

An Awakening to See and Hear

Deaf West Theatre Production of Broadway Musical Comes to Downtown

By Donna Evans

When it came time for director Michael Arden to prepare his cast for a new version of the rock musical *Spring Awakening*, he decided to push the actors out of their comfort zone. That's a cliché that is sounded a lot in theater, but this time it meant something: Arden had to urge hearing and deaf actors in new directions.

The show's deaf performers had to pace their signing with the music's tempo; it's not part of their vocabulary to know how long a certain note would take. Hearing actors, meanwhile, needed to learn American Sign Language.

The results will be revealed when the Deaf West Theatre company and a group known as The Forest of Arden open a version of *Spring Awakening* at the Rosenthal Theater at Inner-City Arts on Thursday, Sept. 13. The show, with a 25-member cast that includes seven musicians, runs at the venue at 720 Kohler St. through Oct. 19.

The show with a book and lyrics by Steven Sater and music by Duncan Sheik is based on Frank Wedekind's controversial 1891 Expressionist play of the same name. The story of a group of teenagers in 1890s Germany struggling with their sexual awakening opened on Broadway in 2006 and went on to win eight Tonys, including Best Musical.

Arden, who made his Broadway debut as an actor in Deaf West and the Roundabout Theatre

Company's production of *Big River* (it played at the Mark Taper Forum in Downtown Los Angeles in 2003) started learning sign language for that show. Prior to that experience he didn't know any deaf people. He said being able to share this mode of communication with an audience "has been a rewarding and delightful experience."

The story highlights a low point of deaf education, Arden said. In 1880, an international conference of deaf educators decreed that oral teaching was better than manual, or sign education. The only way for deaf people to be fully integrated into society would be to teach them oralism, which meant reading lips and speaking. While some in the United States rejected the conference's decision, an entire generation of deaf people were denied access to language, Arden said. He compared this to *Spring Awakening's* themes of miscommunication and isolationism.

"Oralism was and is not a viable option for many people," Arden said. "These people who were not able to cultivate oralism were robbed of language altogether and considered failures. We're taking that and running with it in this play."

Arden said that anyone who has seen a previous production of *Spring Awakening* will find the Deaf West version very different. Not only is there the use of sign language, he said, but the story depicts deaf culture of the 1890s. The original work was a comment on the perils of the denial of information and communication



A new version of the Tony-winning *Spring Awakening* casts deaf and hearing actors and musicians. It opens this week at Inner City Arts.

photo by David J. Kurs

of German teens. In the new version several of these characters are in a schoolroom setting and are forced to speak.

Actor Daniel Durant, who is deaf, hopes the Downtown production will open people's minds to the diversity that deaf culture can bring to the arts and the world. Durant plays Moritz, a boy who, while smart, does poorly in school. He is under pressure from his parents to be perfect and struggles with how to be social. Mostly, 24-year-old Durant said, Moritz broods.

"I hope people will love this play because we show such beautiful ASL, which is a very visual art, combined with amazing music and singing," Durant said in an email to Los Angeles Downtown News. "I hope it is life changing for all who see it."

Durant, who was born in Detroit and moved

to Los Angeles in 2012 to join a Deaf West production of *Cyrano*, said it is not easy to combine American Sign Language, English and music, but that the cast had "ASL masters" on hand to help. Throughout the two-hour musical, some of the hearing cast will sign and speak at the same time. Others will be the voice for a deaf actor, such as Durant. The person who voices for Durant, on and off stage, also plays in the band, he said, noting, "All of us work as one team."

Arden takes that description to the next level. "It is exciting to see a group of people supporting and teaching each other," he said. "These are incredibly talented kids who've all had to learn new skills for this show."

Spring Awakening runs Sept. 13-Oct. 19 at Inner-City Arts, 720 Kohler St., (818) 762-2998 or deafwest.org.