

staged with beautiful visual appeal.

When the online magazine *Edge* (www.edge.org) asked people to respond to the question: "What is your dangerous idea?", references to Galileo arose at the very beginning, Walter Bilderback pointed out in his interview with Norman Roessler. The insights Galileo gained from looking through his telescope still provoke us today. Edgar translated Brecht's "Teleskop," "Fernrohr" or "Rohr" colloquially and humorously as "tube," and once Galileo even pointed his "tube" directly at the audience – a form of Brechtian alienation. We were examined and asked to think about the many debates and controversies surrounding science today: evolution, cloning and stem cell research, artificial intelligence, scholastic freedom, or global warming. It was the great achievement of this excellent production to keep Brecht's play alive and participate in the timeless search for a responsible and free scientific inquiry.

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LONG FORM: ESSAYS, REVIEWS, INTERVIEWS

LOST AND FOUND IN A DAREDEVIL RENOVATING FRANK WEDEKIND'S *SPRING AWAKENING* AS A ROCK MUSICAL

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Based on Frank Wedekind's banned 1891 play Spring Awakening - of all unexpected choices - the major achievement of everyone involved in the musical version is to have found the modern within Wedekind's stifling, repressive world (New York Observer).¹

The German playwright Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) was known for producing plays that were controversial, shocking and dramaturgically complex. Although very much a product of their historical moment, his plays incorporated a variety of aesthetic styles that anticipated future developments in expressionism and the theatre of the absurd. In his seminal work, *Spring Awakening* (1891) for example, Wedekind employs a pastiche of motifs that include the grotesque, black comedy, and tragedy. Two teenage lovers defy the oppressiveness of their provincial late-nineteenth-century German village, awaken their mutual sexual attraction, and engage in a carnal relationship. A generational conflict ensues, as the desires of youth are counterpoised against the adult-induced moral codes of bourgeois society. Thus, Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, particularly when considered within its cultural and historical context, functioned as a subversive work that challenged the hypocrisy, taboos, and conservatism of the German establishment.

The composer and librettist / lyricist team of Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater have created a rock musical rendition of Wedekind's play that ran during the spring of 2006 at the Atlantic Theatre Company, before moving to Broadway later that December at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre. As the above quote suggests, they have reconfigured Wedekind's modern classic into a form that is accessible

for contemporary audiences, most specifically Broadway, while also appealing to young adults. Sater and Sheik's endeavor raises questions about authorship and efficacy in adapting a canonical work such as *Spring Awakening* into a context that is linguistically, culturally, and structurally remote. To what extent does the rock musical reconstitute the form and content of the original? Conversely, in what ways does the cultural, historical, and social milieu of the source text correspond with contemporary society? Ultimately, what is gained and lost from such an exchange? My aim critically is to demonstrate the functionality of adapting a modern classical play into a rock musical. By comparing the original *Spring Awakening* with Sater and Sheik's version, I will analyze each work within its historical and cultural moment, before looking at the ways that they either coincide or remain remote from each other. I hope to ascertain the ways in which the rock musical bases itself in the form and content of the original. Therefore, topics such as spectatorship, artistic form, and dramatic structure will be addressed in conjunction with locating either work in context, beginning with Wedekind's Germany and then moving to the current social climate informing the Sater / Sheik rendition. Finally, I will depict the rock musical as a functional adaptation that, for the most part, maintains the "spirit" of the original.

Spring Awakening was written in 1891, at a time when Germany had been recently unified under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck, and the country was defined by unprecedented nationalism, imperialism, and social conservatism. It is the latter trait that most disagreed with the twenty-six year old Wedekind, as he sought a bohemian lifestyle of sexual openness, drunkenness, and adventure. Like his spiritual mentor, Friedrich Nietzsche, he continually rejected the cultural oppressiveness of German society, seeking a world given to sensuality instead of rationalism, nihilism rather than order; one that responded to the visceral drives of being alive, not the socially indoctrinated mores identified by the church, government, and bourgeois. By attacking such institutions in his poems and journal articles, which landed him in prison, Wedekind established himself as an iconoclast, as indicated by his biographer Sol Gittleman: "The full force of civilized morality was mobilized against Wedekind and against the taboos which it refused to confront."² It is through this worldview that Wedekind wrote *Spring Awakening*.

