

Spring Awakening Dramaturg's Note

It's easy to separate ourselves from the past; to think we've learned from its failures and undone its mistakes. At first glance, the moral values in *Spring Awakening* seem archaic. These characters live in a restrictive society ruled by Protestant values that dictate every aspect of their lives: what they learn in school, who they marry, what career they can have, and so much more. Adults keep the facts of life hidden from their teenage children, seeking to quiet the "temptation" of their growing sexuality by ignoring its existence. The effects of this oppressive society were huge—adolescents suffered from mental illness and trauma in a time before psychology knew how to treat them.

In reality, these issues have not so much disappeared as changed their appearance. Kids who grow up on the Internet (as many of my peers and I did) have access to so much information they lack the emotional maturity and context to understand, and often have no one who will explain it to them. The culture of the Internet provides another version of the age-old divide between parents and their kids. Our school system still fails to see children as individuals with unique needs and talents. Standardized tests make it impossible to view students as anything other than statistics. These factors, combined with the unique challenges and emotional ups and downs of adolescence, make young people particularly susceptible to mental illness—there are still so many reasons they're unsupported and misunderstood.

Spring Awakening is based upon Frank Wedekind's 1891 play, *The Awakening of Spring*. He wrote that almost every scene in his play was based on an actual experience of one of his classmates—and those scenes are nearly identical to the ones in our musical. His work was banned in Germany almost as soon as it was published; it was adapted for Broadway in 2006. Now, in 2021, adolescence looks completely different: Twitter was barely one year old when *Spring Awakening* premiered, and Instagram wouldn't be created for another four years. Social media has transformed the structure of a teenage life, giving them the chance to live in and create a culture entirely separate from the adults in their lives.

Spring Awakening tells its story using punk music, the native language of the misunderstood teenager. Punk is an inherently political genre that values irreverence and amateurism. It wants to tear down old structures of form and aesthetic, and with them structures of oppression.

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Underground punk culture celebrates the qualities that young people are traditionally taught to suppress. It lets them be loud, emotional, and expressive in the face of a world that wants them to be quiet. Punk's chaotic, angry style finds a perfect home in 19th century pastoral Germany, with teenagers who are just as angsty as the ones in 2021.

Whether your teenagehood is in the recent or distant past, I ask you to remember how it felt. To be a teenager is to feel so full of possibility, so smart, so infinite, and at the same time to have so little control over your life. This unique emotional contradiction is where we meet the kids of *Spring Awakening*.