Coterie to open season with ‘Spring Awakening’

Tony-winning musical about teen sexuality will be for audiences 13 and older.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL The Kansas City Star

Noah Whitmore plays Moritz and Shelby Floyd plays Ilse in the Coterie's fall staging of the Tony winning rock musical. Photo for The Coterie: Brenna Paxton

For years the Coterie Theatre has pushed the boundaries of acceptability when it comes to what a children’s theater can and can’t do.

Some shows are clearly aimed at young-adult audiences, while others fit comfortably in the educational niche designed to get busloads of kids into the theater.

So it’s not so surprising that the respected theater company in Crown Center will kick off its 2012-13 season with “Spring Awakening,” an edgy rock musical about teenagers discovering their sexuality. This will be the first Kansas City production of the show, which claimed eight Tony Awards on Broadway. The book and lyrics are by Steven
Sater; Duncan Sheik wrote the music. They based the show on an 1890s play by Frank Wedekind.

“Spring Awakening” will be part of the Coterie at Night series, which means no daytime performances for school groups. The viewing age is 13 and older. The Coterie’s promotional materials clearly alert potential theatergoers to the show’s sexual situations and strong language.

“The purpose of Coterie at Night shows was to do pop culture and not necessarily school-curriculum shows,” Jeff Church, the Coterie’s artistic director, said. “We wanted to free ourselves from the shackles of doing only shows for educational value.”

The themes of sexual discovery and responsibility seemed appropriate, Church said, in light of the 20th anniversary of the company’s Dramatic Health Education Project. The program, in which the Coterie partners with the University of Kansas and University of Missouri-Kansas City medical schools, was originally called the Dramatic AIDS Education Project. It provides information to school kids about safe sex and the effects of sexually transmitted diseases.

“‘Spring Awakening’ is a show about teenagers who are kept in a state of ignorance by the adults, resulting in bad things,” Church said.

For the Coterie to snag the rights to a show you might reasonably expect to see at the Unicorn or as an independent production at the Off Center Theatre or Just Off Broadway is a moral victory in Church’s view.

“The Coterie doesn’t get to do plays that win a bunch of Tonys,” he said. “That’s the sorry state of theater for young audiences, to be honest.”

The Coterie for several years has carved out a niche for itself by taking Broadway musicals and trimming them down to a one-act running time and editing the material specifically for young audiences. But Church said that’s not the case with “Spring Awakening.”

“What’s confusing for people is that we are not editing this show,” he said. “We’re not expurgating it at all. I do believe the show in New York had a small amount of nudity, and we’re not doing that, but the content is totally unchanged.”

Church will direct the show. Anthony Edwards will be the music director and, in an unconventional approach, Church has hired three choreographers: David Ollington, Vanessa Severo and Tiffany Powell.

“Spring Awakening” runs Sept. 6-30.

Overlapping with “Spring Awakening” will be “Dear America: Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie,” which will run Sept. 12-30 in daytime performances only. Julie
Jensen’s adaptation of Kristiana Gregory’s book tells the story of young Hattie Campbell, who treks west with her family in 1847 from Independence to Oregon. The play tempers her youthful optimism with the sometimes harsh realities of traveling overland by wagon. Amanda Kibler, the Coterie’s new education director, will direct.

The rest of the season:

• “The Presidents,” the Coterie’s annual touring show, will play area schools Oct. 2 through Dec. 21. It’s a lighthearted musical about two Secret Service agents on Air Force One recounting the history of the presidency in song. The show is in the style of “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)” and similar comic compressions of voluminous history. The book and lyrics are by Steven Cole Hughes, the music by Jessica Jackson. The show will mark the professional directing debut of Tosin Morohunfola.

• “Shrek the Musical,” Oct. 30-Dec. 30. This will be the world premiere of the young-audiences version of the show, which Church received permission to create. The version staged on Broadway, with its huge cast and elaborate effects, would be beyond the capability of any young-audiences theater, Church said. The producers and authors — composer Jeanine Tesori and lyricist David Lindsay-Abaire — are allowing the Coterie a free hand in adapting the material. Church said he expects the abbreviated version to be licensed widely after the Coterie’s premiere.

• “Number the Stars,” Jan. 22-Feb. 21, 2013. Based on Lois Lowry’s award-winning novel for young readers, the show dramatizes the efforts of a Danish family to help Jewish neighbors escape during the Nazi occupation in World War II. Cynthia Levin directs.

• “Tell-Tale Electric Poe,” Feb. 23-March 10, 2013. This reprises a popular show the Coterie first staged in 2009, matching an actor’s performance of stories and poems by Edgar Allan Poe to a live score performed on electric guitar by Rex Hobart (also known as Scott Hobart when he’s designing and building sets for the Coterie). In 2009 the actor was Bruce Roach. This time the spoken-word material will be performed by Hughston Walkinshaw, who has been seen in several shows at the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre. (This production will tour to schools in January and February.)

• “Slashdance!” by Ron Megee, March/April 2013. Specific dates will be announced later. Megee combines the basic plot of “Flashdance” with a horrifying survival tale involving virus-infected cannibals. This, as you might suspect, is part of the Coterie at Night series.

• “Bud, Not Buddy,” April 9-May 24, 2013. Reginald Andre Jackson’s adaptation of the novel by Christopher Paul Curtis is a tale set in the Great Depression about an orphan who goes in search of the bandleader he believes to be his father. The director will be Scot Copeland, producing director of the Nashville Children’s Theatre.
• “Lyle the Crocodile,” June 18-Aug. 4, 2013. The Bernard Waber book is adapted by Kevin Kling with music by Richard Gray. The Coterie has produced the non-musical version of “Lyle” before, but never this version. The show will be co-directed by Missy Koonce and Ron Megee, who will also be actors in the production.

In addition to the regular season, the Coterie will also present its annual Young Playwrights’ Festival showcasing the work of promising young writers from the Kansas City area April 24-25, 2013.