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Amy Weintraub

Acting Honors Thesis

Crafting Wendla Bergmann in *Spring Awakening*

Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik's adaptation of *Spring Awakening* ends, "And all shall know the wonder of Purple Summer."¹ These lyrics resonate with me as I reflect on my experience in this show investigating and embodying the role of Wendla Bergmann. Steven Sater intended for this lyric to encompass a spring endured in youth and a summer of maturation ahead. As I process this show and my position in it, the text has gained new meaning.

Since becoming a theatre major, I have been craving a role in a full-length show that would test my dramatic abilities and my breadth as a vocalist. *Spring Awakening* did just that. It was the first time I performed in a complete naturalistic/expressionistic piece and the first time I tackled a show that required a belt-driven vocal technique. It was also the first time I played a character who encountered physical violence and my first well-known contemporary musical (to some, *the* musical of my generation). Executing such a well-known piece carries with it a burden of expectation about how it should be performed. Lastly, it was the first time that I had to juggle three rehearsals/performances at one time, each with a very distinct set of demands.

Having finished the show, I am proud of what I accomplished. The work I did in advance of and during the rehearsal process gave me a certain freedom in performance, allowing my character to live in the moment and take a new journey

¹ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 87.

each night. The journal I created made up the bulk of my process and was instrumental in helping me translate the information I gathered from the original play, writings about the musical and the musical script itself into something usable for the stage. I considered the following during my process: text analysis (which helped me to ground myself in the historical context of the original work as well as the contemporary adaptation of the musical), song exploration, additional biographical information not present in either the play or the musical, and acting techniques. This work helped me formulate the structure of the journal composed of initial questions, given circumstances, acting beats and objectives, relationships to other characters, letters I wrote as Wendla, and pictures that captured the spirit of the show (many of which were by artists working during Wedekind's time). It is in these pictures that most of my text exploration becomes visible. Many of these pictures were not directly related to the show, but nonetheless matched my vision of the show based on my research. They captured Wendla's relationships to the other characters,² her relationship to the action onstage, and her relationship to her own body. Some mark the beginning of Wendla's journey, when she begins to explore her body and reflects on what she is feeling.³ Others captured what I thought were two different reactions to the sex at the end of the first act.⁴ These images were instrumental in helping me get into character every night; I looked at them before each show and they allowed me to be able to see through Wendla's eyes. I took what I had learned from my perspective and then re-examined the play

² See Appendix pgs. 28-35 for relationships.

³ See Appendix pg. 41.

⁴ See Appendix pgs. 46-47 for Melchior's experience and pgs. 48-49 for Wendla's reaction to the same event.

from the character's point of view, uncovering her motivations and intentions. The full journal is appended to provide a closer look at my process.

As part of my process before creating the journal, I consulted the writings of Wedekind, Sater, and Franzen with the intention of creating a three-dimensional, holistic character. I am certain I could have given an acceptable performance had I read nothing other than the musical adaptation, but I felt compelled to seek out these other sources as this was my honors paper and I wanted to see what could be gained from understanding the many iterations of *Spring Awakening* and varied interpretations—After all, I think a lazy actor does the character an injustice by not doing this work. In truth, I found my research to be less obviously fruitful than I had expected. It was difficult to draw specific correlations between my studies and the acting choices I made in performance. That said, this literature firmly rooted me in the stakes and context of the play and informed general expectations related to language and style. As previously mentioned, this work is most visible in the images I used in my journal, as these were my realization of the ideas stated by the writers above. As in opera, I found that the composer's original intention (in this case, Wedekind's intention and Sater's interpretation) influenced style but didn't necessarily translate to action.

When I reflect on my performance in this show compared to others, I understand and appreciate the value of this background research. I am not sure I can articulate the specifics of how my performance was impacted by this work, but I think it distinguished me as someone better informed with regards to the age of my character, the desperation of her situation and the consequences of her actions.

Research that may have more specifically impacted my choices might focus less on the theatre history of the time but rather on dramaturgical concerns, like the daily life of a teenage girl in provincial Germany, or a specific study of the impact of religion in society during Wedekind's time. I look forward to doing research for each character I play after I leave Oberlin, when I am no longer constrained by the overwhelming demands of its double-degree program.

After four months of intense rehearsal, I finished the show, or as Steven Sater might say, survived the spring of my adolescence, and will take what I learned as I venture into the purple summer, the post-college world of acting.

Literary Exploration

Frank Wedekind's original play, *Frühlings Erwachen*, later translated to *Spring Awakening*, bridged the gap between naturalism and expressionism and was a precursor to the Theater of the Absurd, without fully embracing a single genre.⁵ When first published in 1891, the play caused such an uproar that it wasn't until 1905, with the help of Max Reinhardt, that it was successfully published with harsh edits from the government.⁶ The 1905 version is memorable for its episodic scenes, fragmented dialogue, distortion, and caricatures. Its themes, shocking at the time, included gender and sexuality, education, and generational conflict.⁷

As I prepared to take on this role, I found it helpful to understand the historical circumstances that led to the realization of this play. Midway through the

⁵ Charlotte Ryland, "Spring Awakening," 2012, <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/books/spring-awakening-iid-115597/do-9781408189498-div-00000001>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

19th century theatrical tradition transitioned from Romanticism to Naturalism. Prior to Naturalism, audiences expected spectacle and glamour, itself a change from the classical tragedy of the previous era.⁸ As 19th century European society began to evolve socially and scientifically, the popularity of romantic drama waned. The expansion of industry and growth in world commerce brought about a rise of the middle class and a more knowledgeable proletariat.⁹ With this rise came a greater distinction of class lines.¹⁰ In 1848, Marx published his Communist Manifesto, suggesting that nothing is final or permanent.¹¹ Eleven years later, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*.¹² Viewing the common man as a product of his environment had become interesting, both on and off the stage.¹³

Émile Zola was one of the first to define this new style. In his *Naturalism in the Theatre*, he furthered this discussion of the individual as the result of both heredity and environment.¹⁴ His vision for the theatre introduced contemporary social and political issues, revealing the unsavory aspects of life with the intent to horrify and shock the audience.¹⁵ He encouraged playwrights to change the structure of their plays in order to emphasize the examination of a character's psychological behavior. Zola also advocated for a return to tragedy; detailed reproduction of behaviors, authentic costumes and sets; and a way of speaking

⁸ Joe Jeffreys, "Émile Zola and *Thérèse Raquin*" (lecture, "Realism and Naturalism," NYU Tisch, New York City, July 13, 2016).

