Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Deaf West's Rousing Spring Awakening

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 3rd, 2015

Arousing all senses.

This may be the choice three-word assessment of the stunning Deaf West Theatre production of *Spring Awakening* that made the leap from a long run at Inner City Arts to the larger Wallis Annenberg Center in Beverly Hills.

Whatever the terms of this arrangement, one can only celebrate the fact that it happened and that, in so doing, it imaginatively took advantage of the height and breadth of the Bram Goldsmith space at The Wallis. Simultaneously, one can only weep at the brevity of its presence there. Even with the just-announced extension, the show will close Sunday, June 14.

First, some background. Theatre of the deaf is not a new phenomenon, but it is neither a common nor a particularly ancient one. The first American company to successfully combine deaf and hearing actors on stage was The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), established in New England in the late 1960s by David Hays, a Broadway set and lighting designer and avid sailor.

Hays had never imagined he would be doing that sort of thing at all. Yet after the success of the Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker*, Anne Bancroft and Arthur Penn, who had seen from the inside out the effect of the Helen Keller story on general audiences, enticed Hays to get involved in an experiment to do just that. Once inducted, Hays became so enthralled with the concept that he described theatre of the deaf (correctly) as "a major dimensional form of poetry." He went on to lead the NTD for the next 30 years.

Back to the present. Ed Waterstreet, the now-retired founder of Deaf West Theatre (DWT), was a star member of the NTD company who proved to be a worthy steward of its traditions when he moved to Southern California and started his own deaf/hearing local company almost a quarter century ago. The hybrid DWT productions that followed — *Big River* and *Pippin* — were major achievements, the former making it to Broadway, while the current *Spring Awakening*, beautifully directed and choreographed by Michael Arden and Spencer Liff, respectively, not only upholds those traditions, but has infused them with their most exuberant and satisfying expression to date.

This production of Frank Wedekind's 1891 expressionistic play about teen-age angst and the calamitous consequences of social and sexual repression (a groundbreaker in its day) is based on the Best Musical Tony Award-winning Broadway version, with Duncan Sheik's rousing score and book and lyrics by Steven Sater. Its wild mix of lyricism and alternative rock, of period and modern, of communication in American Sign Language shadowed by sung and spoken English, is

a constant swirl of movement gesture and language that Hays intuitively had called “possibly the only new theatre form of the second half of the 20th century.”

A scene from Deaf West Theatre’s *Spring Awakening* at The Wallis.

The DWT production at the Wallis confirms this perspective. It is difficult to call this production a play or a musical in the narrow conventional sense. This *Spring* awakens a fluidity that is much more balletic, with the ceaseless on stage movement of people, projections, sets and lights, animated by three stationary musicians and a collection of ambulatory ones, plus a piano-player whose piano does the wandering for him. It’s everybody doing everything all at once.

The story’s told by this combustion of movement, sung and spoken lyricism, roles often played by two people, one speaking the other not, deaf actors shadowed by a singer who speaks and sings for him or her, sometimes while also playing an instrument. (Ironically, the show’s most anguishing moment is performed in excruciating silence by two deaf actors, playing father and son, who struggle vainly to communicate at all…)

Period and plot do not deviate much from the original. We’re still looking at a group of teen-agers in the late 1800s coping with their hormones and their elders in a society whose denatured strictures view sex as secret, furtive and dirty. Yet its reverberations speak loudly to the present because, for all of our vaunted emancipation, repressive orthodoxies continue to exist.

l-r, Sandra Mae Frank as Wendla and Austin McKenzie as Melchior in Deaf West Theatre’s *Spring Awakening.*

The central Romeo-and-Juliet affair of Melchior (Austin McKenzie, who sings and speaks) and Wendla (Sandra Mae Frank, tenderly shadowed by Katie Boeck, who speaks and sings for her while also playing guitar) is one of innocence betrayed. Melchior is bright and rebellious enough to understand more than his elders will allow, but when he and Wendla are trapped and burned by society’s ignorant judgments, both are destroyed.

In the case of Moritz (a poignant Daniel N. Durant), a tortured young man tormented by sexual fantasies and a debilitating fear of failure, he meets with the kind of shaming and disapproval that propel him to a tragic end. Homosexuality is touched on more lightly, and with some levity, but not so the consequences of parental child abuse. Its horrors terrorize the young Martha (Treshelle Edmond) and thrust her older sister, Ilse (a terrific speaking and singing Krysta Rodriguez), into a marginal life of sex and alcohol.

Ben Stanton’s ubiquitous lighting, and the calibrated sound design of Brian Hsieh and John Nobori, conspire with designer Dane Laffrey’s movable set and projections to engage as equal partners with the performers in telling the story. Structures and images flow and shift, integrating people, music, animate and inanimate objects in important ways that contribute to what can only be described as an *über*ensemble.

If there are objections to be raised, they have to do with a second half that overstays its welcome by delivering approximately four false endings. A sequence of culminative scenes that keep piling up even misled the opening night audience into assuming that each one signaled the show’s final apotheosis, only to take a step back and continue.

No matter how well executed, these scenes need to play out swiftly and not delay the outcome at a time when things have become pretty predictable. Any future life this production may have should seriously consider an adjustment. It's too fresh, exciting and exquisite a show to be marred by something as uncomplicated as misplaced indulgence.

Finale.

Top image: A dramatic moment in Deaf West Theatre's Spring Awakening *at The Wallis.*

All photos by Kevin Parry.

WHAT: ***Spring Awakening***

WHERE: Bram Goldsmith Theater, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 9390 N. Santa Monica Blvd, Beverly Hills, CA 90210

WHEN: Today-Friday, 8 pm; Saturday, 3 & 8 pm; Sunday, 2 & 7pm. Also June 11 & 12, 8pm; June 13, 3 & 8pm; June 14, 2 & 7pm. Ends June 14. Open-captioned matinee, June 6.

HOW: Tickets $29 – $99, available in person at The Wallis Center Ticket Services, by phone, 310-746-4000 or online at www.thewallis.org.

NOTE: Due to adult themes, language, sexual content and brief nudity, this show is suggested for mature high schoolers and up. Special seating will be available for deaf or hard of hearing patrons.

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