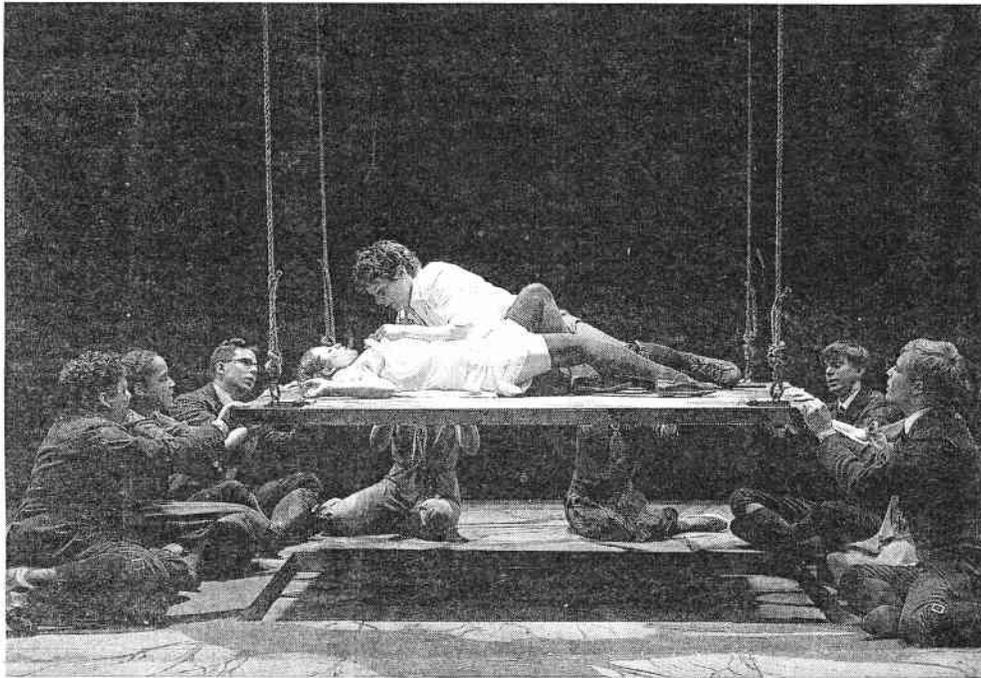
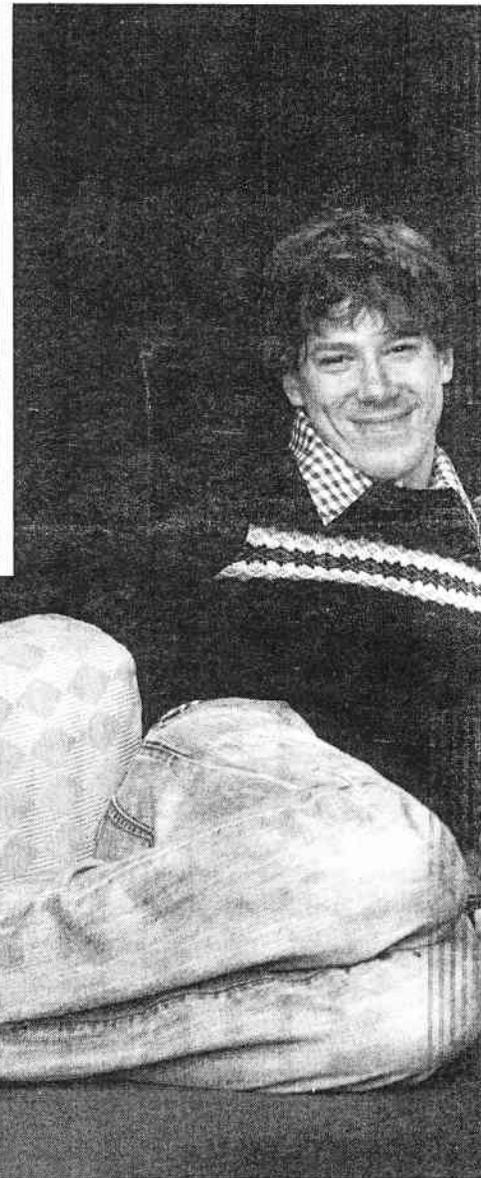


# A 'SPRING' IN



Three young stars



BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Everything's coming up roses for "Spring Awakening," the critically acclaimed Broadway musical that's on its way to being a genuine from-the-ground-up hit. It is that hoped-for Holy Grail: a Broadway show that can cross over to a young, pop/rock audience a la "Rent." And the young, mostly unknown actors who give it life are what theater dreams are made of — talented, energetic, and beautiful.

