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## Theatre Arlington's artistic director moves to the next stage in life

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By LAWSON TAITTE / The Dallas Morning News  
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B.J. Cleveland was a child star at 12, a local household name in his 20s. Now he's 12 again in Theatre Three's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* – and is eagerly exploring all kinds of new things.

That's because Cleveland, 45, just left Theatre Arlington after 15 years as artistic director. He had directed or acted in at least seven productions every season, plus ran the company's education department.

"I think I'm ready for a little bit of freedom," Cleveland says.

Cleveland left Arlington because declining finances meant the company had to consolidate administrative and artistic functions. He didn't want to be the numbers guy. He'll still act and direct there, but he's suddenly available for fresh opportunities.

"I always felt like I got the job of artistic director too early," he says. "I never got to sow my artistic oats."

The Fort Worth native is a man with roots. A member of a big Czech clan, he still lives in an old family house in the cultural district there. As incoming president of the Tarrant County Live Theatre League, he's thick with the folks who taught him at Casa Mañana's school when he was a kid – many of whom are still running Fort Worth theaters.

At 12, Cleveland toured nationally in *A Thousand Clowns*. At 20 he spent time in Los Angeles, staying with friend Lisa Welchel and appearing with her on *The Facts of Life*. He also played Pfc. Bush in Robert Altman's 1983 film *Streamers*.

From 1986 through 1994, the young performer hosted daily local children's shows, first on Channel 39 (*Cartoon Clubhouse With BJ and Lester*), then on Channel 11 (*BJ & The Super Ones*). Cleveland's oversize smile and eyes big as Frisbees left their mark on a whole Texas generation.

Most of Cleveland's adult stage career – now well over 300 shows – had been in Tarrant County until the founders of Uptown Players asked him to do their first show, *When Pigs Fly*, in 2001. He has since starred often for the Dallas company.

*Spelling Bee* is his main-stage Theatre Three debut. (He starred in *Mid-Life! The Crisis Musical* in the smaller space downstairs last year.) He's balancing being 12 again onstage with teaching 11 classes, from kids' groups to the University of Texas at Arlington.

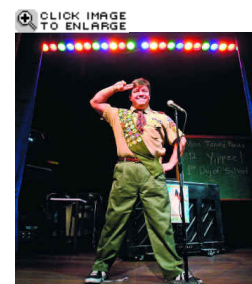
The *Spelling Bee* set offers a unique performance environment for Cleveland and his colleagues. It looks amazingly like a real middle-school "cafeteria-gymnasium."

"This intimate space, with the audience sitting right next to you, is the ultimate lie detector," the actor says. "It's not the big stuff, it's the little bits of business, like picking bubble gum off the bottom of your chair."

Always a crowd pleaser and absolutely unafraid to go over the top when milking the laughs, Cleveland says he's worked hard to maintain the innocence of his character, Chip – a Scout and former spelling champion who lets his budding interest in the opposite sex disturb his concentration.

Plan your life

Through Oct. 25 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. \$10 to \$40. 214-871-3300. [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com).



LOUIS DeLUCA/DMN  
**Being a 12-year-old** in the spotlight is a familiar role for one-time child actor B.J. Cleveland.