

How does the Palace spell 'FUNNY?'



PETE'S PICKS

Peter Dossing

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, besides being one of the longest titles for a theater production that won't fit on the Palace marquee, is a very funny show. This Tony Award-winning play features music and lyrics by William Finn, book by Rachel Sheinkin and was conceived by Rebecca Feldman. The Palace production of *Spelling Bee* is directed by Lammie Hilboldt, music directed by Jonathan Borden, and choreographed by Courtney Wissinger.

As you walk into the Palace, you immediately get the feel of walking into a high school auditorium and gymnasium — the theater walls are plastered with preppy banners bragging of championships from years gone by, the stage is set up like a high school gym with bleachers, a basketball hoop on the wall and a table for the judges.

Our story is about an eclectic group of six mid-pubescent who vie for the spelling championship of a lifetime. While candidly disclosing hilarious and touching stories from their home lives, the tweens spell their way through a series of (potentially made-up) words, hoping never to hear the soul-crushing, pout-inducing, life un-affirming “ding” of the bell that signals a spelling mistake. The six young spellers have thoughts of grandeur as they all compete for a chance to go to the National Spelling Bee.



Andy Sharp

Katya Welch, as Logainne Schwarzandgrubenniere, front, is joined by Daniel Ponce, second from right, as Carl, and David Gray, right, as Dan, in a scene from the dress rehearsal of the Palace Theatre production of *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* on the Springer Memorial Stage weekends through June 24.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee



Red Poppy Rating: 4 out of 5

Six spellers enter; eventually one speller remains.

Mary Ellen Butler, Palace artistic director, shared with me that the script is so powerful, it requires that every character has the strength to play a lead. “We can go through the cast and see that each of our cast has played a lead ... they’ve all carried whole shows on their back.”

Just look at this cast: A “comfort counselor,” Mitch Mahoney (played by local favorite David Gray), whose job it is to sensitively usher off a losing contestant. Mitch is fulfilling his obligation as part of his court-mandated community service program.

One of the two adults directing the bee is the bubbly Rona Lisa Perett (Windy Zavaleta) who has made it be known that her perfect moment in life was

winning the third annual Putnam Spelling Bee. That was just the biggest thing that ever happened to her, so she spends most of the show trying to contain her excitement about everything.

Our other adult on stage is the spelling bee judge, the oh so serious Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Erik Freisinger). He is responsible for delivering the words, definitions, languages of origin and using the word in a sentence, if asked. He is not happy to be here (the principal was suddenly called out of town) and sarcastically adds his spin when he responds to student questions.

Add the six student contestants and you’ve got some serious talent on stage. All the children are played by adults except for the young Chip Tolentino played by the talented Buddy Novak — did I say this is not a show for kids?

Windy Zavaleta echoed, “This cast is so great. It’s really a treat for all of us that we all get along and can play off each other.” She’s right — no one missed a line or cue, least that I could tell.

One of these outstanding student spellers was Olive Ostrovsky (Jordan Marett) who exclaimed after the show that she was so happy, she got a couple of people to cry when she was lamenting about her sad life. Her best friend happens to be her dictionary.

Each of these six spelling competitors deserves to be singled out for their acting abilities. Katya Welch, who plays Logainne Schwarzandgrubenniere, is the alpha female in the group, she speaks with a lisp and has very strong political views. Quite a hoot actually. The top speller from last year’s competition, Chip Tolentino, is played by the young Buddy His ability to appear really mad at the judges and his carrying on taunting them was hilarious.

Another spelling ace is Marcy Park (Emma Thoen). She is a super-achiever transfer student who speaks six languages and is under great pressure to perform. Leaf Conebear (Daniel Ponce) is an odd duck who designs his own seriously pointless clothes. He sang to his competitors and the judge *I’m Not That Smart*, questioning his own ability to be in the spelling bee.

But strangest of all the competitors is William Barfee, played by a very funny William Gilbert whose actions reminded me of a young John Belushi. He is blessed with a “magic foot,” which spells the words out for him.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is now on the Springer Memorial Stage, weekends through June 24 at Georgetown’s Historic Palace Theater. The show plays at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, with matinees at 2 p.m. Sunday. Reserved seating tickets for all performances are \$32 for general admission, \$29 for seniors (55 and older), active military (with ID) and students. Run time two hours including intermission. This show contains adult language, humor and situations. Not recommended for children.

pdossing@gmail.com