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (Before Sunrise, 1889) started the Naturalistic movement, which dramatically portrayed an accurate depiction of the world. Sudermann became a key figure in Germany’s Realist movement with his play, *Die Ehre* (The Honor, 1889). While being related to Naturalism in the sense that the artist dramatizes events as they actually are, Realism deliberately rejects the beautiful or appropriate subjects of the past for the unidealized reality of life, a style popularized throughout Europe by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen with his play *Ghosts* (1881).

Wedekind, feeling that the only true way to reach people was to shock them, wrote plays that departed
from the prevailing styles of the day: Realism and Naturalism. His work fell somewhere between Naturalism and Expressionism, where the artist chooses to express emotional truth rather than actual truth. This is one of the main reasons he hasn’t known the popularity of some of his contemporaries. Still, Wedekind’s innovative and revolutionary style proved highly influential in the theatre of the absurd, the modern dramatic satire, as well as the movement of Expressionism. Wedekind’s work had teeth. It bit and held, and eventually spat blood.

**WEDEKIND: The World’s First Punk?**

Frank Wedekind was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1864. His mother was a singer/actress who had toured her way from Chile to San Francisco where she met Wedekind’s father, a physician and a political radical, who had fled the suppressed political revolts of 1848. Together they moved back to Hanover where they had Frank.

The conservative unification politics of Otto Von Bismarck proved to be too much for Mr. Wedekind’s radicalism, so he moved the family to a castle in
Aargau, Switzerland, in 1872, where Wedekind grew up the second oldest of six children. It was a close, intellectually enlightened family. By the end of his high school years, Wedekind was writing plays, poetry and songs, which he’d play on his guitar.

Of note during this time is that there were a disturbing number of suicides in Aargau, including two boys named Rotner and Ruetschi who shot each other dead in 1880. According to Wedekind’s boyhood friend, Sophie Haemmerli-Marti, Wedekind, having come upon the scene soon after it occurred, “knelt by the bench, dipped his handkerchief in the blood, and wanted to die on the spot” (BENTLEY). Wedekind had to be talked out of suicide by his friend Schibler, after which the two of them decided to take an oath of blood to start their lives anew in memory of their fallen classmates.

Wedekind rallied. He went on to do his university studies in Munich, where he further pursued his interest in the arts. He wrote about theatre, ballet, and literature as a contributor to some local newspapers and journals.
When Wedekind returned home, his father wanted him to study law. Wedekind wanted to pursue writing. The rift eventually turned violent when Wedekind hit his father. He fled for Munich to become a professional writer when he was 19. The famed German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann dramatized the event in his play Das Friedensfest (The Coming of Peace: A Family Catastrophe, 1890), beginning a life-long feud between Wedekind and Hauptmann.

Though he was now free to pursue his writing, he had to support himself. Wedekind began working in advertising. He also worked as a freelance journalist and as the private secretary of an art dealer, which allowed him to travel extensively around Europe.

Wedekind’s father died in 1888, and though they fought, his father left sufficient inheritance for Wedekind to settle in Munich. It was here he found the bohemian district of Schwabing, which would be a great influence upon the playwright, enlightening him to the wonders of the cabaret and the circus, both of which would greatly inform his work. It was at this time in his life that Frank Wedekind wrote Spring Awakening.
As the money from his father ran dry, Wedekind started writing more for hire, working for a satirical journal *Simplicissimus*, founded by Wedekind’s publisher, Albert Langen. The journal was committed to new and controversial works, which, in line with Wedekind’s themes from *Spring Awakening*, criticized the authoritarian school system and the flawed sexual education practices of the day. Other contributors to the journal included Thomas and Heinrich Mann, whom Wedekind befriended, and who would both go on to great fame and prestige in German literature. In 1898, the German King Wilhelm II objected to an article Wedekind had written for the publication about the king’s recent trip to Palestine. Wedekind spent six months in jail for the allegedly treasonous article.

In 1906, Wedekind married Tilly Newes, an actress from his repertory company who played the role of Lulu in his plays *Erdgeist* (*Earth Spirit*, 1895) and *Die Buchse der Pandora* (*Pandora’s Box*, 1903). The couple had two daughters “who would later remember their father treating children with exceptional respect, as if there were no significant difference between
children and adults” (FRANZEN). That same year, the company premiered *Spring Awakening*, directed by the famed director of that time, Max Reinhardt. By this time, Wedekind had become more and more interested in acting, developing his grotesque and exaggerated style from his love of the cabaret and the circus. He was cast in the production, and many later productions, as “The Masked Man.”