Liberalized from a German play by Franz Wedekind — written in 1891, first produced in 1906 and controversial for its time — the new "Spring," still set in the 1890s, captures the turbulent voice of teenagers grappling with sex and desire and lust and love in a world where their parents barely mention the words. And it does it with a modern, bold and sexy story married to a sophisticated (but undeniably catchy) score by Steven Sater and Grammy-nominated pop-rockers Duncan Sheik, in his first musical.

John Gallagher Jr. — who plays the magnetic, spiky-haired, sex-obsessed Moritz with a ferocious, punkish energy — knows about rock 'n' roll. His parents are folk musicians, and Gallagher has been playing in bands all his life, including his current group, called Old Springs Pike. Gallagher, 22, admits that he felt so out of place at the auditions, he initially walked out. He wasn't a Broadway baby, even if, as a kid, he had fallen hard for musicals like "West Side Story" and "Rent."

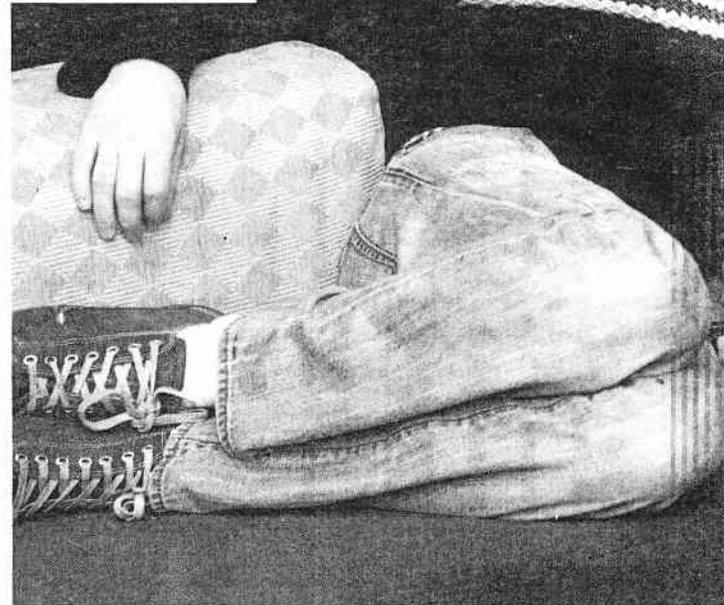
"The other night, Rosie O'Donnell came to the show," says Gallagher, a native of Wilmington, Del. "She came backstage and her first words to me were, 'It's "Rent" times a thousand.'"

"If you'd told me when I was 14 and blaring the 'Rent' soundtrack in my living room and pretending to be the characters that I would be starring in a show that someone would refer to as going leaps and bounds beyond that show that I loved, I would have thought you were crazy."

For the handsome and engaging Jonathan Groff, 21 — who plays the show's heart and soul, the smart, restless Melchior — experiencing the growth of "Spring Awakening" — first its off-Broadway incarnation, then onto the Great White Way and now into a potentially long-running hit — is a thrill, especially after the Lancaster, Pa., native's first Broadway show was the notorious flop "In My Life."

"The audiences just keep getting bigger and bigger, and we keep doing better," says Groff, whose first big break

*'It's "Rent" times a thousand.'*



was playing Rolf in a touring production of "The Sound of Music."

"During previews, we couldn't sell half the house. Now that we've opened and word is getting out and people are coming back again and telling their friends, it's spreading. It's really exciting."

