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There's a 'Spring' in the director's step

Paul heads up "Spring Awakening" at Round House

BY THOMAS FLOYD

Alan Paul prides himself on being one of the hardest-working stage directors around. But there was a stretch, in 2018, when he became weighed down by his onstage obligations.

As Paul directed four productions that opened within the space of six months — "Camelot," "Romeo and Juliet" and "The Comedy of Errors" for D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company, and "Kiss Me, Kate" at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre — the Potomac native turned to candy, pizza and other vices to help endure the stress,

putting on pounds in the process.

"I was like, 'I have got to get this under control so that if this happens again, I know how to do that,'" Paul says.

It's happening again, as Paul has taken on another string of high-profile productions this theater season: "Cabaret," which had an extended run at Olney Theatre Center through October; the world premiere of "Peter Pan and Wendy," which debuted in December at the Shakespeare Theatre; and the rock musical "Spring Awakening," which launched Jan. 22 at Round House Theatre.

The 35-year-old says he has im-

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SPRING AWAKENING
Round House Theatre,
4545 East-West Hwy., Bethesda.
240-644-1100.
roundhousetheatre.org.
Dates: Through Feb. 23.
Prices: \$56-\$83.

TOP: From left, Kalen Robinson, Cristina Sastre and Chani Wereley appear in "Spring Awakening." **LEFT:** Director Alan Paul is in the midst of another prolific season that has seen him shepherd three major shows: "Cabaret," "Peter Pan and Wendy" and "Spring Awakening."

proved his diet this time around, trading junk food for salads. He also worked more exercise into his routine, at times using rehearsal breaks to hit the treadmill instead of napping.

"Now I think about it like an athlete," Paul says. "You have to get yourself in a physical and emotional mind-set. Everyone is looking to you, so you can't get tired."

Developing that mentality is just the latest step in the theater wunderkind's evolution. Upon graduating from Northwestern University in 2006, Paul landed an internship at the Shakespeare Theatre, swiftly working his way up the ranks. Over the past decade, he has served as the company's associate artistic director while booking gigs directing theater and opera at venues across the country.

But the challenge of directing "Cabaret," "Peter Pan" and "Spring Awakening" in a row has been uniquely taxing for Paul, with all three productions calling for an ambitious vision, sprawling cast and crew and complicated rehearsal process. The director's affinity for spreadsheets, which he uses to meticulously organize each production's logistical hurdles, has proved invaluable.

And Paul, who reveres heightened storytelling and acknowledges being "bored" by kitchen sink realism, wouldn't have it any other way.

"He's able to see the big picture," says Simon Godwin, who took over from Michael Kahn as the Shakespeare Theatre's artis-

tic director last year. "You have to be a pragmatist as well as a visionary, and Alan brings together those two sides of being a director extremely well. That's why he's able to commandeer the trust of all of these theaters, which are giving him their biggest shows."

After visualizing a vibrant Weimar Republic-era nightclub for Olney and soaring to Neverland with "Peter Pan" — a particularly complex production that included sword fights, puppetry, flight choreography and a live dog — Paul has ventured to late 19th-century Germany for "Spring Awakening."

The Tony-winning musical, which premiered on Broadway in 2006 with a score by Duncan Sheik and a book and lyrics by Steven Sater (based on a 1891 play by Frank Wedekind), focuses on a group of repressed teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality. With the help of scenic designer Adam Rigg and lighting designer Colin K. Bills, Paul depicts the dichotomy between the characters' outward innocence and inner anxiety with contrasting imagery: an expansive mural of the Garden of Eden that looms over the stage and neon-lit bars that come to life during the musical numbers.

"The metaphor that's been exciting to me is of Adam and Eve," Paul says. "The play begins in the 1890s, where you have an old view of sexuality that is romantic, and maybe a worldview that's very structured and formal. So that backdrop is idyllic and pastoral. Then there's what those teenagers were feeling, which is neon and alive and a tingling of finger-



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Cristina Sastre, left, and Evan Daves star in "Spring Awakening" at Round House Theatre. The Tony-winning musical focuses on a group of repressed teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality.

tips in every part of their bodies."

Beyond "Spring Awakening's" headbanging spectacle, Paul knew he also needed to unpack the musical's challenging subject matter, which includes depression, suicide, domestic abuse and questions of consent. So he worked intimately with the cast to ensure that his production portrayed the story with sensitivity.

"He's created a really safe and collaborative space for us to explore this piece," says Cristina Sastre, who plays the lead role of Wendla. "He has this sixth sense

where he can tell if this is a moment where we need to be serious and focused, or if this is a moment where people need to laugh."

With the run for "Spring Awakening" underway, Paul plans to take a brief breath (and enjoy a well-earned getaway to Florida) before diving into his next directorial assignment: a production of "The Wedding Singer" that opens in May at the Village Theatre in Issaquah, Wash.

In the meantime, Paul continues to help supervise the Shakespeare Theatre's current season

and plan the company's 2020-21 lineup. Looking ahead, Godwin envisions a day in which his second-in-command is not just helming individual productions but has an entire theater company under his stewardship.

"I'm certain he's going to become one of the next cultural leaders in American theater," Godwin says. "He's a very generous, fair-minded, balanced person who is already a leader in the rehearsal room, and I'm sure the leadership of a building won't be far away."

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