Wedekind’s literary canon spans about 30 dramas and pantomimes, 17 prose tales, 21 essays, and almost 150 satirical poems. He received little more than personal recognition for his work until *Erdgeist* became locally popular around 1905, though the play was not published in its uncensored entirety until 1962. Its sequel, *Die Buchse der Pandora* (Pandora’s Box) was produced in 1903 and then banned a year later. Aside from *Spring Awakening*, Wedekind’s other works may be best known for the projects they inspired, such as Alban Berg’s opera, *Lulu*, and G.W. Pabst's film version of *Pandora's Box*.

In 1918, Wedekind died from acute appendicitis. A virtual riot occurred at his funeral, which was
attended by some of the day’s leading literary luminaries as well as a host of Germany’s young bohemians who had found a leader in Frank Wedekind. Thomas and Heinrich Mann were both there, as well as Bertolt Brecht, whom had been duly influenced by Wedekind, embodying Wedekind as the central figure in his first drama, Baal (1918). According to Ward B. Lewis, “Wedekind’s work manifested those concepts of anti-Aristotelian theater, open form, and alienation which further developed in Brecht’s theater, thereby influencing the drama of the entire twentieth century.”

**THEMES: Rebel Theatre**

In *Spring Awakening*, many themes are expressed, but those of religion, schooling, parenting, and sex seem to be at the forefront of Wedekind’s intentions. In each of these themes, Wedekind attacks the conventional attitude of the times.

Frank Wedekind was himself a radical atheist, so it is no accident that his most enlightened character in *Spring Awakening*, Melchior, is also a professed atheist. Also important in how we view Wedekind’s take on religion is his portrayal of Pastor Kahlbauch, the
town’s wholly unsympathetic religious leader. During the funeral scene, the Pastor does absolutely nothing to address the social issues that would cause a boy to take his own life, nor does he do anything to help ease the suffering of the parents or the community. Instead, he chooses to assure all God’s witnesses that a crime such as suicide will be rewarded by “death everlasting.”

The parents in *Spring Awakening* seem to also fail miserably. From the physical abuse by Martha’s parents to Melchior’s parents ultimately denying their parental obligations, there is no proper role model presented. Perhaps Wedekind was responding to the paternalistic culture of the times, which, because of the civil code, the *Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*, put the father squarely at the head of the household. Perhaps by showing the dangers of a society that puts more faith into God and the State than into parents and their capability to choose what’s best for their children, Wedekind is prodding both children and parents to question authority. Or perhaps he just wanted to show how ignorance and its promulgation could only lead to ruin.
One of Wedekind’s most scathing commentaries is reserved for the theme of how horribly the school system fails to meet the needs of the children. In most productions, the most overtly absurd or scary characters in the play are the schoolmasters. The “My Way or the Highway” attitude is universal. And the “My Way” in question is highly questionable. It provides no latitude for creativity, no room for originality, no room for genius.

In a letter to a critic in 1891, the year the play was finished, Wedekind claimed his intention in writing Spring Awakening was to “depict poetically the phenomenon of puberty in order to facilitate more humane views among parents and educators” (LEWIS). Obviously, Wedekind is trying to warn parents and educators of the dangers of letting their children be raised in ignorance. It is this very ignorance that leads to the most tragic event of the play. In her book The Ironic Dissident, Ward B. Lewis explains that Wedekind “treats the theme of puberty as it awakens to Life without adult guidance; dark, compulsive aspects cause entrapment and horror since the bourgeois world
treats the problem as nonexistent or immoral; nature, sexuality, and Life are left to the young to struggle with in torment.” And tormented they are.

*Spring Awakening* attacks the paternalistic, conventional attitudes of the time as well as the oppressive authority of the church and state. Wedekind presents this world as a warning about the dubious outcomes of a society where parents, educators, and religious figures ultimately fail the needs of their children. However, against this backdrop, Wedekind ultimately shows us the possibility of a better world; a world where a child’s spring awakening can rise up to the sunshine of a long, hot summer.

**WHY RELEVANT: Too Many Children Left Behind**

*(a director’s opinion)*

Not long ago, director Anne D’Zmura, the mother of a third grader in a Long Beach public school, read an article in a local newspaper asking an Orange County principal how her school was able to raise its standardized test scores. The principal proudly remarked that ‘getting rid of the fluff’ was the
decisive factor, implying that anything not on the tests was just that: fluff.

With the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act, our country is doing precisely the opposite of what the bill’s title advertises. On its website, Americans for the Arts states “A report from the Center for Education Policy concludes that since the enactment of NCLB, 22 percent of school districts surveyed have reduced instructional time for art and music.” We are leaving behind the children who don’t make the testing numbers. As a result, the public schools are forced to teach primarily to the test, by rote, with test-specific curriculum.