Wedekind's play is a remarkably complex achievement that stylistically can be traced to early-nineteenth-century dramatists such as Georg Büchner and Christian Dietrich Grabbe. Like his predecessors, Wedekind departed from the conventional dramaturgical techniques of his time, while embracing a multifaceted aesthetic that included elements of symbolism and expressionism. Although it was not his first work, *Spring Awakening* is considered to be the play that established Wedekind as a serious dramatist.³ In it he employs a fragmented dramatic structure that functions as a montage of contrapuntal motifs ranging from the poetic to the grotesque, the realistic to the fantastic, and the sentimental to the bizarre. Moreover, it can also be read as a melodrama, tragicomedy, or a morality play, insofar as it makes a clear moral statement by establishing a narrative comprised of good and evil forces that includes elements of humor and tragedy. In short, *Spring Awakening* is a rich dramaturgical feat that conjoins both form and content to address the oppressiveness of contemporaneous German society.

The themes addressed in Wedekind's play are still relevant today, particularly

in an American context. While American society may not be as overtly puritanical as late-nineteenth-century Germany, issues like sexual repression, sex education - or lack thereof - adolescent violence, and generational conflict persist, as exemplified most recently by the Duke University lacrosse team fiasco and the Virginia Tech massacre.⁴ Indeed, it was in the wake of the Columbine tragedy that Sater had the impulse to create the rock musical, as indicated by his remarks shared with me in a recent interview:

I knew the play a long time and loved the play. It captured the anguish and cries of young people. Its themes could be well served through a contemporary rock musical that appeals to young people, especially after the shootings of Columbine. We wanted to touch the troubled heart of young people around the world with this show.⁵

As Sater indicates, *Spring Awakening* has the capability to connect with younger audiences by speaking to their personal experiences, particularly as it pertains to their struggle for a reassuring identity and place in society. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by the play's homosexual relationship (Hänschen and Ernst) and the obvious correlation we could make to adolescence, sexual orientation, and peer acceptance in a contemporary context.

Moreover, our current moment also aligns with the play's socio-political tropes. As Edward Bond states in the introduction to his translation of the work:

The play isn't out of date. It becomes more relevant as our armies get stronger, our schools, prisons and bombs bigger, our means imposing discipline more veiled, and our self-knowledge not much greater.⁶

Indeed, in our age of globalization and mass production we are simultaneously encountering a degradation of individualism that echoes Wedekind's historical moment. Just as Germany exhibited unprecedented nationalism, imperialism, and conservatism, which ultimately resulted in the rise of Nazism during the 1930s - the hiccup of the Weimar Republic notwithstanding - today in America we can likewise identify a culture governed by strict moral codes. Although ours might be more subtly organized, from the way we educate our children, to the politicians we elect and the churches that populate our communities, America's cultural conservatism is pervasive, and can be likened to the soulless milieu of Wedekind's late-nineteenth-century Germany. Therefore, one can assume that a rock musical rendition of *Spring Awakening* would be a creative, sensible, and illuminating way of capturing the text's rebellious content.

In *The Theatre Will Rock*, Elizabeth Wollman identifies the rock musical as a "subgenre" of the American musical that functions as a social history. Rock 'n' roll's association with rebelliousness lends to a theatrical style and dramatic narrative that caters to a countercultural impulse. This was very much the case with *Hair* (1967), for example, which was a product of its time both in form and content, as it used rock 'n' roll as the basis for constructing a thematically oriented

plotline that addressed its historical moment. Issues such as resisting the Vietnam War, experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs, and the sexual revolution were foregrounded through a range of loosely connected vignettes set to rock music. In addition to being an artistic and commercial success, *Hair* has since served as the prototype for numerous rock musicals that have likewise used the form to intersect with themes akin to a given time period. For instance, whereas *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* reflected the revival of American Christianity in the early 1970s, Jonathon Larson's *Rent* and *Tick Tick Boom* both captured the struggles and plights of young adults living in New York City during the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁷

