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## Theater review: Theatre Three has a hit with 'The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee'

10:47 AM CDT on Tuesday, September 29, 2009

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Can you spell "hit"?

The first act of Theatre Three's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* has the audience rolling in the aisles. The second goes in a somewhat different direction, but one equally entertaining and satisfying.

William Finn's hit Broadway musical has toured Dallas previously. The version that opened on Monday is the first produced locally. Director Bruce R. Coleman's cast includes some of Texas' most outrageous performers, but here they are on their best behavior. They're outrageously funny all right, but they get their laughs by portraying the characters, not by breaking character to comment rudely on the action.

Six 12-year-olds (all played by adults) are competing to go to the national level. Another group of competitors has been chosen from audience members before the show. Part of the fun is in seeing how the cast members improvise around the newcomers; even more lies in seeing whether the interlopers are good sports.

A former winner (Amy Mills) and an assistant principal recovering from a disgrace (Paul J. Williams) host the bee and give the kids their words to spell. All six contenders for the regional championship have unique backgrounds, and the comedy (not to speak of Finn's songs) uncovers every quirk.

Last year's winner, Chip (B.J. Cleveland), bears the heart of a tiger under his scout uniform; only budding pubescence could undo his confidence. Marcy (Alexandra Valle) proudly speaks six languages and possesses every possible adolescent skill set, except the ability to have fun. Logainne (Megan Kelly Bates) might be the most charming of the kids, if she didn't feel such pressure to succeed from her two gay dads.

The three others have more poignant stories. Leaf (Chad Peterson) was so picked on by his brothers and sisters that he believes he's not smart. Olive (Arianna Movassagh) suffers because her father is late and her mother has run off to India on a spiritual quest. The oddest kid is probably William (John Garcia), who can breathe through only one nostril and uses his foot to spell with.

Early on, the show's comedy succeeds despite a lot of flat singing and missed high notes. Later, as the songs become more individualized, things simmer down. High points are a protest from the grief counselor (Darius-Anthony Robinson) and Cleveland's big number, which is so frank about adolescent sexuality that you might want to think twice about bringing actual 12-year-olds to the shindig.

**PLAN YOUR LIFE** Through Oct. 25 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. Runs 140 mins. \$10 to \$40. 214-871-3300, [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com).