The current regime is leaving its mark, not only on our education system, but also in every possible aspect of our daily lives. The conservative coalition is entrenched in everyday politics, the separation of church and state is becoming ever more fuzzy, and all the while, our civil liberties and personal freedoms are becoming more and more the business of the government.
Frank Wedekind would have loved this country. He would have loved to have been able to stand up on a soap box and shout at the top of his lungs against the disturbing developments of the day. He would have loved to have had our freedom. But he also would have seen how valuable our freedom is, and how those in power are drastically attempting to suppress those freedoms.

Questioning institutions and authority is always relevant. Without asking important questions, the only answers will be decided by those who think they know best. It’s always been difficult to know what’s best—that’s the real trick—but this country has a history of allowing us to decide what’s best for ourselves. When you finish seeing *Spring Awakening*, see if you don’t ask yourself some very important questions, and be very thankful you still have the freedom to answer those questions for yourself.

**DESIGN: Innovation From Inspiration**

The design for the University Players production of *Spring Awakening* specifically tries to create a difference between the many bipolarizing forces and dynamics at work in the play—bipolarities like the
oppressive, definite, sterile nature of the adults versus the curious, limitless, passionate nature of the children.

The set design is meant to show the confined world of the adults with boxed-in, caged-in effects while the children use the set pieces to break the oppressive structure of the adult world. That confined world below is then polarized against the ethereal air of another, utopian world just out of reach.

In the costume design, Nancy Wei has taken her own emotional response to themes of the play and applied them to her designs. The costumes magnify the rigidity and absurdity of the bombastic schoolmasters and priests, the pained falling-in-line of the adults, and, in the children, the glimmer of hope that they may some day display their true colors.

Through her lighting design, Azra King-Abadi wanted to express “the opposition between the oppression enforced by the adults and the children’s longing for freedom by contrasting stark, cold and isolated areas with brightness, color and enveloping warmth.”
Composer David Jacques started with simple, melodious children’s songs to create motifs throughout the play that would represent the children. In contrast to the free-flowing, acoustical fluidity of the children’s motifs, Jacques employed a more structured, rhythmic, metallic sound to convey the oppressive nature of the authority figures of the play.

Director D’Zmura hopes that synthesizing these design features will illustrate the many forces and dynamics at play against each other in the show: the lyrical vs. the steady; the natural vs. the rigid; lust vs. sterility; limitless vs. definite. Such bi-polarities are the crux of Spring Awakening’s subject matter.
BASIC PROMPTS:

1) In *Spring Awakening*, one of the major bipolarities is free will versus determinism. If free will is defined as being able to exercise control over one’s own actions and decisions, and determinism is the belief that every event, decision, and action is fatally predetermined, how does the play give insight into how our life is ordered? How does it give insight into how our life should be ordered?

2) The Masked Man is one of the most innovative characters in all of theatre. Why? Who do you think the Masked Man really is? Who else could he be? Because Wedekind himself often played him, many have suggested the Masked Man is Wedekind’s own sensibility; since Wedekind alludes to Goethe frequently, many have suggested the Masked Man is Goethe himself, while others have suggested the Masked Man is Life itself. Given those possibilities (or any other possibilities you may support and defend) what does Melchior’s choice to go off with the Masked Man symbolize?
3) To what does the title of the play relate? How is the title appropriate in conveying the themes of the play?

**ADVANCED PROMPTS:**

1) *Spring Awakening* has been described variously as tragic, comic, and tragicomic. How would you describe this production?

2) How is the play’s structure as revolutionary as the subject matter?

3) Does Melchior actually rape Wendla? Does Melchior think so? Does Wendla? How much does the answer affect how we ultimately view Melchior? How much does the answer change the reading of the play?

4) Given the nature of the play’s last line, with what lesson are we finally left?

**GLOSSARY:**

**Absinthe:** A highly alcoholic liqueur made from wormwood and herbs, now widely banned due to its toxicity.

**Agony in the Garden:** The time Jesus spent in the garden of Gethsemane, between the Last Supper and his arrest.
by Roman soldiers who were led to him by Judas Iscariot.

**Alexander the Great**: The king of Macedonia from 356 to 323 B.C.E. One of the greatest generals in history, he conquered the Persian Empire, further spreading Greek ideas and customs in western Asia and Egypt.

**Anemia**: A condition of having too little iron in the blood, resulting in pallor or weariness.

**Charybdis**: A treacherous whirlpool in ancient Rome, opposite the cave of Scylla, a sailor-eating female sea monster. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus must sail his ship between Scylla and Charybdis; though several of his men don’t live to tell the tale, Odysseus and the boat make it through.

**Confirmation**: A rite of passage where one is admitted to full communion with the church.

**Desdemona**: A character in William Shakespeare’s *Othello*. She is Othello’s wife whom he murders because he suspects her infidelity.