Although Sater and Shiek's *Spring Awakening* differs from *Hair*,⁸ we can also see similarities in the two works. In addition to possessing diverse scores that consist of rock 'n' roll motifs ranging from pop to punk, their content hinges on a generational struggle that depicts youthful rebellion against cultural systems identified by established institutions: religion, education, and government. Moreover, they both forego scenic spectacle in favor of a minimalist setting, break the convention of the fourth wall and use direct address - thereby suggesting a style reminiscent of a "rock concert" - and provide rousing finales that signify youth's triumph over a tragic loss. Most significantly, they use the sounds of rock 'n' roll to define characters while evoking a transgressive impulse. *Spring Awakening* establishes this technique at its outset when Melchior's "All That's Known" sardonically defies the rigidity of the educational system:

*All that's known in history, in science, overthrown at school, at home, by blind men. You doubt them, and soon they bark and hound you till everything you say is just another bad about you.*⁹

While "All That's Known" possesses a soft rock motif, much in the spirit of the late Kurt Cobain, it is immediately followed by the rebellious punk sounds of Moritz and the boys bellowing "The Bitch of Living." In both cases, Melchior and Moritz join their peers to represent their rebelliousness through the lyrics and its defiant cadence, while exhibiting the essence of Wedekind's original. Indeed, the songs are the most effective part of the Sater / Sheik adaptation, as they conflate form and content to offer an insightful view of the narrative's younger generation. Whereas "The Bitch of Living" features the oppressive educational environment of the adolescent males, "My Junk" includes their female counterparts in an anthem that reaffirms teenage identity with an anachronistic touch: "I go to my room and turn the stereo on!"¹⁰ In a poignant musical alteration, "Touch Me" depicts the entire youth ensemble in a rock fugue centered on the discovery of masturbation. Repeatedly, the group implicitly sings, "when I go there..." into their handheld microphones while expressing the joy, confusion, and pangs of their sexual awakening.¹¹ Perhaps the most compelling reconfiguration of the original into song comes at the end of the rock musical's first act, during Melchior and Wendla's consummation scene. Whereas the play uses a brief scene to depict this significant plot event, Sater and Sheik incorporate it within a combination of spoken dialogue and delicately sung chords, thereby expanding temporally and dramatically beyond the source text. Michael Mayer's staging in the Broadway

production complements this effective elaboration, as the youth ensemble also appears onstage to underscore the singing of the principals with punctuated vocal and physical interjections. As a result, the youthful eroticism of Wedekind's text becomes aesthetically reconstituted by the music and choreography, and thus, echoes the spirit of the original within the context of a contemporary spectatorship.

If Sater and Sheik's adaptation effectively assimilates Wedekind's younger characters, it fails to account for the dramaturgical function of the older ones. The play's central conflict is constructed along generational planes. As previously mentioned, *Spring Awakening* was a product of Wedekind's rebellion against the authority figures and institutions of his time. As a result, his play's dramatic tension juxtaposes the evil machinations of its older figures against its younger victims, with the former representing the repressive mores of nineteenth-century Germany and the latter serving as examples of the system's social conditioning. Melchior functions as the primary challenge to the establishment, but is ultimately silenced; Moritz and Wendla are tragic casualties in a society in which parents are more concerned with their reputations than with the very existence of their children.¹² Wedekind exemplifies this struggle through a wholly unsympathetic rendering of twenty adult characters that collectively foil their younger counterparts. With fingerprint names like Headmaster Sunstroke and Professor Bonebreaker, Wedekind creates a symbolic and expressionistic depiction of modern Germany, most notably exhibited in Melchior's makeshift trial scene. An unseemly group of schoolmasters publicly condemns Melchior for allegedly causing Moritz's suicide by compromising his moral sensibilities; a "degenerate" letter is the evidence they use against him.¹³ In addition to upholding the play's dramatic conflict, Wedekind's grotesque treatment of the establishment metatextually functions to criticize the hierarchy of nineteenth-century Germany. In the rock musical, however, Sater and Sheik cut the adults out of this scene, and instead offer a "rock-a-billy" number entitled "Totally Fucked." Sung by the entire youth ensemble, this catchy song is interesting yet fails to illuminate the text, or capture the nuance, absurdity, and dramaturgical function of the scenic event. In fact, Sater and Sheik assign two actors to represent the entire adult world throughout their adaptation, which, along with the numerous omissions of individual characters, creates an unbalanced narrative that dissipates the tension underscoring the original.