⁹ Joe Jeffreys, "Émile Zola and *Thérèse Raquin*" (lecture, "Realism and Naturalism," NYU Tisch, New York City, July 13, 2016).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

unique to each character.¹⁶ These developments were made feasible by the invention of electric lighting and the introduction of the box set, in which all of the action onstage is contained within three walls and an imagined fourth wall.¹⁷

Naturalism, as defined by Zola, hoped “to do great things with the subjects and characters that our eyes, accustomed to the spectacle of the daily round, have come to see as small.”¹⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, naturalism had become somewhat obsolete in the eyes of more avant-garde artists. A reaction against naturalism, expressionism became the new means by which writers could engage viewers.¹⁹ Early expressionism, which had its roots in Wedekind’s era, depicted “a world where iconic figures body forth the emotions of the central characters”²⁰ and inner feelings are brought out in the visual aspects of the production. It was characterized by the following: a dreamlike and nightmarish atmosphere, a limited set often with strange shapes and unexpected colors, episodic structure (which posed dramatic statements from the author’s perspective), sometimes grotesque characters based on stereotype and caricature, poetic dialogue, and unrealistic, puppet-like acting.²¹

¹⁶ Émile Zola, “Naturalism in the Theatre,” *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*: 369, doi:10.1515/9781400874644-020.

¹⁷ Joe Jeffreys, “Émile Zola and *Thérèse Raquin*” (lecture, “Realism and Naturalism,” NYU Tisch, New York City, July 13, 2016).

¹⁸ Émile Zola, “Naturalism in the Theatre,” *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*: 364, doi:10.1515/9781400874644-020.

¹⁹ Joe Jeffreys, “Frank Wedekind and *Spring Awakening*” (lecture, “Realism and Naturalism,” NYU Tisch, New York City, July 21, 2016).

²⁰ Steven Sater, “Preface,” preface to *Spring Awakening* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2007), x.

²¹ Justin Cash, “Expressionism in the Theatre,” *The Drama Teacher*, July 09, 2015, accessed August 06, 2016.

It is clear after analyzing Wedekind's original play that he was influenced by both naturalism and expressionism. When Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik adapted the play, they removed many of the more expressionistic elements, perhaps because the play and the musical had different goals. According to Jonathan Franzen, who translated the edition of the play I studied, Wedekind aimed to "address the subjects of sexual morality and bourgeois hypocrisy."²² Franzen outlines some of the major differences between the play and the musical:

"Moritz Stiefel...is transformed, in the musical version, into a punk rocker of such talent and charisma that it's unimaginable that a report card could depress him. The casual rape of Wendla Bergmann by the play's central character, Melchior Gabor, becomes a thunderous spectacle of ecstasy and consent. And where Wedekind showed the young sensualist Hansy Rilow resisting masturbation... we in the twenty-first century are treated to a choreographed orgy of penis-pumping, semen-slinging exultation."²³

While Wedekind was seemingly more accurate in capturing the motives of his characters, Franzen argues that a contemporary audience is too scandalized by mimicry of reality. In order to be able to laugh at Hansy (who in the musical is called Hanschen), we have to view his act as dirty and dissimilar to our own lives. Since the musical is equally as concerned with entertaining as it is with exposing hypocrisy, Naturalism is abandoned in favor of something more pornographic. In Steven Sater's words,

"In Wedekind's script, Melchior 'date-rapes' Wendla. We wanted to see him make love to her. More: we wanted to show how this young man (who jests at his friend's puberty wounds) first uncovers ineluctable sexual feelings;

²² Jonathan Franzen, "Authentic but Horrible," Introduction to *Spring Awakening* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011).

²³ Ibid, x.

how he begins to own his sexual identity; how he helps Wendla awaken to hers.”²⁴

However, I would propose that society has evolved even since 2006 and Wedekind’s original ideas might be more accessible to a present-day audience. The issue of consent has been a topic of interest in the past few years, so it is less likely that a modern audience, particularly a college-age audience, would interpret the sexual encounter between Melchior and Wendla as being entirely consensual and erotic. I believe that most people, as I did, would question Melchior’s actions. The discrepancy between the play and musical on this issue plagued me throughout the process. In performance, I found subtle ways to marry my interpretation of the event with that of my director and the intentions of the writers.

Franzen, the translator, continues his discussion of the differences between the two works:

“...bourgeois masochist Wendla Bergmann: what else could she become in 2006 but a saintly young emblem of *sexual* abuse?”²⁵

Where Wedekind falls short in the original play, if you will, is in his treatment of the teenagers. He is just as willing to make fun of them as he is to take their complaints seriously. The musical is far more successful in giving the impression that the teenagers have the moral high ground, or at least appear to be correct from the perspective of the audience.²⁶

Franzen’s thoughts were particularly helpful in deciphering the tone of the piece. Originally subtitled, “The Children’s Tragedy,” Wedekind’s choice of words

²⁴ Jonathan Franzen, “Authentic but Horrible,” Introduction to *Spring Awakening* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011), x.

²⁵ Ibid, x.

