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## Theater review: *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

BY ALEX BENTLEY

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There are certain types of theater experiences that seem custom-made for a specific type of theater. I could never imagine watching, say, *The Lion King* in a small community theater. That doesn't mean that someone couldn't make it work, but having experienced it in all its grandeur in a big theater, it's hard to see it being presented in any other way.

Likewise, having now experienced *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* in the intimate theater-in-the-round confines of **Theatre Three**, I have trouble visualizing it ever being in the **Circle in the Square Theatre on Broadway** (which is still relatively small at 650 seats), where it played for over 1,100 performances.



Ken Birdsell

The cast of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

That's due to the fact that the cast and crew of this version have done an astounding job of making every audience member feel as if they are part of the show, and not just because some of them actually *are* part of the show (four people are chosen from the audience to take part in the bee). Competitors in the *Bee* include Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Megan Kelly Bates), a girl saddled with a lisp and an unruly last name (not to mention first name) that seems to stem from her two gay fathers smashing their names together; Chip Tolentino (B.J. Sullivan), a Boy Scout and defending spelling bee champion who nonetheless seems to be easily distracted; William Barfee (John Garcia), who's perpetually stuffed-up, allergic to peanuts, and sick of hearing his name pronounced wrong ("It's Bar-fay!"); Olive Ostrofsky (Arianna Movassagh), a lonely girl whose father doesn't show up and whose mother is in India; Leaf Coneybear (Chad Peterson), the obvious offspring of hippies who wears pajamas, hats with ears, and whose spelling "technique" involves him going into a trance that sounds like he's been possessed by a demon; and Marcy Park (Alexandra Valle), a transfer student who's competed in the National Spelling Bee and figures to be the odds-on favorite if she doesn't let expectations overwhelm her.

Seeing over the students are Vice Principal Doug Panch (Paul J. Williams), who brings a dry wit and surliness to the proceedings as he reads out the words and definitions; Rona Lisa Perretti (Amy Mills), a former champ who loves to moderate to feel that thrill of competition again; and Mitch Mahoney (Darius-Anthony Robinson), a former convict who's performing community service by providing "comfort" to the eliminated contestants and giving them juice boxes.



Ken Birdsell

Top row: B.J. Cleveland, Alexandra Valle, and John Garcia. Bottom row: Ariana Movassagh, Chad Peterson, and Megan Kelly Bates

A familiarity is bred right off the bat, when Ms. Perretti walks in unannounced to start the show. From there, it's hard *not* to be involved in the goings-on as each of the students, who are seated on benches close to two sides of the theater, seems to spend as much time interacting with the audience as they do participating in the bee. Impressions may vary depending on your vantage point, but for my money, Chip and his budding hormones provide the most entertainment value. His attention is grabbed by an attractive woman taken from the audience, who's fortuitously (or not so fortuitously)

seated next to him, and by Leaf's sister Marigold, for whom a random audience member stands in. The leers that Cleveland throws toward each of them are awkward, slightly creepy, and downright hilarious.

In fact, the male students mostly rule the day. That's not to say that Bates, Movassagh, and Valle don't do a great job -- they do -- but Cleveland, Garcia, and Peterson get to play characters that provide them with more comedic opportunities. Leaf almost literally bounces off the walls, and Peterson portrays this manic nature to a tee without ever going over into "annoying" territory. Compared to Chip and Leaf, Garcia's William is relatively toned-down, but he still gets a lot of laughs with his constant admonitions of the mispronunciation of his name and exaggerated use of his "magic foot" spelling technique. One of the funniest moments in Monday's performance came when one of the audience members on stage unexpectedly participated in one scene, and Garcia had to pull her to the ground to emulate the rest of the characters, spooning her in the process.

Even though *Bee* is a musical, the music is greatly overshadowed by the comedy. Only two or three numbers are truly memorable, including the eponymous "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," "Pandemonium," and "Chip's Lament," which rivals *A Chorus Line's* "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three" for unexpected hilarity. All of the cast have fine singing voices, but none of them have that "stand up and take notice" kind of number, which suits *Bee* just fine.

Set designer Jeffrey Schmidt deserves major kudos, condensing an entire school "cafetorinasium" (part cafeteria, auditorium, and gymnasium) into the small theater. The set is filled with lots of fun details, including fire alarms on the wall, basketball goals hanging from the rafters, and all sorts of posters/flyers that remind students to get their H1N1 (aka swine flu) vaccinations, tell them to study for the TAKS, and congratulate the "2nd Place Champs" debate team with the backhanded compliment of "We always thought you might do it!" Lighting designer Amanda West also makes a number of scenes better with evocative spotlighting, especially when characters appear in random corners.

*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* may have gained fame in the bright lights of New York, but the cast and crew at Theater Three make it come alive just as much as any Broadway show. That you can experience it up close and personal is just icing on the cake.

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