The rock musical's treatment of the final scene marks its greatest departure from the source text. Whereas the play's culminating moment is replete with stylistic nuance, the adaptation is no more than a formulaic rendering of a conventional musical: the dramatic tension is resolved, a "happy ending" installed, and a triumphant finale rings down the curtain. The difference between the two versions is most clearly identified by Sater and Sheik's omission of Wedekind's mysterious Masked Man figure.¹⁴ While Moritz is resurrected from the dead as originally scripted, Wendla also reappears and thus replaces the Masked Man, and both of them successfully convince Melchior not to kill himself. Once again the lack of an adult character deprives the narrative dramatic tension, as the hopeful ending is never in doubt. Indeed, with little effort, they inspire their friend to quit his suicidal impulse and inspire him "through love" to continue living.¹⁵ Whereas Wedekind's Masked Man functions as a multifaceted dramaturgical device ex-

hibiting elements of symbolism within a scene that is as grotesque and austere as it is prophetic and comedic, Sater and Sheik omit the character and romanticize the play's ending. Wendla and Moritz rescue Melchior from himself, a hopeful message prevails, and the entire cast - the youth ensemble as well as the two adult actors--two, not three share in a resounding anthem of love: "I believe there is love in heaven, all will be forgiven!"¹⁶ Never mind that this is the very generation whose children, also taught to conform, will give rise to the Nazis in forty years.

Furthermore, Sater and Sheik's treatment of the final scene departs from Wedekind's use of language and replaces it with song. *Spring Awakening* is considered by many scholars to be a forerunner to theatrical expressionism, which is demonstrated by the way its rich prose offers insight to Melchior's psychological turbulence. For example, when he enters the graveyard, Wedekind provides him with a mellifluous monologue that in both form and content express his tormented soul:

*Melchior: Ich muß drüben unter den letzten suchen! - Der Wind pfeift auf jedem Stein aus einer anderen Tonart - eine beklemmende Symphonie! - Die morschen Kränze reißen entzwei und baumeln an ihren langen Fäden stückweise um die Marmorkreuze - ein Wald von Vogelscheuchen! - Vogelscheuchen auf allen Gräbern, eine greulicher als die andere - haushohe, vor denen die Teufel Reißaus nehmen.*¹⁷

*I must look for new ones over there! The wind whistles around each stone in another key [meaning it is atonal] - an oppressive symphony! The wreaths of death [meaning the wreaths of flowers created for funerals] are ripening and dangle their long threads one for one, a single piece at a time in between the marble crosses - a forest of Scarecrows! Scarecrows on all graves, one more horrifying than the other - tall as houses. In front of these the devil would take cover.*¹⁸

Admittedly, this quite literal translation of the German loses its linguistic nuance, thereby compromising the original's poetry and providing the actor with a text that is barely playable. Although more effective English models exist (see Bond), there is always some degradation of the source text in translating, particularly if the original includes heightened language. As a result, a musical treatment of such a text can perhaps capture its essence every bit as much as a linguistic version. For the most part, Sater's lyrics and Sheik's score justify this point. From "I'm Gonna Wound You" to "The Bitch of Living" the songs, all of which are performed by the youth ensemble, serve to illuminate the younger generation, their struggles, and the oppression they suffer at the hands of the adult community. The music functions to liberate their "subtext," and in Sater's view, "replaces the role of the Masked Man," whose benevolence, he argues, "gets performed by the music."¹⁹ Thus, the music embodies all that is hopeful, good, and empathetic about the young people of this oppressive world.

