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Stage

Wordplays

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**'Poppins' is stupid-shallow-too-simplistic-slow-but-not-atrocious; 'Bee' gets straight 'ahhhs'**

## I HEAR A MUSICAL

*Mary Poppins at Fair Park Music Hall, 901 First Ave. Through Oct. 18. Ticketmaster.com.*

*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee at Theatre Three, 2900 Routh St. Through Oct. 25. 214-871-3300.*

What the new TV series *Glee* is to show choir, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is to spelling contests: A loving if often withering look at loveable misfits who do one thing well ... that, for the most part, people don't care about. Athletes get adulation; brainiacs and artists get fruit to the back of the head.

The set-up for composer-lyricist William Finn and librettist Rachel Sheinkin's perky, hilarious musical is simplicity itself: Six students (and four more recruited from the audience) stand before a judge (Paul J. Williams) pronouncing obscure words and slowly revealing themselves and the "types" who make it here: Driven Asian girl, Marcy Park (Alexandra Valle); pervy Boy Scout Chip Tolentino (B.J. Cleveland); ditzy savant Leaf Coneybear (Chad Peterson); nerdy William Barfee (John Garcia); sensitive Logaine Schwartzandgrubenierre (Megan Kelly Bates); and neglected Olive Ostrovsky (Arianna Movassagh). As they fall, Idol-like, they are consoled with juice boxes and Twinkies by "comfort counselor" Mitch Mahoney (Darius-Anthony Robinson).



Director Bruce Coleman makes some puzzling choices, such as inserting an intermission in what works well as a long one-act. And while it's part of the charm of *Spelling Bee* that the child-spellers are played by adults — a song with the lyric "My unfortunate erection" would be outright creepy coming from an actual 13-year-old — Theatre Three's middle school appears to border on the geriatric. (And Amy Mills is noticeably too old to play the grown-up fading bee champ Rona Peretti.)

Still, the actors have a blast and carry the audience along with them. Among the children, Peterson gets his character best: the breathless sense of wonder and unbridled amazement. Cleveland milks laughs mercilessly with his bold, do-anything approach to Chip. Some of the best work, though, comes from Robinson, stunningly butch as Mitch, then flighty as a hummingbird when he plays one of Logaine's gay dads.

Where the actors don't always hit home is in their appreciation for Finn's sprightly, clever songs. Finn's music dances on eggshells, as lively and as brisk as a splash of cold water. The lyrics, thick with internal rhymes and subtle word play, need proper showcasing. That doesn't always happen, as when Garcia's speeds through delivery of the line "alphabetter" so it sounds more like "alphabetta," swallowing the joke. (Odd he goes too fast, since the rest of the time he seems to be playing Barfee as Droopy Dog.)

The improvisational aspects of *Spelling Bee* give the humor an organic quality even when it turns slightly sad. It's as much fun as you'll ever have at a bee ... and probably most theaters.

There's not quite enough fun in *Mary Poppins*, this year's State Fair production from Dallas Summer Musicals. Oh, it tries: Statues come to life and dance (male nudes at that — eerily erotic for a kids' show); a chimney sweep dances upside down on the ceiling; and the befrocked governess, in an admittedly stunning bit of theatricality, flies over the audience and through the roof of the hall. Yes, it dazzles occasionally. But fun? Not so much.



It heads that direction with a set that resembled a big pop-up book, but then you realize it's too small and un-magical for a magical show. The new songs are forgettable; some old ones ("I Love to Laugh," "Sister Suffragettes") have been nixed. At times, it seems to clunk along.

Not, though, fatally. Ashley Brown, the original Broadway *Mary*, reprises her role here, and she has Julie Andrews' mix of stern weirdness and cooing vocals down pat. And Act 2 gets a burst of comedy (and dramatic tension) with the appearance by Ellen Harvey as rival nanny Miss Andrew.

But press night saw several understudies in key roles, including Dominic Roberts stepping in for the Tony Award-nominated Gavin Lee as Bert. Roberts, though full of energy, looks to be about a foot shorter than Brown — he risks being swallowed up by her umbrella if the winds change.

There are more ponderous, less well-intentioned bloated musicals out there, and *Mary Poppins* exudes good will. If only if had a better time doing it.

Pretty maids all in a row

For anyone who thinks that the origins of twisted psychosexual relationships can be traced back to when they first met their ex, I got news for ya: Freaky has been around a long time. And it gets pretty freaky with *My Sister in This House*.

Based on an actual event that took place in Le Mans, France in the 1930s — which also formed the basis for Jean Genet's more fictionalized play *The*

Maids — it tells the story of the Papin Sisters, young girls with a secret connection who eventually turned on their employers in a violent way. The real-life event was to French intellectuals what the Leopold and Loeb murder was in the America — and with a similar sexual motive.

WingSpan Theater Co. revives this award-winning play starting Wednesday.

— A.W.J.

*Bath House Cultural Center, 521 E. Lawther Drive. Oct. 8–24 (preview on Oct. 7). Thursdays–Saturdays at 8 p.m., Saturday matinees at 2 p.m. \$15–\$20. 214-675-6573.*

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