²⁶ Ibid, xi.

frequently led audiences astray. Wedekind hoped his play would be “a sunny image of life” filled with laughter.²⁷ Instead, it is more often interpreted as a tragedy in which the hero embodies an entire society, keeping its children in the dark. The comic moments exploit “the laughability of adolescent sorrows, the sorrows of adolescent laughability.”²⁸ However, in a morally sound society, tragedy usually includes some sort of justice. There is no real justice or morality in this show, and for this reason, *Spring Awakening* is best viewed with a sense of ironic detachment. Thus, Wedekind’s characters, as he once referred to himself, are considered “authentic but horrible.”²⁹

The musical deviates from the play in a few other ways. The difference in plot between the two and the lack of lyrics in Wedekind’s version drastically alter relationships between characters. In the play, the scene between “Mama who bore me” and its reprise doesn’t occur until the second act, after Melchior has already beat Wendla. By moving it to the start of the show, the writers of the musical send a strong message, that all of the incidents that follow are the result of Frau Bergmann’s unwillingness to be honest with her daughter.³⁰ After Wendla’s rape, Melchior and Wendla never speak again. There are no plans to meet up in the graveyard nor letter reading in the reformatory. The two are not Romeo and Juliet figures, as in the musical, but simply two guilty teenagers whose actions reflect the immorality of the society in which they were raised. The musical does not end with

²⁷ Jonathan Franzen, “Authentic but Horrible,” Introduction to *Spring Awakening* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011), xii.

²⁸ Ibid, xiii.

²⁹ Ibid, xvi.

³⁰ Steven Sater, “Preface,” preface to *Spring Awakening* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2007), xii.

the return of both Wendla and Moritz in the graveyard when Melchior is about to kill himself. Moritz does return in Wedekind's version, carrying his blown-off head in his hand and encouraging Melchior to kill himself. Melchior is instead saved by a masked man, a sort of *deus ex machina* figure. The adults are given ridiculous names in the play, such as Professor Brockenbohn and Professor Killaflye and are clearly understood as the enemies. In Wedekind's version, the children behave as if they are puppets under the thumb of the domineering adult figures. The tragedy in this is that while the adults are often aware of what they are doing, they continue to do it. Mrs. Gabor, one of the more tolerable adults, defends Melchior's behavior, saying: "But a good natured person will turn into a criminal there as surely as a plant will die if you deprive it of air and sunlight."³¹ Following this, she agrees to send Melchior to a reformatory, where he is to be punished for behavior that was not entirely his own fault. The use of song in the musical exposes the internal thoughts of the teenagers and gives the impression that they have complex ideas beyond those instilled in them by adults and are possibly more independent than they are given credit for.

In addition to studying Wedekind's original play and its historical context, I found Steven Sater's *A Purple Summer: Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* to be helpful in analyzing the musical as its own entity, independent of the play on which it was based. I read this book before starting staging rehearsals, which gave me a good idea of the writer's intent before creating my own interpretation. Throughout the book and Sater's foreword in the musical script, I learned that Sater and Sheik

³¹ Frank Wedekind and Jonathan Franzen, *Spring Awakening* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011), 63.

hoped to counteract the satirical nature of the original play. Unlike Wedekind, who laughed at all of the characters, the writers of the musical wanted us to sympathize with the teenagers and resent the adults. Music, and pop-rock music specifically, was the best medium through which to achieve this. Teenagers often turn to this type of music as an escape, thus, it was fitting for it to become the inner monologues of these characters: “Scenes set out the world of nineteenth-century repression, while the songs afforded our young characters a momentary release into the contemporary pop idiom.”³² Contrary to tradition, Sater did not write lyrics with the intention of furthering the plot. To him, song functioned as subtext, the equivalent of a moment of silence in speech.³³ Understanding this and studying the historical implications of these lyrics guided me even more than the text of the musical or the play. It is in these songs I discovered Wendla as she truly is, uninhibited by the demands and restrictions of her oppressive, bourgeois society.

In his foreword to the musical, Steven Sater discusses how he gave his characters more depth by allowing them to take their own journey within Wedekind’s framework. Similarly, I used my research on both bodies of work as a frame of reference when taking my journey. I also acknowledged the personal bias that the translator, Franzen, as well as the writers of the musical, Sater and Sheik, might hold and formed many of my own opinions independent of their beliefs. However, many of the things they said were invaluable in helping me craft my character: Wedekind’s play taught me about the historical context of the show.

³² Steven Sater, “Preface,” preface to *Spring Awakening* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2007), ix.

³³ *Ibid*, ix.

Sater's words on his lyrics and his interpretation of the show supplemented my understanding of the play. Through Sater's musical analysis I began to understand her first as a teenager with unique, yet relatable desires, whose behavior (as dictated in the play) fluctuates as she tries to satisfy the demands of her society and herself. My process was like that of a child learning about colors. I began with the primary colors of red and blue, studying the play and the musical separately. When I combined what I learned from each of these texts, I discovered purple.

"Mama who bore me"³⁴

This is the first song in the show. It appears first as a solo ballad and is then repeated after a scene between Wendla and her mother as an angsty, belty reprise sung with the other girls. Sater did not intend this to be an accusation, but rather "a sort of elegy the girl sings for herself."³⁵ While she sings, she explores her maturing body in the mirror. The similarities between her mother and the woman she sees in the mirror force her to acknowledge that her mother has not taught her how and why her body is changing. In effect, her mother has let her down. She uses language from the Bible because it is the only language she knows to describe what she sees and feels. The line, "some pray that, one day, Christ will come a'-callin'. They light a candle, and hope that it glows," is based on the Parable of the Ten Virgins, in which brides await the coming of their bridegrooms.³⁶ Realizing they forgot to take oil for their lamps, they leave to get oil and are not home when the men come for them.

With these lyrics, Sater asks Wendla to question what life will be like if she waits

³⁴ See Appendix pgs. 4-6 to see author's interpretation.

