

BROCK'S BANTER: The Power of Knowledge

By Brock Weir

Nobody wants to be a captive audience, but sometimes it is just easier ? and more fruitful ? to simply go with the flow.

Last Wednesday night I had the pleasure of sitting through the final dress rehearsal of the musical *Spring Awakening*, now on stage at Theatre Aurora.

Brought to life by director Sergio Calderon and a cast of 13, it is a potent and evocative mix of teen angst, sex, and the exploration of sexuality, sexual identity, intolerance, abortion, and rape.

You're right; this is no *Sound of Music*. Despite the iconic Rodgers & Hammerstein musical being set in Austria, and this period musical by Steven Slater and Duncan Sheik set next door in Germany, it is there the similarities end.

There are no happy-go-lucky nuns or lonely goatherds here in this unusually gritty tale.

That is not to say taking in *Spring Awakening* is not a fun and indulgent way to spend an evening, because it certainly is, but it provides plenty of food for thought.

One of the plot threads that particularly caught my attention was the relationship between the enlightened leading man Melchior and his naïve, sheltered leading lady Wendla.

Although his knowledge of the sex is largely limited to knowledge gleaned from books ? and trial and error ? Melchior, by comparison to his peers, is a ?man of the world.? The same can't be said for Wendla, who can't even root out from her mother how and why her married sister is popping out kids faster than the Kaiser is popping out machines of war.

The teens eventually give into their base desires, Melchior knowing full well what the outcome could be, but Wendla having no inkling whatsoever that a quick roll in the hay could result in something tangible nine months down the road.

It raises the question of whether Wendla, with such a deficit of knowledge could possibly be in a position to give consent to Melchior, a very modern question posed in material going back 125 years.

It certainly piqued my own curiosity and arriving home after the show I headed over to my bookshelf and pulled a volume I hadn't picked up in quite a while ? ?Purity & Truth: What A Young Man Ought To Know? by Sylvanus Stall.

Dating from 1897, it is something I picked up as a voracious collector of the weird and wonderful, rather than as how-to manual foisted upon me by my parents. Nevertheless, it provides some interesting reading and a synopsis of future volumes in the ?Self & Sex Series? including what young boys and girls ?ought to know.?

The difference between the sexes is quite revealing.

According to the synopses, young boys ought to be aware of the ?reproductive power? God has bestowed in him, ?the difference between creating and making?, ?the mama and papa nature? in a stalk of corn, an oyster, a flower, schools of fish, nesting birds, and in the Garden of Eden.

Moving onto the spicier stuff, the book touches upon ?the manner in which the reproductive organs are injured in boys by abuse? compared to other animals, ?the consequences in boys of the abuse [of said organs], need for proper information, how to preserve their bodies in purity and strength,? and so on.

As for the girls?

Well, it's quite simple: ?the origin of life? (as illustrated by the relationship between seed and soil, and the birds and the bees), ?fishes and their young ? the parent fishes and the baby fishes, the seeds of plants and eggs of fishes, how fishes never know their baby offspring, lessons from birds, the relationship between parent and child, the body being a temple to keep holy? and the importance of receiving ?their instruction from their mother.?

From that, I think it is safe to surmise that the boys were slightly better equipped to enter the 20th Century compared to their female counterparts. If knowledge is power, the girls, undoubtedly by design, were in a distinct disadvantage.

But is knowledge really power? Recent events have certainly called that into question.

Almost all of us were raised in the belief that knowledge is indeed power. If we were lucky enough to grow up in a family where the resources were available to support a university or college education, or any part thereof, this was held as the standard to shoot for. Alarming, however, it seems that knowledge and education in and of itself are acquiring something of a stigma, being a breeding ground for ?elitism? and those against the public at large.

The fact that aspiring to higher education is being seen as elitist is alarming in itself, but so are the consequences.

The examples in the United States are self-evident, with men and women with some sort of post-secondary education overwhelmingly choosing one presidential candidate over another, those in the other camp railing against the ?elites? and the

characteristics ascribed to them, yet themselves being unable to discern between real and fake news.

Now, for better or worse, we know what that potent cocktail can lead to.

But what of Canada?

While some of those aspiring to succeed Justin Trudeau in 2019 are railing against this 'other?', seeming to be defined loosely as (a) those with resources, (b) those with education, or (c) all of the above, there is a common pattern when push comes to shove in a school budget.

The first items invariably to hit the chopping block are arts-related subjects, often the only outlet students have for creative and intellectual self-expression, followed by the always beleaguered Civics, the very lessons of which teach students the rights they have and how to fight for the issues they hold dear.

Together, both subjects are integral in ensuring the up-and-coming generation have the wherewithal to be critical thinkers, but they are somehow seen as expendable.

Recently, however, I was heartened to see a swift response to a November article in Macleans which suggested the Province is 'quietly floating the idea of removing the mandatory civics course' as a requirement of education.

The thankfully overwhelming backlash to that trial balloon prompted the Ministry to issue a statement to allay fears that this is not the case.

'The passionate outcry to protect the Civics course over the past few days was inspiring to me as a Minister of Education, but also as a member of the elected assembly whose main job is to serve the people who gave me this responsibility by casting a vote,' responded the Minister. 'Students have contacted my office and told me about how Civics inspired them to get involved in public service, to consider roles that enhance our freedoms and rights as Canadians, and for some very ambitious young leaders out there, I have heard about how this course has piqued their interest in one day having my job as a Minister of the Crown.'

'It is a right and a freedom to be engaged in this very democratic discussion about education in our province, and keeping Civics in our schools is integral in shaping young people to become Canada's next generation of engaged citizens.'

But it is also important to ensure young people realise that education, regardless of the path taken, is integral for them to be fully equipped in life, something to be celebrated, and it is not an aspiration for which they will be mocked when anger and dissatisfaction in other quarters bubble to the surface.

Civics teachers of tomorrow might have quite a task ahead of them.