**Diphtheria**: An acute infectious disease thought to be brought on by prolonged exposure to cold, and which,
during the times of *Spring Awakening*, was generally fatal.

**The Donkey and His Shadow:** (Or The Ass and His Shadow)

An Aesop fable where a man rents a donkey on a very hot day and quarrels with the owner as to who has the right to sit in the Ass’s shadow. The fable: In quarreling about the shadow we often lose the substance.

**Dropsy:** Also called Edema, a condition whose symptoms include swollen limbs and which, in the times of the play, usually resulted in death.

**Dryad:** Female tree spirit in Greek mythology.

**Expressionism:** An artistic movement whose adherents felt art should represent feelings and moods rather than objective reality.

**Faust:** A legend pervasive throughout Europe about a man who sells his soul to the devil. First popularized by Christopher Marlowe in England, in *Spring Awakening*, the reference is to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s two-part version written in 1806 and 1832, the year of the author’s death. The play focuses on the search for the meaning of existence and the mysteries of the soul. It
remains one of the most influential works of German literature.

Homer: The most famous of the ancient Greek epic poets. He is credited with writing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The Gretchen Story: Also from Goethe’s *Faust*, after Faust makes his deal with Mephistopheles (one of Satan’s archangels), he is transformed into a young man and meets Gretchen. With some scheming by Mephistopheles, Faust and Gretchen unite. After some serious relationship issues, Gretchen accidentally kills her mother with a sleeping potion that Faust has given her. Gretchen becomes pregnant with Faust’s baby but after Faust and Mephistopheles kill her enraged brother in a sword fight, Gretchen goes insane and drowns her newborn child.

Louis XV: Ruled as King of France from 1715 until his death in 1774. He brought France into the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) and the Seven Years' War (1756–63), where France lost most of its colonial possessions to Britain, causing France's moral and political authority to decline greatly. He died hated by his subjects.
Maypole: A tall pole traditionally erected for May Day celebrations, usually decorated with flowers and ribbons.

Nebuchadnezzar: (c 630-562 B.C.E.) Ruled Babylon in the Chaldean Dynasty. He is famous for constructing the Hanging Gardens of Babylon but his destruction of temples in Jerusalem and the conquest of Judah made him infamous in the Bible.

Parallelepipedon: A six-sided prism where each base is a parallelogram.

Pariah: An outcast.

Pedagogue: An educator or teacher who teaches in a particularly dogmatic way.

Plato: One of the three great ancient Greek philosophers. He followed Socrates and preceded Aristotle.

Polyphemus: A Cyclops who throws Odysseus and his men into a cave. Odysseus gets him drunk and blinds him while he is sleeping.

Priapus: A minor Greek god of fertility, livestock and male genitalia.
Queen of the Fairies: Titania, the wife of Oberon in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. A marital quarrel between them sets in motion the confusion of the other characters in the play.

**Putrefaction**: Decomposition or corrosion of organic matter, typically a body.

**Sassanid**: The name of the second Persian Empire (226–651) which encompassed all of today's Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Afghanistan, eastern parts of Turkey, and parts of India, Syria, Pakistan, Central Asia and Arabia.

**Scapegoat**: Somebody who is made to take the blame for others.

**Schiller**: Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) was a great German writer/philosopher who befriended Goethe in his later years. Beethoven set Schiller’s *Ode an die Freude* (Ode to Joy) to music for his final movement of the famous 9th Symphony.

**Sermon on the Mount**: A famed sermon delivered by Jesus, which included the Lord’s Prayer and many of the basic tenants of Christianity.
Socrates: One of the most original and influential figures in ancient Greek philosophy and in the history of Western thought.

*Summa cum laude*: A Latin phrase meaning "with highest honors" usually awarded for achieving the highest academic honors upon graduation.

*The Grand Inquisitor*: A story told in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880) that tells of Christ coming back to earth in 16th-century Spain and being taken before the Inquisition.

*Virgil*: A famed classical Roman epic poet.

*Wetzlar*: A town in the German state of Hesse.

*Woodruff*: An herbaceous perennial plant used in Germany to flavor May wine (called *Maiwein* or *Maibowl* in German), and beer (*Berliner Weisse*).

*Walpurgisnacht*: A pagan festival celebrating the end of winter. In the play, it is a reference to a scene from Goethe's *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles (one of Satan’s archangels) takes Faust to a witch's Sabbath on *Walpurgisnacht* to distract him. He nearly succeeds as Faust gets caught up in the sensual chaos of the festivities. Fortunately, he is reminded of Gretchen by
an apparition in her likeness. Mephistopheles then tempts Faust once more by taking him to see "Oberon and Titania's Golden Wedding," an allegorical play within the play.

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