³⁵ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 4.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

around for something to relieve her unhappiness. If something does come, will she know what to do? Through this song, Wendla concludes that she is not satisfied by thoughts of Heaven and Bethlehem, instead she “yearns so badly to understand. She wants to feel, to know, what it means to be alive.”³⁷

“My Junk”³⁸

This song immediately follows a scene in which the girls talk about the boys they are attracted to, Melchior Gabor and Moritz Stiefel. For the girls, life without a partner is insignificant and incomplete. Love is the only thing that temporarily fills a void, and the lover is “a vase that we fill with the sadness of our own heart.”³⁹ The girls know the boys themselves are meaningless, but it is what they project onto them that make them appealing. This recognition of fantasies as nothing but fantasies is captured in the word, “junk,” and this self-awareness gives the impression that they understand how they have been deceived by their society, but feel trapped within it.⁴⁰

“Touch Me”⁴¹

In this song, Melchior is describing to Moritz what he believes sex feels like from a woman’s perspective. Sater based his lyrics on Racine’s *Phèdre*, the story of a woman who falls in love with her son. Like *Phèdre*, the characters in *Spring*

³⁷ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 5.

³⁸ See Appendix pg. 9 for author’s interpretation.

³⁹ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

⁴¹ See Appendix pgs. 9-10 for author’s interpretation.

Awakening face a similar struggle of a mind at odds with bodily desires.⁴² The song is infused with longing and desire, both of which were inspired by the Song of Solomon.⁴³ Wendla's weeping angels are replaced by pleasure. Although she never sings alone in this song, it marks an important discovery in her journey: "Mama may have made Wendla 'bad,' but 'all will be forgiven' in the arms of this love."⁴⁴

"The Word of your Body"⁴⁵

Directly following the first interaction between Wendla and Melchior, they sing this duet, which Sater wrote to be the subtext of the preceding scene. He uses the imagery of love as a wound, harkening back to the classic Cupid tale.⁴⁶ This song is particularly fascinating as it is the first of many in which the characters are prophetic. They know that they will wind up hurting each other emotionally but they will also harm each other physically when Wendla later asks Melchior to beat her with a stick.⁴⁷

"The Guilty Ones"⁴⁸

The next time Melchior and Wendla sing together is under very different circumstances. The first act ends as Melchior thrusts into Wendla. The second act begins in the moments after sex, when the two experience guilt but do not yet understand why. Sater argues that the two are questioning the permanence of the

⁴² Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 24.

⁴³ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵ See Appendix pg. 12 for author's interpretation.

⁴⁶ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁸ See Appendix pgs. 18-20 for author's interpretation.

bliss they just experienced, but I suppose this is a matter of interpretation.⁴⁹ He does say that the “word” of their bodies led them astray as they don’t know how to process what they just experienced. The “silver reply” that Wendla speaks of is drawn from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet calls Romeo from her balcony.⁵⁰

“Left Behind”⁵¹

Following Moritz’s suicide, the company gathers at his funeral. Sater believes that the remorse the teenagers experienced from having sex and in losing their friend is lessened when they finally put it into words in this song.⁵² The lyrics, “A shadow passed. A shadow passed, yearning, yearning, for the fool it called a home,” pay homage to Homer’s *Iliad*, when the spirits of dead warriors depart from their bodies regretting the life they have left.⁵³ Moritz leaves his body, which was never truly a home to him.

“Totally Fucked”⁵⁴

In this song, Melchior finally realizes the consequences of his actions. Unlike Wendla, Sater points out, Melchior’s parents never kept him in the dark as Wendla’s did, therefore he is more culpable for his actions.⁵⁵ I would argue that even though

⁴⁹ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 49.

⁵¹ See Appendix pg. 20 for author’s interpretation.

⁵² Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 59.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 60.

⁵⁴ See Appendix pg. 21 for author’s interpretation.

⁵⁵ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 63.

Melchior was informed when he slept with Wendla, his guilt is mitigated as he is still the product of a corrupt society.

“Whispering”⁵⁶

Of all the notes Sater included in his book, his notes on “Whispering” were by far the most helpful for me in preparing this song. The lyrics are heightened and poetic, so I struggled to create specific actions rather than playing a general mood. Sater intended for this song to encompass an entire journey within itself. The first verse describes how Wendla’s sexual act made even the ghosts shudder with horror.⁵⁷ She then listens with the ghosts, pitying others, who like herself, are unaware of what they are doing.⁵⁸ Here, we see yet another example of Wendla being prophetic, this time predicting her own death in the line: “See the father bent in grief, the mother dressed in mourning. Sister crumples, and the neighbors grumble. The preacher issues warnings.”⁵⁹ She continues by predicting how her family will be judged by society if word of her mistake gets out.⁶⁰ Later in the song, she transitions from sin to longing, characterized by a shift from late autumn/winter to summer.⁶¹ In the first scene of the show, her mother pointed out that she was “in bloom” physically. Now she is in bloom, carrying a child that will be born in the summer.⁶² She chooses to ignore the ghosts and instead welcomes the life growing

⁵⁶ See Appendix pgs. 23-25 for author’s interpretation.

⁵⁷ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 72.

⁶¹ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 72.

⁶² *Ibid*, 73.

inside her. She concludes her journey by claiming her story as her own.⁶³ Sater writes that this song, too, is the culmination of her journey. In the musical, she began by wanting to know where babies came from and ended by listening to the voice of the child inside her.⁶⁴

“Those You’ve Known”⁶⁵

Immediately before this song, Wendla has left the stage screaming for her mother, who had taken her to an abortionist. When Wendla appears in this song, the audience understands that she, who had planned to meet Melchior in the graveyard, has died. This song represents one of the major differences between the adaptation and Wedekind’s original version. In the latter, Moritz represented Melchior’s despair and returned at the end to convince Melchior to follow suit and kill himself.⁶⁶ In the adaptation, this gruesome image is replaced by the return of Melchior’s dearest friends, who promise to always be with him as long as he lives. From Sater’s perspective, Wendla is still pained by what he has done to her, but offers forgiveness.⁶⁷ She convinces him not to succumb to the darkness inside him, but rather to embrace it. The “northern wind” she speaks of comes from Romeo and Juliet and is often associated with the devil and temptation, but is used here to

⁶³ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 73.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 74.

