

Theater: Glorious "Spring," Sugar "Daddy," Stingy Stein

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SPRING AWAKENING (2015) ***1/2 out of ****

DADDY LONG LEGS ** out of ****

REREAD ANOTHER ** out of ****

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BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE

When Deaf Theatre West came to Broadway in 2003 with its acclaimed revival of Big River, I was bummed not to get a chance to see it. Like many, I was intrigued. A deaf theater company. Doing a musical? What did that even mean, I and perhaps the clueless like me in the hearing community wondered. It sounded fascinating, to say the least. An interesting experiment. I was sorry to miss it.

Now having seen their revival of Spring Awakening on Broadway, I know exactly what I missed back in 2003: great theater. Like an all-male As You Like It or an all-female Julius Caesar, like an all-Asian Death of a Salesman or any other such approach to the canon, these unified takes on casting or performing can offer insights both large and small, inspire staging and reveal meaning quite unexpected and refreshing. Done as a stunt, none of these approaches mean a thing. Done with purpose and artistry and a desire to find connections and inspire performances, they are revitalizing.

That's the case here, with the doubling up of key characters underlining their isolation and inability to communicate, with signing becoming as intimate and moving as a whisper, with silence the most powerful moment in a musical filled with great numbers.

Spring Awakening left Broadway just six years ago. And its original cast -- Jonathan Groff, John Gallagher Jr. and Lea Michele -- left huge shoes to fill. But it's a delight to see the story has lost none of its impact, the score and songs none of their dusky, moody impact.

Teenagers in the late 1800s of Germany feel unduly repressed. Like teenagers everywhere, they question everything and want to know everything...now! Melchior (a handsome Austin P. McKenzie) is a budding thinker who refuses to attend church and tries to console his sex-obsessed friend Moritz (a convincingly troubled Daniel N. Durant) with the facts of life. Wendla (a fresh-faced and appealing Sandra Mae Frank) simply wants to know where babies come from, something her mother (Camryn Manheim) is incapable of explaining. Hanschen (Andy Mientus, so good in the original cast of the new Les Miz) just wants to sleep with anything that moves. The school they attend -- mirroring the times -- insists all deaf students learn to speak instead of sign and punishes those who won't or simply don't gain fluency as failures. Hearing a teacher mock a student's attempts to verbalize Latin is haunting. Their parents are dour and disapproving and demanding, when not downright abusive. It won't end well.

Spring Awakening is a signal moment in musical theater. This is the show that made rock n roll truly belong on Broadway -- not as a jukebox musical or as nostalgia or for specific shows drawn from rock albums but as a specific voice and style that earned a permanent place on the stage alongside country and folk and blues and Tin Pan Alley. It's never left since. Spring Awakening returns just as the show's Duncan Sheik returns with

American Psycho in the spring. It should give him encouragement to see how vibrant and moving this breakthrough remains.

Director Michael Arden honors the original while putting his own touches on it in ways large and small, from the intertwined bodies of students that form a tree to the coup de théâtre at the end which makes use of the show's gunmetal grey look throughout for a final breathtaking glimpse of a brighter future during the closer "The Song Of Purple Summer." He proves himself a director of the first order. The work of choreographer Spencer Liff and the rest of the technical team is similarly inspired.

The signing throughout is just lovely and poetic, often spreading from the person speaking to the cast as a whole, becoming as important visually as the movement or the set or the lighting.

The cast as a whole is sexy and talented, from the moment they come onstage in their underwear to dress in front of us before the beginning right to the finale where they strip back down again, emphasizing the innocent beauty of youth that has nothing to be ashamed of, whatever parents or society might say. (No wonder teenagers love this show.)

