

Student-Produced Theatre Projects: A Vital Aspect of Collegiate Theatre

by

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A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

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by

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### **Introduction**

Theatre business professionals are a close-knit community of people who run in similar circles. Likewise, it is nearly certain that every college theatre major knows another student studying theatre at a different college or university. Through relationships with students studying elsewhere, I have learned about outlets instated at other universities that allow students the ability to practice theatre through supervised student-run experiences. Most college level theatre programs, both B.A. and B.F.A., typically have a student-run theatre project company that encourages undergraduate production of full-length plays and musicals. East Carolina University; however, did not have a formalized organization to fosters student-run theatre productions where they put what is taught in the classroom into practical use. By initiating a subcategory of the East Carolina Musical Theatre Association (ECMTA) that funds student produced theatre, I have created additional acting, designing, and directing opportunities for undergraduate students to practice the methods they are learning in their training at East Carolina University. This theatre company, called 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players, will provide the Greenville community with an entirely student-produced theatre organization that contributes relevant, thought-provoking theatrical productions.

### **Background**

At a university it is expected that a student's mind will be broadened to explore the world around them. Professors often ask their students, "Does the world need change and if so, what can you do to change it?" In truth, social change is a broad topic. What does change in this world truly mean as a student in college? Theatre is a great place to explore an answer. To fully understand the importance of this project, one must first see the justification for having

educational theatre in the first place. In the article titled “Unanswered Questions in Educational Theatre”, Stuart E. Baker postulates that there are four justifications for the existence of theatre programs. He states that theatre education provides students with a “liberal arts education, professional training, community service, and recreational release” (Baker). Perhaps the most crucial of these facets to study as a student would be our community service. East Carolina University’s motto, “to serve”, is well known by those associated with the university. I was fortunate enough to implement service through the Honors College before I even started my freshman year. Service ties into theatre in many ways. Stuart remarks “college theatres provide many people in this country their first acquaintance with live theatre” (Baker). Above anything, a student-run theatre company enables this experience to happen on a wider scope; branching out into our community and showing people something they may have never seen before. Additionally, when students can observe other students’ work, it fosters a level of connectedness between and among peers that is not possible within the constraints of a four-show season. Student-lead theatre helps bridge this important gap, allowing for more diverse work aimed at contemporary audience as well as being a catalyst for thoughtful discussion on past and present theatre’s role in society. Observing the function theatre serves to a community can be better understood through Thornton Wilder’s essay *Some Thoughts on Playwriting* which states that there are four vital components of theatre that make it unique: theatre reposes upon the work of many collaborators, is addressed to a group-mind, is a world of pretense, and that the action in theatre takes place in a perpetual present time. He shows how many art forms are solitary events or skills, whereas theatre requires an audience. Wilder says that the action on stage, fictitious in nature as it may be, requires the support of a crowd and that “...theater partakes of the nature of festival. Life imitated is life raised to a higher power.” The viewer’s opinion of a play rests heavily on this concept. Without full support of a crowd and their investment, a play would “fall to pieces”, as Wilder so aptly put it. The life on stage and action require an audience. Our student

theatre company has a contemporary audience in mind, which provides us with this support needed while we provide audiences with the theatre they seek.

### **Project Purpose**

In the academic 2015-2016 year, fellow Honors College senior Brandon Fillette and I succeeded in establishing a student-run company (5<sup>th</sup> Street Players) that produced new student-written works, *Proof*, and *Spring Awakening* through ECMTA during our final spring semester. Our project is intended to have longevity past this initial formation. I anticipate the student-run theatre projects to function into future generations of students to come through East Carolina University's School of Theatre and Dance.

As the final portion of my Senior Honors Project, I directed Duncan Sheik's *Spring Awakening*. Sheik began his career writing pop/rock music in the 1990s. His most notable song is the Grammy nominated single "Barely Breathing". He wrote pop/rock music for the duration of the 1990s into the 2000s writing songs for himself as well as other artists. In the mid-2000s, Sheik began working on a new project. This project grew into what we know as the Tony Award winning musical *Spring Awakening*.

Sheik worked alongside Steven Sater to develop *Spring Awakening*. The musical is adapted from Frank Wedekind's 1891 play of the same name. Sheik and Sater both practice Buddhism, giving them a unique connection that prompted their idea to work together. Their desire to work on piece as controversial as *Spring Awakening* was largely due to the aftermath of the Columbine shooting in 1999 (Crosby). The two men felt the theatre community needed a piece of theatre that explored the way society raises children and the pressures placed on teenagers by adults. *Spring Awakening* is filled with religious undertones, giving the two Buddhists a strong platform to argue against with their musical. Through their collaboration, Sater wrote the book and lyrics, while Sheik composed all the music. It took eight years to complete the musical, but their hard work certainly paid off.