⁶⁵ See Appendix pgs. 26-27 for author’s interpretation.

⁶⁶ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 79.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 80.

suggest that when Melchior is “blown’ from his better self by the memory of sorrow, his friends will still be with him.”⁶⁸

“The Song of Purple Summer”⁶⁹

Sater understands purple summer to be a time of hope and maturation. In his words, it is “the time when the painful spring of adolescence reaches the maturity of summer.”⁷⁰ The color purple matches the bruise of adolescence, but is also a hopeful color that marks the survival of spring and the optimism of the coming summer.⁷¹

Once we started rehearsal, I began my journal, modeled after Matt Wright’s book, *Crafting Character*. This journal helped me to bridge the gap between the original play and the musical, between spoken word and song. I asked and answered questions about my character that expanded beyond what was stated in the script.

The journal was structured as follows:

- I. Given Circumstances
- II. Initial Questions I have for Wendla
- III. Scene-by-scene/song-by-song
 - A. Dramaturgical work/definitions/context
 - B. Entrances (Tripp lecture)
 - 1. The Past: What just happened that changed how I behave when I enter?
 - 2. The Present: What am I doing (activity)?
 - 3. The Future: What’s the first thing I want to accomplish?
 - C. What is being done to me versus what I know
 - D. Super Objective
 - 1. Scene Objective
 - a. Action
 - i. Tactic
- IV. Relationships to others onstage

⁶⁸ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 81.

⁶⁹ See Appendix pg. 27 for author’s interpretation.

⁷⁰ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 85.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 87.

- A. Favorite memory with each person
- V. Letters written to Melchior based on the one in the script
- VI. Pictures as inspiration
 - A. Many by artists from Wedekind's time

Through this journal, I was able to convert my research into usable acting choices, which ultimately gave my character freedom in storytelling and music production.

Rehearsal and Performance

In the words of Steven Sater, Wendla Bergmann is described as a:

“A girl with a mission—a nineteenth-century teen with a quest that could also feel contemporary. Thwarted by her mother, she keeps looking for answers: she wants to know the world of her strange new body. Disturbed but also darkly intrigued to learn Martha's father beats her, Wendla turns, searchingly, to Melchior.”⁷²

One of my biggest obstacles in the rehearsal process was discerning exactly what question Wendla is trying to answer and from whom does she seek the answer? As this quote states, she is searching for many different things and consults many different sources. She wants to know how babies are made, so she consults her mother. Later, she wants to be beaten to understand Martha, so she goes to Melchior. At times, she speaks directly to God because her church background has taught her that God can answer the unanswerable. When she asks these questions, she does it with the intention of feeling something, usually pleasure. Given her upbringing, pleasure is almost always immediately followed by a feeling of guilt. This oscillation between pleasure and guilt and between adulthood and youth⁷³ characterizes Wendla's journey until “Whispering,” when she “chooses to remember

⁷² Steven Sater, “Preface,” preface to *Spring Awakening* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2007), xii-xiii.

⁷³ See Appendix pg. 50.

the love she has felt, to ignore the ghostly whispers of society, and embrace the new life already whispering within her.”⁷⁴

My realization of Wendla’s journey was slow and at times frustrating. Coming from an operatic background, it is usually my first instinct to “over-act” in a more declamatory style and forget about the immediate objective. This often results in a lack of honesty and connection to others in a performance. Considering this was my honors project and a show with which I felt a strong connection, it was important to me that I put considerable time and work into this production. As one of my acting professors said last summer, “there are two types of actors: those that approach their characters with themselves in mind, and those that step into the body of another character and abandon themselves entirely in performance, like Daniel Day Lewis.”⁷⁵ I knew I would want to draw on my own childhood in preparing the character, but I wanted everything in the performance to be the result of Wendla’s choices and not my own.

We began the process by learning and polishing the music. Because the music and harmonies are so difficult, I do think it was key that we started this early on. I learned several things about my character and her relationship to others by observing her music in context. Wendla and Moritz represented two extremes, between which Melchior was a sort of intermediary figure. Moritz’s music is frenetic, gritty, and up-tempo. Wendla’s music, in contrast, is legato, simple, and limited in range. It possesses a certain maturity and worldly wisdom that is lacking

⁷⁴ Steven Sater, “Preface,” preface to *Spring Awakening* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2007), xiv.

⁷⁵ James Tripp, “Shakespeare” (Lecture, Shakespeare Intensive, Stella Adler Studio, New York, June 10, 2016).

in the music of the other characters. Certain characteristics of the songs gave me clues as to how they should be performed. “Mama who bore me,” which opens the show, is slow and melodic. Because the beginning is in many ways the most important part of the whole show (in terms of forming initial opinions), I knew I needed to energize this song while remaining honest and believable. To do this, I motivated my entrance onto the stage with a moment before that involved Wendla fingering herself in the bath and then passing a cross on the way back to her room, the stage.⁷⁶ As previously mentioned, the sensation of pleasure was inexorably tied to a feeling of guilt. In the first verse of the song, I let Wendla get swept up in the beauty of the line as she explored her body. When the main melody returned for a second time, Wendla tried to suppress the feelings of pleasure she had just experienced. Here, I fought against the natural tendency of the music and avoided legato. I sang this verse in a more chest-heavy mix and emphasized the words to break up the smooth line as a sign of rebellion and a decision to begin the journey of finding answers. In other songs, like “The Word of Your Body,” the sparse accompaniment beneath the rather slow, intimate vocal line matched the action and atmosphere of the scene. It also occurred to me at that time that Wendla might be somewhat prophetic, particularly in “The Word of Your Body,” as many of her songs are written as a reflection on what just happened or is about to happen. Her music lacks the naïve, childlike nature she possesses through much of the show. Melchior’s music is a mix of these two styles, sensitive at times and at others, very angsty. These notes were extremely informative as I entered the first read through.

⁷⁶ See Appendix pg. 4 for author’s interpretation.