Artistically, the production is unified and strong from start to finish. Its weakness mainly comes in some vocals, normally a fatal flaw in a musical but not here. McKenzie is an appealing lead and a deeply sympathetic presence throughout. I worried he didn't have the power to put across the climactic "Totally Fucked" but in fact McKenzie came through in stellar fashion. While Durant has the turmoil of Moritz down pat, Alex Boniello couldn't match him as the Voice Of Moritz (and fell way short of Tony winner John Gallagher Jr. who blew the roof off with these same songs). Similarly, Kathryn Gallagher's bluesy mama take on the Voice Of Martha failed to impress, though in this case it felt of a piece with the unsatisfying work of Treshelle Edmond. (To be fair, the role is brief and not terribly interesting, though somehow Lilli Cooper made something of it in the original.) The great Marlee Matlin simply has little to work with in several one-note adult roles.

Patrick Page and Manheim were able to make more of their various roles, thanks to the many opportunities they had to give voice to others as well. And how did this work, with one actor performing a character and another actor sometimes giving them voice in line reading or song? In general, one simply watched the performer who embodied the character, while the voice or the singing did its work. Sometimes lines appeared on screens or chalkboards, sometimes they were spoken and signed, sometimes just signed but always the visual impact was clear and the doubling or tripling of a line was clarifying and powerful, never confusing.

Both Mae Frank as Wendla and Katie Boeck worked in synergy to create an angelic, sweet but troubled Wendla, the girl who felt herself confusedly aroused by the idea of punishment. The devilishly sexy Mientus and the innocent (?) Joshua Castille had great fun in the seduction scene "The Word Of Your Body." And the winning McKenzie (an excellent actor) made you believe Melchior would rise above this brutal start to demand a better world.

And all of this discussion of individual performances underplays the overall impact of a show that is truly conceived and performed as a unified whole, with the cast moving in concert and reinforcing dramatic scenes in powerful ways. Arden and the design team work together seamlessly, building the story element by element, overpowering the melodrama inherent in the original play with sophisticated verve, creating a second act that builds on the first right up to a finale that really is a triumph. It was like seeing Spring Awakening for the first time. Or should I say, like hearing it in a new way.

DADDY LONG LEGS ** out of ****
DAVENPORT THEATRE

Few remember Jean Webster's epistolary novel Daddy Long Legs. It features a spunky, winning orphan a la Anne Of Green Gables and so many other tales, but somehow hasn't retained its hold on readers. A pity, since

the book is a charmer. Still, it's endured long enough to be made into a film at least four times (including Mary Pickford, Janet Gaynor, Leslie Caron and even Shirley Temple as our heroine) and presumably adapted for the stage just as often.

Those coming to this two-hander musical fresh will find it innocuously pleasant if somehow unsatisfying when all is said and done. Those who have read the book will be more confused, wondering how the essentially bright and witty tale became so quiet and rather mournful. That shouldn't dim the pleasure of two solid performers doing their best, namely Megan McGinnis as the orphan Jerusha and Paul Alexander Nolan as her benefactor and eventual love Jervis.

In the show, Jerusha is "The Oldest Orphan In The John Grier Home," as McGinnis charmingly sings in the opening number. She's 18 and quite clever, industriously helping at the dour but competent orphanage where she must depend on charity for housing or brave the cold streets alone. What more can she hope for? Quite a bit, since Jerusha now has great expectations: one of the home's patrons has decided to send her to college. Jerusha will go to school and have everything she needs paid for (including a king's ransom of \$35 a month allowance -- in 1909, mind you -- so she can "fit in"). In return, she will never know her patron's name but must write to him as "John Smith" once a month with a report on her progress.

Soon Jerusha is off at school, making friends and delighting in the opportunity to learn (and buy pretty dresses; she's not a saint, after all). She assumes her patron is quite old and grey-haired (if he's not bald, that is) and has the idea he is very tall. So she dubs him "Daddy Long Legs" and writes him far more than once a month. In fact, her patron is the youngish and handsome Jervis Pendleton, the eccentric uncle of one of her schoolmates. Despite his better judgment, Jervis is charmed by her letters. Soon he is re-reading the books Jerusha is reading, visiting her with the pretext of checking on his niece and of course falling hopelessly in love. Jerusha quite likes this Jervis, though he is far from the only young man paying her attention. Yet her sad background worries her.