Duncan Sheik once said, “It's my mission to make sure that the theatre is paying attention to what the rest of the world is listening to” (Wood). Sheik’s work is infused with pop/rock culture through contemporary lyrical phrasing, rhythm driven songs, and controversial subject matter. “Duncan is someone who feels that art proceeds by transgression,” said Steven Sater, the playwright and lyricist with whom Sheik collaborated on *Spring Awakening*. “And I think he's only gotten freer over the years” (Wood).

### **Approach**

Beginning a student-run theatre company was no easy feat. With the help of ECMTA, I arranged fundraisers to get money to produce shows. The biggest fundraiser was a 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players GoFundMe page, raising over \$2,000. A proposal process involved students proposing works they were interested in seeing produced or directing. I worked with my mentors and Brandon Fillette to choose the inaugural season of 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players. The shows we produced were *First Stages: Playwrights' New Works* (February 19-20), which included *A Tree is a Tree* by Briana Johnson and *Re-VOLT-ing: An Electrifying Comedy* by Kole McKinley, *The SWISH Improv* (February 21), *Proof* (March 18-20), and our production of *Spring Awakening* (April 15-17).

Choosing what show Fillette and I wanted to do for the final part of our project was not easy. We read various plays and musicals and chose the Tony Award Winning musical *Spring Awakening*. The show was challenging, but we knew it would translate to our borrowed performance space at Magnolia Arts Center well. We applied for the rights to the show and signed a contract with Musical Theatre International (MTI) to produce the show. Afterwards, we held auditions, cast the show, and began rehearsals. We rehearsed for four or more hours every night for over a month. The week before the show opened we moved into the performance space and introduced the set, costumes, and microphones into the equation. These additions helped the actors to really embrace the show’s concept. Per our contract with MTI, we charged \$10 per

ticket to the show. Each performance was sold out, allowing us to raise significant funds to go towards 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players next season.

### **Conclusion**

My Senior Honors Project has allowed me to explore a part of my craft that I never thought I would be able to explore during my undergraduate studies. Working as a director on a full-length musical challenged my creative skills as well as my leadership skills. Working to unify a group of designers and actors for a cohesive final product was challenging, but it was something that seemed to come easily to me. I definitely see myself directing again in my career. As a producer of an organization, I found scheduling to be the most difficult aspect of the project. I will probably stick with acting and directing for the foreseeable future.

### **Final Product**

# SPRING awakening

BOOK & LYRICS BY  
**STEVEN SATER**

MUSIC BY  
**DUNCAN SHEIK**

BASED ON THE PLAY BY  
**FRANK WEDEKIND**

#### THE BOYS

Melchior  
Moritz  
Hanschen  
Ernst  
Georg  
Otto  
Ulbrecht (u/s Melchior)  
Dieter (u/s Moritz)

Waseem Alzer  
Drew Wells  
Daniel Gonzalez  
Caleb Tolin  
Allen Williams  
Cameron Vaughn  
Jayland Potts  
David Smith

#### THE GIRLS

Wendla

Lexie Wolfe

|                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| Ilse                    | Josy Christian   |
| Martha                  | Corinne Holland  |
| Anna                    | Eve Devonport    |
| Thea                    | Morgan Goodman   |
| Schoolgirl (u/s Wendla) | Kennedy Young    |
| Schoolgirl (u/s Ilse)   | Sarah Lewis      |
| Schoolgirl (u/s Martha) | Madeline Whallen |

THE ADULTS

|                            |               |
|----------------------------|---------------|
| Frau Bergman               | Naja Richburg |
| Frauline Knüppeldick       |               |
| Frau Gabor                 | Gabi Stephens |
| Frauline Grossbustenthaler |               |
| Frau Bessell               |               |
| Herr Sonnenstich           | Dirk Lumbard  |
| Headmaster Knochenbruch    |               |
| Herr Neumann               |               |
| Herr Rilow                 |               |
| Herr Steifel               |               |
| Father Kaulbach            |               |
| Doctor Von Brausepulver    |               |
| Herr Gabor                 |               |
| Schmidt                    |               |

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