I went into the first reading hoping to do nothing more than understand the basic framework for my character's journey and position within the show. In the past, I have made the mistake of "acting" too early on and sticking with choices that were perhaps not as well informed as I would have liked. I was cognizant of this at the first reading and studied my character as one might a history textbook, objectively and without projecting any of my own emotions or reactions. I was also sick at the time, which forced me to approach the music similarly, unable to rely on years of operatic training.

The first read through left me with several important things to consider. I found reading the sexual scenes to be incredibly awkward and I knew that it would be a challenge for them to be believable if they were not carefully rehearsed and choreographed. After the reading, I was intrigued by the discrepancy between styles in this show. The songs and much of the language are very contemporary while the setting and the context in which the show takes place is more traditional. Similarly, the original collaborators of the musical didn't intend for there to be much synchronicity between spoken scenes and songs. Song world was to be completely separate from the reality of the spoken word, as dictated by the transition from head microphones to handheld mics and the dramatic shift in lights that coincided with the music. Our production aimed to create smoother transitions between these two worlds, such so that the characters would remain more consistent and not alternate between two opposing standards. I knew I had to find a balance between allowing my character to enjoy the contemporary, rock attitude of the music while remaining somewhat fixed within the context of her time. In order to make this switch less

jarring, I had to work against sounding classically trained and attempt to sing as if speaking on pitch. Finally, I had to figure out a way to stop doubting myself. I left the first read through wondering whether the other cast members thought I was deserving of the role. In hindsight, I know this was silly, but I struggle with insecurities when I do anything other than classical voice. I feel pressure not to sound too operatic in a musical theatre setting. Ultimately, I remembered what Audra McDonald said to me which was to “sing with my own voice,”⁷⁷ as determined by the character, and not my peers or previous performers.

Chris gave us an enormous amount of freedom in staging the show. He avoided prescribing any blocking that might feel contrary to the natural instincts of the characters. Looking back, I wish I had done more character preparation over the summer as I may have had a better idea early on about how my character would move about the stage.

The most difficult scenes to stage were the scenes between Wendla and Melchior. I remember struggling in particular with the scene leading up to “The Word of Your Body.”⁷⁸ Given that Wendla’s overall objective for most of the show was to feel something beyond her experiences as a child, this was the first scene in which she discovered someone who could potentially fulfill that. In this scene, the characters were supposed to reunite for the first time in several years. Melchior and Wendla had spent time together as children and frequently encountered each other in groups, but never alone. As Amy, my first instinct would have been to run up and hug someone I hadn’t seen in a while, but as Wendla, I had to consider societal

⁷⁷ “Meeting with Audra McDonald,” Interview by author, February 2012.

⁷⁸ See Appendix pgs. 10-12 for author’s interpretation.

expectations for men and women and the fear of being caught alone together. This, in turn, limited my physical choices. Every movement, from eye contact to taking a step forward, had to be a conscious decision, as I am sure Wendla was hyper-aware of her spatial relationship to Melchior in that moment. At first, she wanted him to take her seriously, but when she revealed too much, she tried to cover up her emotions. At the end of the scene and the beginning of the song, this need to feel something arose as a desire to experience pleasure. She wanted to draw Melchior in and make him take control. It was at this point that we saw Wendla publicly give into desire.

Chris, Shane, and I met every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon to work on this scene because it was, in many ways, the most important scene for our characters as it established everything that was to follow. In working on this scene, I was held back by a note given to me in one of my acting classes at the time. I was told that I was “emotionally indicating” and that the best thing I could do was strip everything away and just speak as myself. It wasn’t until I started working on my journal that I figured out how to motivate my stillness and choose when to move and change tactics. It also became easier as Shane and I developed more chemistry as scene partners. I learned that it didn’t take physical movement to get his attention or to draw him in, but that I could do so simply by imbuing my text with added layers of intention.

I encountered difficulty again in the beating scene where Wendla asks to be hit by Melchior so she can empathize with Martha who she has just discovered is

being beaten and raped nightly by her father.⁷⁹ Here, her objective changed from needing to experience pleasure to needing to experience pain. In some ways, it was the easiest and most direct scene as her sole aim was to get Melchior to beat her. To achieve this, she tried different actions, like proving him wrong and provoking him in order to convince him. As in the hayloft scene that followed, Chris asked that Shane and I work out the logistics of this scene on our own before polishing with him. This was actually pretty exciting for me because I have studied stage combat in many different summer programs, but have never had an opportunity to put my skills to use. In the beginning stages, we approached this scene and the hayloft scene in very clinical terms, choreographing specifically when and how to move. There was the added challenge of trying to mimic real beating with audience on three sides of us. Obviously he couldn't truly hit me with a stick, so we had to angle the scene exactly and be in sync with the sequence of action/reaction to create something that looked believable. The fall to the ground required that Shane come as far down to the ground with me as possible while pushing me. He also had to push me away from his body and not down or I would hit the ground with too much force and risk hurting myself. This scene was in some ways the most difficult because it required that we think simultaneously as characters and smart actors. It is easy to get swept up in the moment as a character, particularly in a moment of extreme passion, but we had to balance this inclination with an awareness of the space and the step-by-step procedure required to properly execute the fighting. Freedom is certainly

⁷⁹ See Appendix pgs. 14-15 for author's interpretation.

desirable onstage but this scene taught me that freedom is only achieved through focus.

The hayloft scene presented a unique challenge in that we were to experience a complete range of emotions, culminating in a questionable sexual act at the end of the scene.⁸⁰ In this last scene of the first act, Wendla and Melchior work through their emotions following the beating scene. As with pleasure, Wendla's experience of pain was followed immediately by feelings of guilt. Melchior, too, feels guilty for having let his impulses get the best of him. By this point in the story, it is understood that to feel *anything* at all in this society is to feel guilt. Wendla longs to rid herself of this feeling and thinks she can do so by gaining his forgiveness and getting him to stop pursuing her. By the end of the scene and after much prodding from Melchior, Wendla changes objectives entirely and gives into her curiosity once again. In discussions with Chris, he agreed with the playwrights in wanting to eliminate any question of rape. In my reading of both the play and the musical, however, I believed that the act still wasn't wholly consensual, because of the number of times Wendla said "no" and on an even more basic level, because she couldn't consent fully without understanding what sex was to begin with.