Could any man of standing approve of an orphan? And Jervis worries, will Jerusha forgive his deception? Can he get her to love him as Jervis before discovering Jervis is her patron and then perhaps, horribly, feeling obliged to marry him? Well, really, have you never read *Anne Of Green Gables* or *Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm* and the like? The pleasure is in getting to know the characters, after all, not the suspense of their presumably happy fates.

Daddy Long Legs has been turned into a movie at least four times, including the godawful musical version starring Fred Astaire and Leslie Caron. That's a little surprising since it's an epistolary novel and almost all the letters are written by Jerusha to her unknown patron. It is, essentially, a monologue. The charm comes in falling in love with this intelligent young woman and slowly imagining her patron is falling in love with her as well. The modest suspense comes in wondering if the handsome young Jervis and her benefactor are one and the same.

This show lacks that suspense of course: we know Jervis is her patron from the start. So here the suspense must come in getting to know him as well, along with his dilemma about when to reveal this double identity. Notably, the songs for Jerusha often pull from lines in the book and feel more specific and alive. The songs for Jervis must be created from whole cloth; time and again the music and lyrics of Paul Gordon fall short. Whether because of clunky lines or confused references to the Camelot tale of the Lady In the Lake or a never fleshed-out backstory of a broken heart, the songs and story of Jervis remain unsatisfying.

The problems reach their peak with his big number "Charity." Suddenly Jervis is denouncing charity as corrosive, as building up a wall between the giver and the receiver, a wall that can never be scaled. Huh? This is bizarre on many levels. The story celebrates charity and in the case of Jervis, the noble act of charity has done exactly the opposite of what he claims: without expecting anything in return, Jervis has found his wall scaled and his heart opened by another. So what exactly is he complaining about? (The book by John Caird with its hints as

to why Jervis is closed-off to feeling is surely at fault here too. We simply don't know why this man is such an emotional recluse, despite a vague reference to him being dumped for a duke many years ago.)

The songs for Jerusha are better, especially when peppy. But the arrangements and chamber feel of the show emphasize the romantic and even mournful undertones of the work. Since we don't know where Jervis has begun, it's hard to follow him on his journey to love. When they finally meet, Jerusha's anger and then abrupt declaration of love feels both obvious and undramatic. We know her well, but after two hours we still don't know him. John Caird has provided a showcase for two actors, not a satisfying work.

And that takes care of the show they made. What remains are many confused questions about why they made this show out of this book. First and foremost, there is the overall tone. The novel is a delight to read. Webster's heroine is funny and smart and self-aware. But you certainly wouldn't know that watching this. Humor is modestly present but more often the tone is dramatic and serious rather than exciting and fun. Jerusha is a firecracker and that's clear from the start of the novel. Instead of "John Smith" as requested, she calls her patron "Daddy Long Legs." She plays with the form of a letter to reflect her many studies. (Something the show attempts poorly.) The focus is always on learning and how Jerusha discovers a world of possibilities. The real adventure is knowledge, education, trying and succeeding at becoming a writer and discovering oneself. It is not about falling in love and being rescued by a man.

In the novel, when she talks about seeing Hamlet performed for the first time, Jerusha drolly says this Shakespeare fellow really is good, despite her having assumed he was coasting on reputation all this time. It captures both her genuine excitement at seeing a great play for the first time, her self-aware lack of experience (she's seen precious little if any live theater) but without downplaying her innate intelligence, never more exemplified than by her awareness of how much she has yet to learn. This understanding of her meaning is perfectly in sync with the cheeky, witty tone she sets at the start of the book. But in the show, the lines are split up between Jerusha and Jervis and played straight; we're allowed some condescending pleasure at her naive appreciation of the Bard, a la Educating Rita.

