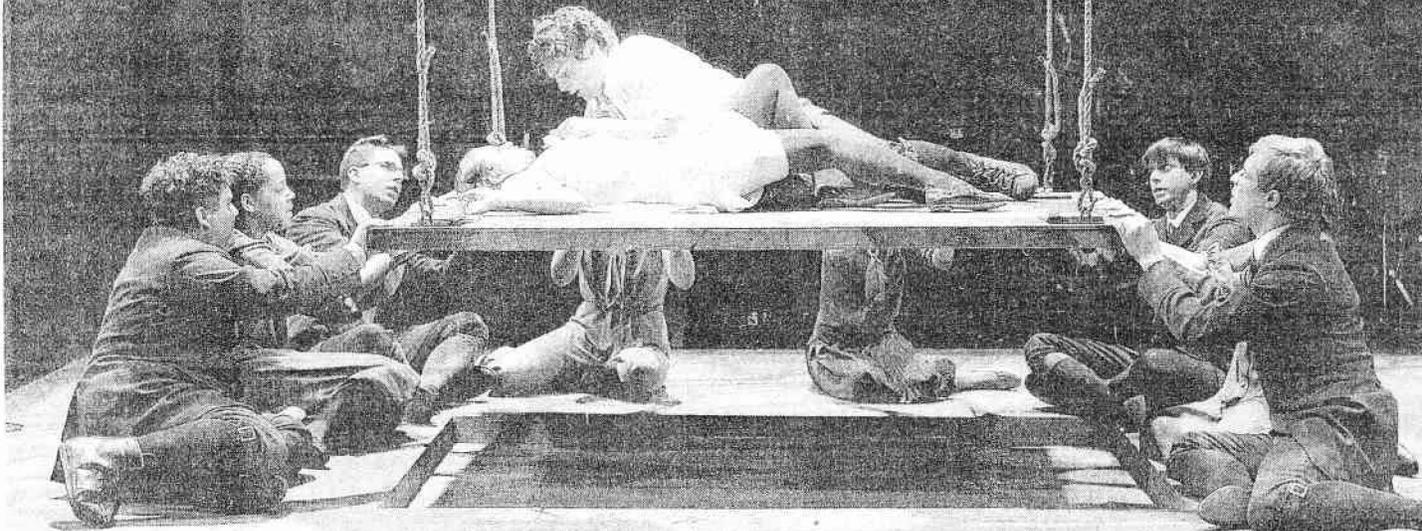


SONIC YOUTH

Will 'Spring Awakening' be the new 'Rent'?

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



IT'S ARDOR Young love is center stage, and down 'n' dirty, in "Spring Awakening."

Steven Sater is running a little late rushing from the Eugene O'Neill Theatre to talk about the musical "Spring Awakening," which opens today after a long journey fraught with delays.

"I just added an intro to the last song, 'The Song of Purple Summer,'" explains Sater, who wrote the show's book and lyrics. But Broadway musicals are like puzzles, and altering one moment can have a cascade effect. "We needed to change the music, and then we needed to change the lyrics. But we got through it."

This final bit of tweaking — a luxury for a show that has been gestating for about seven years — is the favorite moment for director Michael Mayer, the Tony-nominated force behind "Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Side Man" and the recent family film "Flicka," among many other projects.

"It's really fun," says Mayer. "I love this process where the structure is firmly in place, the performances are really solid and I can fine-tune. That's my favorite time. You don't always get to — sometimes you're scrambling to the very last minute to try and make it work. But it works, and now we're getting to tinker."

Broadway is waiting to see if that tinkering pays off. Thanks to ecstatic reviews when it ran Off-Broadway, many are hoping "Spring Awakening" will be the next "Rent" — a sexy musical about the sexual awakening of young people that will bring more real, live young people to the Great White Way.

Based on a scandalous 1891 play, it depicts the stultifying life of teenagers in a provincial German town in the 1890s. Learning Latin, strictly overseen by their parents, wondering what mysteries aren't

being explained to them, the young people explode into rock songs like "The Bitch of Living" and "My Junk" with lusty pleasure. Slyly pulling out a wireless microphone to sing becomes an act of rebellion.

Though the music is sophisticated enough to please any Stephen Sondheim fan, Grammy-winning musician Duncan Sheik was determined — in his first stage effort — not to try and change the subtle, Nick Drake-flavored yearning of his rock albums to fit what some might imagine a Broadway musical should sound like.

"When Steven and I started writing these songs, as an alternative kind of rock person, I purposely didn't want to write songs in a different genre," says Sheik, who has grown from the pop artist behind the hit song "Barely Breathing" to deliver acclaimed albums like "Phantom Moon" (another collaboration with Sater) and his latest, "White Limousine."

"It was definitely our idea that the music of 'Spring Awakening' should be the alternative rock music of the day, and to be strict with ourselves about not letting it turn into something more traditional," says Sheik. "There are many Broadway shows that have been influential on me, like 'Porgy and Bess' and 'Sweeney Todd,' and certainly there have been recent shows that influenced us."

"So it's not like we're not influenced by Broadway, but stylistically, we wanted to make sure the music was going to be really relevant to 20- and 30-year-olds and teenagers."

If the show clicks, it will be a sweet finale to a sometimes torturous journey. It began with a workshop in La Jolla, Calif., in 1999, which led to more workshops and then a turn at the Roundabout in 2001, where plans to take the show to Broadway were derailed by Sept. 11 and financial and artistic demands.

"It was heartbreaking at the time," says Sater, who has written a number of plays, notably "Carbondale Dreams" and, in collaboration with musician Laurie Anderson, a version of "The Tempest." "Then, after three years, times had changed. It was post-9/11 but also post-'Hairspray.' People wanted fun, and we were a pretty dark show."

But that delay proved a blessing, according to Mayer.

"We really wanted to put the show on before," says Mayer. "But it would not have been as good if we hadn't had all this time. Because we never stopped working. All the

time it was on hiatus, we kept adding." And now Sheik, whose album sales of late have not matched his critical acclaim, may very well find his biggest audience yet in a place he never expected to be: Broadway.

"I think I've learned a lot about lyric writing from Steven, because he's so immersed in the world of words," says Sheik. "Steven is so prolific as a lyricist and I'm more prolific with music, so it does allow me to create a lot more than otherwise would have."

"I did some albums that were less commercial and a bit confounding to people. And even my family was saying, 'You're working on a musical?' And looking at me like I'm out of my mind."

He laughs. "Honestly, I have to say it's the most satisfying creative experience of my life so far — sitting in that theater and watching the show. It's really, really amazing to me." ♦

An 1891 play yields a sexy Broadway musical.

FOOTLIGHT SERENADE "Spring" teens John Gallagher Jr., Jonathan Groff and Lea Michele.