Ultimately, the director's vision trumped mine, but as mentioned previously, I combined my interpretation with that of my director by finding ways to add hesitation so that Wendla's reluctance might suggest uncertainty. Subtle things, like drawing my head slightly backward before kissing Melchior made a difference in the audience's understanding. The reluctance Wendla had in this scene made the climax

⁸⁰ See Appendix pgs. 16-18 for author's interpretation.

of her journey right before “Whispering” that much more jarring. She obviously felt guilty, but I believed my interpretation added a layer of regret, knowing that had she followed her instincts, she could have prevented this.

Chris was also open to ideas in staging that scene, which marked the most crucial moment in terms of the show’s theme.⁸¹ Leading up to that, the teenagers had felt oppressed by their elders knowing they had no power to change their circumstances. Wendla finally stood up to her mother, whom she discovered had been deceiving her all along. She said, “why didn’t you tell me everything?” after questioning, “A child? But I’m not married!”⁸² There is a stage direction in the script for Mrs. Bergmann to slap Wendla across the face when she says this. Chris initially wanted us to remove the slap I believe because it would be difficult to stage a fake slap in a thrust space. As we started to run the show, I realized that it wasn’t enough to be glared at by my mother at the height of my journey. With Chris’s approval, we added a real, honest-to-goodness slap as Wendla’s objective shifted to making her mother feel the same guilt she had been feeling. This propelled me into “Whispering” and gave me an obstacle to work against while singing that song.

Adding the slap into that scene made it that much more crucial for me to utilize a note I have been given time and time again by directors, which is to not anticipate an ending, particularly when it’s negative. This note is especially applicable when playing a younger character who is not yet wise enough to assume that things will be negative. Age was something we never really addressed in

⁸¹ See Appendix pgs. 22-25 for author’s interpretation.

⁸² Steven Sater, Duncan Sheik, and Frank Wedekind, *Spring Awakening* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), 80.

rehearsal, so I tasked myself with figuring out how to transform into a 14-year-old girl. I found a few things to be helpful: first of all, I used 14-year-old Amy as an example because I was very obedient and naïve at that age in much the same way that Wendla is both of those things. I then wrote little biographies about the other people with whom I interact onstage. These included personality traits and favorite recent memories with those people. Since I was particularly focused on age, I created memories logical for a 14-year-old growing up in late nineteenth century provincial Germany. I based parts of my relationship with Melchior and Moritz on two of my childhood best friends, trying to ground certain elements of my character in my own reality. I also remembered that young teenagers, like scientific theories, assume they are right in all things until proven wrong (and even then, they sometimes still think they are right). 14-year-olds almost never question themselves, and like good actors, believe that everything they do is the right thing to do. They are optimistic until given ample reason to be otherwise. When I began each scene, I fought against playing it as though I knew what was coming. In my first scene with Melchior, I tried to treat him as though I was unaware of the duet we were about to sing together. In the hayloft scene, I entered with the intention of gaining forgiveness and only once I achieved that did it occur to me that it might go further. I still experienced guilt, but didn't allow it to bring me down until I fully understood its origin, in the scene with my mother. In that scene and the abortionist scene that followed, I still hoped for the best until I realized that was no longer possible. Once I felt secure as Wendla physically and emotionally, the performance was easy. I no longer had to consciously think about making choices Wendla would

make, but trusted that I was so in touch with the character that she would behave however she needed to in the moment, using my body as a vehicle through which to communicate.

The freedom I ultimately found as an actor didn't always translate when singing. This was the first full-length belty, contemporary show I have done. To further complicate things, I was also juggling a role in the opera and my junior recital in the conservatory. I discovered in the first few weeks of rehearsal that I could not sustain all of these rehearsals without taking better care of myself. There were times when I was unable to sing due to illness. Once I was past that, I continued to lose my voice from overuse and misuse.

My Baldwin Wallace voice teacher, Benjamin, gave me some techniques that are frequently given to singers recovering from surgery. These techniques, developed by well-known pedagogue, Joseph Stemple, helped with efficiency of breath and clarity of sound.⁸³ As both a classical and musical theater singer, I find that I release too much of my air too soon, resulting in a breathy tone and tension in my neck and tongue. This set of six exercises had me parse out my breath so that I could sing longer phrases with less tension.⁸⁴ In addition to these exercises, Benjamin had me use a straw to focus my breath. When I put this straw in water and blew bubbles while singing, I was able to hear and see how consistent my bubbles were throughout my range, which told me how efficiently I was using my breath in all parts of my voice. He also had me put the straw under my tongue to allow my

⁸³ Benjamin Czarnota, "Stemple Technique" (Lecture, Voice Lesson, Baldwin Wallace, Berea, September 15, 2016).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

tongue to relax over it.⁸⁵ When I did this, I began to experience more frontal resonance and less tension in my tongue and jaw. These techniques helped my classical sound as well as my musical theatre sound and warmed me up in a healthy and relaxed way. The main difference, as far as I can tell, between legit singing and belt/mixing is in the amount of breath and efficiency required for each. The latter needs more breath used more efficiently. When we try to get someone's attention across the room by calling their name, we are essentially using the same mechanism used by contemporary musical theater singers to belt. Everything begins from a place of speech so that song does not come as a surprise, but is instead a logical extension of what preceded it.