Sater and Sheik's rock musical version of Wedekind's modern classic is generally effective. While it fails to capture the stylistic nuance and dramatic structure

of the original, it quite artfully expresses its younger characters and connects with contemporary audiences. Its most salient feature is the music, which reinvents Wedekind's play as a rock 'n' roll narrative that caters to its target viewer: a current Broadway spectatorship, while making a conscious appeal to younger people. Indeed, as was true of its predecessor *Rent*, the producers of *Spring Awakening* save a percentage of house seats to be distributed to students the day of the performance. As a result, an unusually young audience can be heard cheering their iconic representatives onstage nearly every night. Just as Sater claims that "adolescent audiences have been going wild over it,"²⁰ Wollman likewise acknowledges the piece: "It has created itself as a rock musical that is bad-ass enough for teenagers and palatable enough for adults."²¹ It has achieved remarkable popularity and critical acclaim, as exemplified by it being awarded the Tony for best musical. In short, Sater and Sheik have rendered a modern classical play accessible to a contemporary and foreign audience. By most measures it is an artistic and commercial success that is faithful to the "spirit" of the original.

Sater and Sheik's negotiation of a 116-year-old German play into a definitively American and postmodern context provides us with an interesting opportunity to examine the process of adapting a modern classic for the stage. Whereas the current production has proven to be very popular, one might assess it as having "culinary" appeal; the original *Spring Awakening* was highly controversial and censored. However, as indicated earlier in this paper, many of the themes of late-nineteenth-century Germany can be located in contemporary American society. While their adaptation hardly captures the verisimilitude of Bismarck's Germany and its cultural oppressiveness, Sater and Sheik skillfully use Wedekind's text as a basis for addressing current trends and issues: "We looked at the original play for inspiration, but ultimately told the story we wanted to tell."²² They use the source text as a framework for facilitating Sater's hopeful lyrics and Sheik's "hip" rock music towards championing youthful rebellion against authority. Wedekind's original has in many respects been creatively relocated in a twenty-first century context with the intention of appealing to a contemporary audience instead of honoring a canonical text. As a result, after Melchior is expelled from school and condemned to a reformatory, the electric guitar led number "Totally Fucked" causes the youth ensemble to chaotically move about the stage within a defiant blast of amplified song to accompany their jagged physical gestures and repeated shouts of "You're Fucked" - it is as if the stage becomes their very playground. The space functions as a zone of rebellion as desks are turned over and used as objects woven into the choreography. The song ends triumphantly, before revealing the banished hero, Melchior, defiantly sitting in one of the ubiquitous desk chairs that have been fastened to the theatre's back wall, some twelve feet above the ground. The rigid social construction of the stage world has been thrown into momentary chaos, and the audience can cheer, shout, and lament with its brave representatives.

ENDNOTES

1. REVIEW OF *SPRING AWAKENING*, BY STEVEN SATER AND DUNCAN SHEIK, BASED ON THE PLAY BY FRANK WEDEKIND, DIRECTED BY MICHAEL MAYER, EUGENE O'NEILL THEATRE, NEW YORK, *NEW YORK OBSERVER*,

DECEMBER, 18, 2006.

2. SOL GITTLEMAN, *FRANK WEDEKIND* (NEW YORK: UNGAR PUBLISHING, 1969), 3.

3. SCHOLARS GENERALLY ASSOCIATE WEDEKIND WITH HIS TWO MOST OUTSTANDING TEXTS: *SPRING AWAKENING* AND THE *LULU* PLAYS (*PANDORA'S BOX*, *EARTH SPIRIT*, AND *MONSTER TRAGEDY*). INDEED, SOL GITTLEMAN REFERS TO *SPRING AWAKENING* AS WEDEKIND'S "MOST POETIC AND ARTISTICALLY SATISFYING WORK." GITTLEMAN, 42.

4. *SPRING AWAKENING* CONTINUES TO BE CONTROVERSIAL IN CERTAIN CONTEXTS. FOR EXAMPLE, AS RECENTLY AS 1991 A PLANNED PRODUCTION FOR THE IDAHO SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL WAS CANCELLED BECAUSE IT WAS PERCEIVED AS A THREAT TO THE "MORAL STANDARDS" OF THE COMMUNITY, WHICH HAPPENED TO BE BOISE, THE STATE'S LARGEST CITY. ALTHOUGH THE SHOW HAD BEEN IN REHEARSAL FOR SEVERAL WEEKS, THE THEATRE'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS SUCCEEDED TO THE PUBLIC OUTCRY TO SHUT IT DOWN. FOR MORE ON THIS STORY, SEE JUDITH LEWIS, "BUT WILL IT PLAY IN BOISE," *AMERICAN THEATRE*, SEPTEMBER 1991.

