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Buzz Cut-ups

Theatre Three's "Spelling Bee" is crazy-funny. It will be a huge hit. But is that enough?

by Mark Lowry

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If ever there was a musical made for actors who can unabashedly milk their comedic gifts by playing overachieving kids, it's William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. When that happens, as evidenced in Theatre Three's locally produced area premiere (it has already toured to both Fort Worth and Dallas), count on audiences to leave still howling with laughter, which always translates into smiley faces at the box office.



The spellers of Theatre Three's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee." Photo by Ken Birdsell.

Count on this title becoming a huge audience favorite wherever it plays. It will start popping up at community playhouses and high schools all over the country (theaters in Plano and Bedford are already planning productions for July 2010). Where surefire hits are concerned, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is the new *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change!*

Make no mistake, the *Bee* is blow-milk-out-your-nose funny. It's so side-splitting that you could add up the texting initialisms for amusement (LOL + ROFL + BWL, etc.) and it still wouldn't relay the hilarity of these jokes—some of which can be tailored for specific markets. But what makes the show even better is that it has genuine tear-out-your-heart moments and makes simple but profound statements about the nature of modern families, our competitive culture, expectations, adolescence, disillusionment and—that ol' standby—wanting to be loved.

Theatre Three's production, directed by Bruce R. Coleman with musical direction by Terry Dobson and Vonda Bowling, spends all of its energy in the humor department—and delivers, big time. The production warrants recommendation because of the nutball performances and the brilliance of the show itself, which features tuneful and deceptively complex compositions by Finn. But that endorsement comes with a big asterisk. Heart



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The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee
 by William Finn (music and lyrics); Rachel Sheinkin (book)
 Presented By Theatre Three

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is sacrificed for the sake of guffaws.

In the "gymnacaetorium" of the Putnam Valley Middle School, six students compete to move on to the next round of competition in the National Spelling Bee. Played by adult actors, these characters are:

- Chip Tolentino (B.J. Cleveland), the previous year's champ whose downfall comes as a result of being a pubescent 12-year-old boy.
- Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Megan Kelly Bates), who has two gay fathers (the last name is a combo of theirs, with the "and" included) with super-high expectations of their politically minded darling.
- William Barfee (John Garcia), the oddball genius who can only breathe out of one nostril and identifies with several words selected for him, including "lugubrious" and "antihistamine." The mispronunciation of his last name (it rhymes with "parfait") is an ongoing joke.
- Olive Ostrovsky (Arianna Movassagh), who has supplemented her lack of parental participation (her mom's in an Ashram in India, her dad's always working late and a few dollars short) with reading the dictionary and falling in love with words and wordplay.
- Leaf Coneycbear (Chad Peterson), a spaz who can't believe he has made it this far in the contest. The only sameness in his life seems to be the string of words he receives at the podium, all nouns for South American critters.
- Marcy Park (Alexandra Valle), a super-studious student who doesn't know how *not* to meet expectations.

There are four other spellers, plucked from the audience. Participation phobes fear not, these are patrons who volunteered before the show.

As for the adults, there's Rona Lisa Peretti (Amy Mills), an award-winning realtor and former Spelling Bee champ who moderates the event; Douglas Panch (Paul J. Williams), the vice-principal returning from a five-year absence (it's OK, he's all better now); and Mitch Mahoney (Darius-Anthony Robinson), an ex-con who's the Bee's "comfort counselor."

Much of the show's laughter comes from Panch's off-color definitions and sentence-usage of the words when the contestants are at the mike and attempting a spell. A few of the more *oh-no-he-DIHNT* cracks might even be offensive to anyone turned off by jokes dealing with ethnicity, religion and speech impediments. But keep in mind that this is comedy, and unlike the Spelling Bee, there are no rules.

Each student has at least one song that reveals more about the child, such as Leaf's "I'm Not That Smart" and Marcy's "I Speak Six Languages." Olive lucks out and gets the two best numbers, "The 'I Love You' Song" and "My Friend, the Dictionary," which is the musical's best case for Finn as one of American theater's finest lyricists.

You might think that the actors playing the kiddos would have no limitations with how far they could take their quirky, bratty and nerdy characterizations—but that assumption would be wrong. Kids are outlandish, yes, but they're also human, and the musical writes them as such. This is one of the problems with Coleman's production. Cleveland and Peterson, funny as they are, could stand to be pulled back a smidgen. Garcia handles William's nasally speaking voice well, and he's frequently funny. But he's missing that necessary inkling of cockiness. Even kids with low self-esteem know when they are smarter than others, and aren't afraid to express that.

The girls fare better. Bates and Movassagh prove to be the show's best vocalists (at Monday night's opening, notes didn't hit the mark with most of the other performers), and physically, both are adorable and perfect for playing children. Hands down, Valle gives the show's best performance. Her expressionless face and finishing-school posture are spot-on for a child prodigy. She's one of those insanely smart and/or talented kids for whom you feel a little sorry, what with those rigid parents and stringent rules. Of the spellers, Marcy gets the short-end of audience reaction because she is the least showy character, but that doesn't deter Valle. Her turn is fearless and all-business in the midst of clowns.

As the adults, Robinson astounds with powerful vocals, and Mills plays Rona as a delusional, creepy-crazy woman who knows her glory days are well behind her. Williams, who is also a comedian, nails the delivery in those huge laughlines that come from the definitions and sentences. It's a good guess that he also comes up with the production's ad-lib material, which would change from show to show, depending on the audience spellers.

Jeffrey Schmidt's set nicely fits the "gymnacaetorium" description, with a proscenium auditorium stage, benches and basketball goals above the stage, the school's Pine Cone mascot painted on the center of the floor and hand-drawn banners and posters on the walls. Coleman's costumes are character-appropriate with a little bit of whimsy.

On Monday night, the show felt rushed and the actors didn't always hold for laughs, which resulted in the death of several clever lines in the dialogue and songs. Also, at least one word was misspelled by an actor when it shouldn't have been (when that happens, Panch can do nothing except say "correct" and hope the audience doesn't notice). Those are things that should polish up as the production continues.

Even if not, Theatre Three definitely has a hit here. If you're looking for the biggest laughs imaginable from a musical, search no farther. But when it comes to melding hilarity and heart (and more finely tuned vocals would be nice), T3's production could use more syzygy.



THEATRE 3



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