In *Spring Awakening*, I changed my technique depending on the demands and emotions of the song. In the first verse of "Mama who bore me," I sang everything in my head voice but when the tune returned a second time, I felt that my character had no choice but to belt it, given her emotional state at the time. I did something similar in "Whispering," alternating between a mix and a belt. What I considered to be the moments of reflection, I sang in my head voice and what I thought were thoughts of the future or decisions, I belted. While these decisions were mostly solidified during rehearsal, the music presented me with another challenge in performance. In our production, the musicians were onstage the entire time, behind the actors. We used monitors to see the conductor, but often it was difficult to tell if he was cueing the actors or the band. Since I didn't think Wendla would've been concerned about watching a monitor, I had to find ways to stay in character and also

⁸⁵ Benjamin Czarnota, "Stemple Technique" (Lecture, Voice Lesson, Baldwin Wallace, Berea, September 15, 2016).

look to the vomms for cues. I found this to be especially hard in “The Guilty Ones,” when I was not blocked to face a vom, but had to find a logical reason as to why Wendla might want to be looking there. I came up with the idea that perhaps Wendla was too ashamed to even look at Melchior after they had sex and that by turning away and rejecting his touch, I could both communicate something about my character while also adhering to the demands of the music.

Other than this, my only real obstacle in performance was my mental health and my inability to sleep. As I reflect upon my experience in this show, my biggest takeaway is the importance of learning how to slip into and *out of* character. I was successful in putting my character’s needs before my own, but in so doing, I forgot to treat myself, without whom the character could not exist, with respect.

Looking Ahead

After our Wednesday preview, Ms. Caroline approached me and asked me if I was doing alright. At the time, I thought, “of course I’m alright...I’m doing what I love every night.” Little did I know I was about to lose three days of sleep as a result of the show. Strangely enough, one of the first things I wrote in my journal was that I thought Wendla probably had a hard time sleeping, constantly plagued by thoughts and questions. Even though I had read and studied the original play a few months before, I didn’t realize until much later that Wendla actually has a line about her inability to sleep. When asked by her mother where she gets such wild ideas, she responds, “ I get them at night when I can’t fall asleep.”⁸⁶ Unfortunately, my suspicions became reality when I found myself unable to sleep for the first three

⁸⁶ Frank Wedekind and Jonathan Franzen, *Spring Awakening* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011), 8.

nights of performance. I often have trouble sleeping before a show opens because I'm nervous or running lines in my sleep, but I thought for sure I would have no trouble sleeping after our first performance since I knew I had put in the work and was prepared. What this said to me was that I had indeed succeeded in becoming my character but I had not figured out how to escape her.

While it didn't prevent me from performing, the lack of sleep did inhibit my performance in a number of ways. I found that by the third day of not really sleeping, I was so exhausted that my eyes could not focus on anything. This severely limited my ability to think and act freely as my character onstage as I was preoccupied thinking about making it through the performance. The fatigue carried into my singing and made it difficult for me to access my chest voice and lower register as I had been doing effortlessly with Benjamin. Given how tired I was, I was unable to take full advantage of the freedom I had worked so hard to achieve in rehearsal. It wasn't until I hung up my costume for the last time and said a small prayer to my character that I was finally able to become myself again. I now understand that in order to have longevity in the theatre, one must learn not only how to build a character, but also how to return to a point of stasis following a performance.

Every night before I went onstage, I sat in the dressing room and flipped through my journal as a way of dropping into the character. My "moment before" involved me walking by a cross, so I drew a cross on the bulletin board that I would pass every night on my way from the dressing room to the stage. In other words, ritual helped me get into character so it is logical that it would also help me to get

out. In much the same way that I began each night looking at pictures that spoke to Wendla, perhaps I needed to end the night looking at images that resonated with me. Rather than try and *shed* the character, as I tried to do with a nighttime face mask routine, perhaps I should instead re-assume the character of Amy.

In doing a ritual like this, I also hope that it can be used as a means of self-encouragement. In my opinion, the biggest obstacle in performance is psychological, having to do with a lack of confidence. Many performers are fundamentally insecure as so much of what we do is dictated by the opinions of those watching us. Moving forward, I challenge myself to find a way of critiquing my performance without being self-destructive. I am always eager to reflect on what I did and constantly seek out the opinions of my friends and family. I hope that in the future I can be kinder to myself and trust that if I have done the work, as I did in this production, my performance will be the best it could be.

The success I had in performing the role of Wendla is the result of many factors, but my journal was by far the most invaluable component. I stated earlier that my initial research didn't directly impact my performance, but perhaps that was an overstatement. While I cannot draw specific correlations between that work and individual moments within the realization of the show, I would like to think that this material impacted my overall approach to the show and distinguished my performance. Future research might be more specific to the show and will explore social conditions that would specifically impact my character's choices and behaviors in performance. In a revival of *Spring Awakening*, I would study the impact of religion on late nineteenth-century society, living conditions in provincial

Germany during that time, daily lives of teenagers from that era, and perhaps the school curriculum and treatment of women versus men. More specific research like this would more clearly connect my journal and my acting. The journal itself will stay largely the same, though I would be well served by relating my objectives and actions to specific lines from the script, which should be divided into beats. I also think my mental health could benefit from daily or even weekly reflection about rehearsal. This would remind me to separate myself from the rehearsal process and create clearer boundaries between communicating in and out of character. One thing I learned is that there is just as much, if not more, to be gained by doing something wrong as there is by doing something right.

Writing this thesis is bittersweet as it marks the end of my journey with this beautiful show. I remember saying in an acting class a year ago that I felt I was on the verge of a breakthrough. Well, I *made* that breakthrough. As I reflect on my experience as Wendla in the musical adaptation of *Spring Awakening*, I leave with the confidence of knowing how to approach naturalism, how to tackle multiple shows at one time, how to switch vocal styles, how to better communicate with a director, and how to fully embrace a character. My adolescent spring has passed, so to speak (and unlike my character, I survived it), and I am eager to continue using what I learned as I embark on new journeys with other characters, like Wendla, whose stories will not be “left behind.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Steven Sater, *A purple summer. Notes on the lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2013), 56.

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