5. STEVEN SATER, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, APRIL 17, 2007.

6. EDWARD BOND, INTRODUCTION TO *SPRING AWAKENING*, BY FRANK WEDEKIND (LONDON: METHUEN, 1980), XXIX.

7. ELIZABETH WOLLMAN, *THE THEATRE WILL ROCK: A HISTORY OF THE ROCK MUSICAL FROM HAIR TO HEDWIG* (ANN ARBOR: UNIV. OF MICHIGAN PRESS, 2006), 42-64.

8. AMONG THE STYLISTIC DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN SATER AND SHEIK'S *SPRING AWAKENING* AND *HAIR* IS THAT THE FORMER DRAMATURGICALLY FUNCTIONS AS A NARRATIVE DERIVED FROM A CANONICAL TEXT, WHEREAS *HAIR* IS COMPRISED OF A SERIES OF ORIGINAL VIGNETTES THAT ARE LOOSELY CONNECTED. FOR MORE ON THE INFLUENCE OF *HAIR* ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROCK MUSICAL, SEE WOLLMAN, "HAIR AND ITS IMITATORS," CHAP. 2.

9. STEVEN SATER AND DUNCAN SHEIK, *SPRING AWAKENING* (NEW YORK: TCG, 2007) 21.

10. *IBID.*, 26.

11. *IBID.*, 31.

12. WENDLA AND MORTIZ'S PARENTS INADVERTENTLY CAUSE THEIR TRAGIC DEATHS. WHILE MORITZ'S FATHER PRESSURES HIS SON INTO BELIEVING THAT HE IS A SOCIAL AND SCHOLASTIC FAILURE, THEREBY PROMPTING HIS SUICIDE, WENDLA'S MOTHER, FRAU BERGMANN, FORCES HER TO HAVE THE ABORTION THAT LEADS TO HER DEMISE. BOTH PARENTAL ACTIONS ARE GENERATED THROUGH THE FEAR THAT THEIR REPUTATIONS WILL BE COMPROMISED BY THEIR CHILDREN'S IMMORALITY.

13. WEDEKIND, *SPRING AWAKENING*, TRANS. EDWARD BOND, 3.1. REFERENCES ARE TO ACT AND SCENE.

14. THE FIGURE OF THE MASKED MAN HAS INTRIGUED SCHOLARS AS MUCH AS ANY ASPECT OF *SPRING AWAKENING*. THE CENTRAL QUESTION SEEMS TO BE, WHAT DOES THIS UNNAMED CHARACTER REPRESENT? THOUGH MOST SCHOLARS AGREE WITH GITTLEMAN THAT HE IS A POSITIVE FORCE THAT PROVIDES A SENSE OF HOPE FOR MELCHIOR, BEST REASONS THAT SUCH CLAIMS ARE "FAR FROM CONCLUSIVE." MOREOVER, MUELLER ASSERTS THAT THE MASKED MAN IS REALLY AN EXTENSION OF WEDEKIND—HE DID AFTER ALL PLAY THE ROLE IN REINHARDT'S PRODUCTION, AND THEREFORE, A METATEXTUAL READING OF THE FIGURE SEEMS PLAUSIBLE. FOR SPECIFIC CRITICISM ON THE MASKED MAN, SEE GITTLEMAN, 51-52; BEST, 80-82; MUELLER, XI-XII; ALSO BOND, XX-XXI.

15. STEVEN SATER, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, APRIL, 17, 2007.

16. SATER AND SHEIK, *SPRING AWAKEING*, 82.

17. FRANK WEDEKIND, *FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN* (MUNCHEN, GERMANY: WILHELM GOLDMANN VERLAG, 1968), 71.

18. I GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE MY COLLEAGUE KEN NIELSEN'S HELP IN TRANSLATING THE GERMAN TO ENGLISH.

19. STEVEN SATER, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, APRIL 17, 2007.

20. STEVEN SATER, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, APRIL, 17, 2007.

21. ELIZABETH WOLLMAN, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, MAY 15, 2007.

22. STEVEN SATER, INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR, APRIL, 17, 2007.

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