It typifies the show's confused attitude towards Jerusha. Yes, the novel will end with a conventional happy ending of marriage. But Jerusha is hardly conventional: she touts education for women, argues for getting the vote and expresses a rather shocking disregard for organized religion if not downright atheistic thoughts (in 1909!). So why when she displays her first new dress do we see a sparkly virginal white one that looks for all the world like a wedding gown, as if her only dream was to be a bride? Being a bride is quite the last thing on her mind. She wants to be a writer and a reformer and a citizen, thank you very much. The novel describes Jerusha first buying SIX new dresses -- she describes them all and none of them are white. Yes, white is an appropriate color for a woman her age when stepping out, but seeing it sends entirely the wrong signal.

Similarly, the production design sets all the action in Jervis's world since we're nominally in the library where he reads her letters. Fine enough and it's a warm inviting room for any booklover. When Jerusha heads to a farm towards the end of act one, the windows are opened wide and the light streams in to indicate clear country air. Good. But in the second act, those windows are left open throughout. I kept thinking, are we back in the country?

The one unquestionably dated element of the book is that Jerusha often calls her benefactor "Daddy." It's forgivable since she imagines he is in his eighties and never had a father of her own. But since we have modern ears and sense her benefactor and her true love will be one and the same quite soon, it's creepy to readers of today. She also has many other nicknames for him so this dated wording is easily fixed for the show. And yet, bizarrely, they remain adamantly faithful to the book and have Jerusha call him Daddy quite often. (Yes, "Daddy" is easier to fit into songs but that's no excuse.)

And finally, in a perverse reversal, they ignore the book -- and indeed every other adaptation of the novel I'm

aware of -- and call our heroine "Jerusha" from start to finish. Now Jerusha is a horrible name and it was randomly chosen for her at the orphanage, just one sign of many that reform is needed. As soon as she gets the chance, Jerusha dubs herself "Judy." Wouldn't you, given a name like Jerusha? Even in 1909? She announces this name change in the third or fourth letter of the book. It echoes what every reader has been thinking and proves early on that Judy nee Jerusha is an independent, confident, spunky sort thoroughly deserving our admiration. And of course "Judy" works much better in lyrics. Instead we have Jervis singing about "Jerusha" and how much he loves "Jerusha" and adores "Jerusha" and we think, couldn't you give her a nickname please? Jerusha may be the least romantic name around and since Jerusha herself changes it to Judy and every other adaptation has eagerly done the same, it remains unfathomable as to why this show doesn't. "Daddy" is a little icky but "Jerusha" is downright unforgivable. Certainly Jerusha would never approve.

REREAD ANOTHER ** out of **** **THE BRICK IN BROOKLYN**

Having recently seen the Gertrude Stein children's book *The World Is Round* turned into a captivating evening of theater, I was intrigued by Target Margin tackling her rarely performed 1921 puzzler *Reread Another A Play To Be Played Indoors or Out I Wish To Be A School*. A stage filled with detritus from a party long over is the setting. The game cast composed of Clare Barron, Purva Bedi, Ugo Chuckwu (and honorary cast member and sound man Jesse Freedman) give their energetic all, led by director David Herskovits. It's not enough.

If the title alone makes you wary, stay away. If you're willing to give a talented cast your focused attention, you will be rewarded with some potent imagery, some poignant moments where leaves are falling and music is playing and emotion is conjured out of thin air.

But you soon realize the text is stuff and nonsense. Without some structure imposed on it by the director, without discovering some internal rhythm that makes it sing, it remains a disconnected series of bits. Snatches of dialogue, ideas proffered up then batted away, word play that soon becomes work -- it's all here, unfortunately, and nothing more. Still, one respects the attempt, the dedication to following wherever the author leads, especially when it's clear that -- as a dramatic work -- the author has led you astray.

THEATER OF 2015

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Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

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[An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center](#) *** 1/2

[Fish In The Dark](#) *

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[Josephine And I](#) ***

[Posterity](#) * 1/2