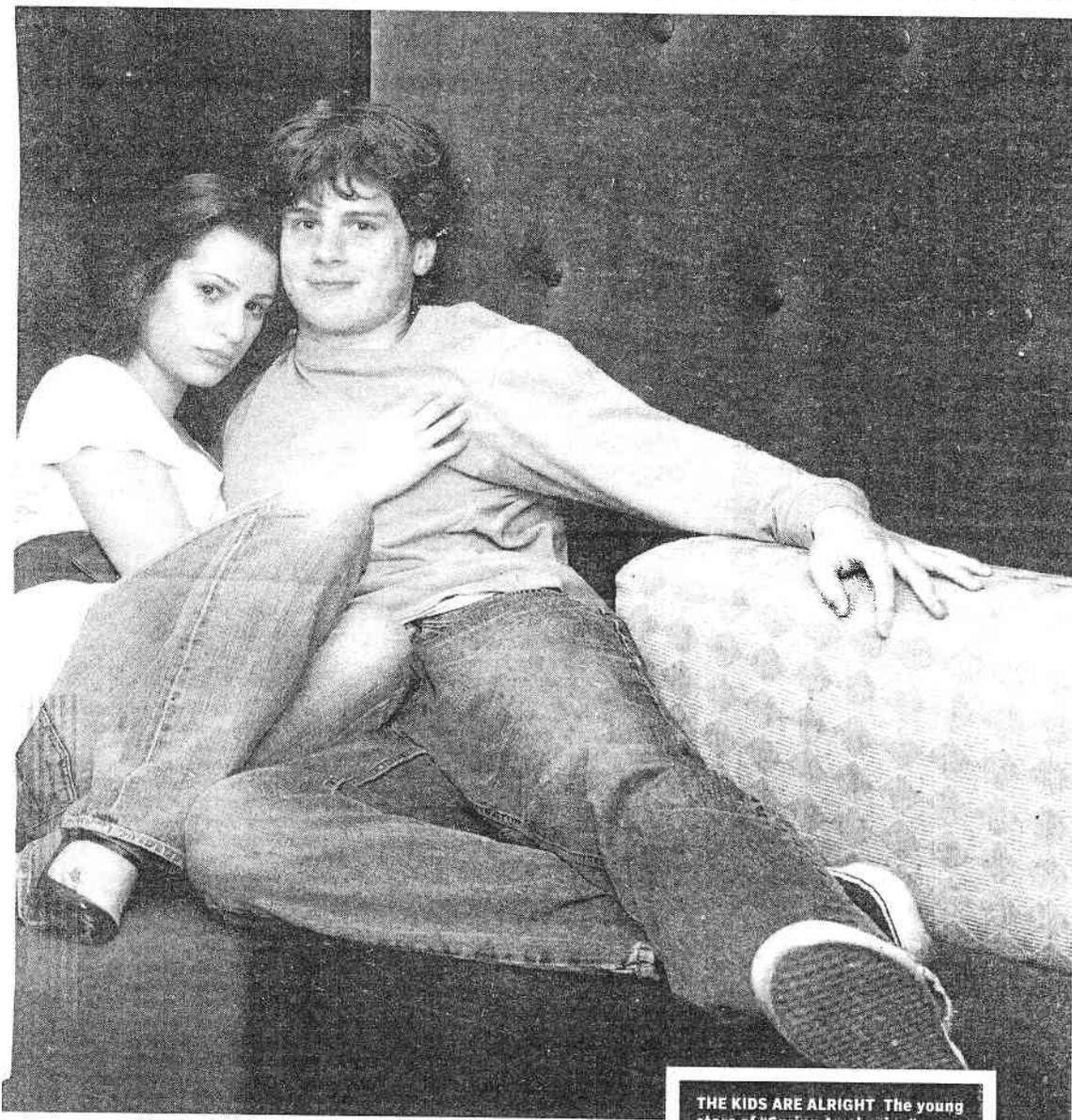
Lea Michele, 20 — born and raised in Tenafly, N.J. — plays the female lead, Wendla, who is seemingly sweet but with dark sexual urges that stun even Melchior. She says nothing prepared her for "Spring Awakening's" rocky journey.

"When we came to Broadway, it was right around the time that 'The Times They Are a-Changin'' was closing, and 'High Fidelity' wasn't doing so well," she says (both shows have since gone dark). "I remember Lauren Pritchard [who plays Ilse, "Spring's" rebellious loner] came up to me, wide-eyed and dead serious, saying to me, 'What if we close? What if this doesn't work out?'"

"I looked at her and didn't know what to say. This is my fourth Broadway show [after "Ragtime" and the recent reviv-

# THEIR STEP

and their musical hit are 'Awakening' Broadway



DAVID HANDBSCHUH/DAILY NEWS

**THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT** The young stars of "Spring Awakening" (above, from left: John Gallagher Jr., Lea Michele and Jonathan Groff) relax before a show. Top left, Groff and Michele get the hang of acting intimate onstage.

al of "Fiddler on the Roof"), and I'm supposed to know what to do — and I didn't. Then I sat in the audience and we were lighting and Lauren got on the stage and she sang 'Blue Wind,' her duet with John Gallagher. And it was so beautiful — that was the first time I cried during this whole experience. I just started crying!

"I looked at her afterward and said, 'If every night you do what you just did, we'll be fine.' That's really how I felt."

As word of mouth spreads — and the

show becomes a must-see for tourists and hip New Yorkers alike — it's clear "Spring Awakening" will certainly be a touchstone in the careers of all three performers.

"The people that are in this show mean so much to me," says Groff. "We've really gone through so much together. We knew the show was going to be special when we started; we spend every waking moment together. And we share an even more special bond, because we get to watch each

other every night on stage.

"We're just so vulnerable and open in this show, and everybody is pouring their hearts out and so happy to be there. I've no doubt these people are going to be in my life for a long time." ♦