

'Putnam County Spelling Bee' is honey of a show

Review

By **BURNEY GARELICK**

Outright prolonged laughter exploded like fireworks at the Florence Events Center June 12 when the Last Resort Players opened "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," an uproarious musical comedy that raced through almost two hours faster than you could spell "jello."

In its 21 years of presenting theater in Florence, the LRP hit the heights with this show.

"Spelling Bee" is absolutely perfect. It was a confluence of outstanding play, music and lyrics with outstanding execution by LRP director David Lauria, music director Jason Wood, accompanist Johanna Bonisteel and an unbelievably accomplished cast.

Just as "Spelling Bee" was a Broadway hit and a critical and box-office success, so too is the LRP production. Broadway and myriad other productions aside, LRP's presentation makes it seem like the show's characters were written expressly for the Florence actors who plucked their parts from the page to create flesh-and-blood individuals.

Who could play William Barfee better than Jason Wood, and who could play Leaf Coneybear better than Matt Korso?

These are just two members of the LRP cast of nine awesome players, and "awesome" is not a word that comes easily to these lips.

Words, of course, are the nuts and bolts of this show. Six middle-schoolers compete for first place in the county spelling bee and the opportunity to win a trophy, cash, bragging rights and a trip to Washington, D.C., to compete in the national bee.

The kids are geeky, quirky and awkward — the stuff of adolescence — as each boy and girl tries to validate their own existence.

Yes, there are serious overtones underlying the hilarious pandemonium. Each kid brings baggage to the bee, as do the three adults managing the event.

The kids learn about the values and priorities of competing, winning and losing. The word-spelling is interspersed with vignettes describing the not-

quite sordid lives of the competitors and the slings and arrows they encounter.

During the course of the bee, two of the most estranged kids become friends.

But there will be no spoiler alerts here. This is a show you've got to see for yourself.

In this comedy of words, the spelling words are as simple as "jello" and "cow" and as obtuse as "crepuscule" and "sesquipedalian."

The spellers can ask for definitions and usage examples, neither of which is helpful, except for getting a laugh.

In addition to knowing the spelling words, the actors must know the dialogue and the lyrics; no easy assignment. The dialogue is bright, crisp and funny, and the lyrics are twisted and tricky with an insistent up-tempo beat.

The LRP actors were undaunted by the syllables, and all the singing was spot on — a rarity for community theater.

Kudos, bouquets and applause to the actor-singers!

An exceptional music director and vocalist, Wood is a consummate actor in a variety of roles, this time in his larger-than-life portrayal of Barfee. Gruff, rude, testy about the mispronunciation of his name and determined to win after having just missed the year before due to a peanut allergy, Barfee and his "Magic Foot" mean to kick butt.

Korso has the uncanny ability to dissolve his own identity into a character's fantasies, quirks and anxieties, leaving an indelible impression of a bizarre, touching reality.

His portrayal of Leaf Coneybear, the red-haired wild child, is priceless and endearing.

Tall, handsome Jesse Reeves is positively charming as polite, helpful, upstanding Boy Scout Chip Tolentino with a good shot of reclaiming victory — if he doesn't fall victim to surging hormones.

Elizabeth Rose assumes with grace and style the conflicted role of Logainne Schwartzandgrunier — how can she be anything but a good speller with a name like that! Logainne strives to overcome the pressure to win urged on her by her two dads, played in the vignette by Wood and Korso.

Erin Reinke is particularly adept at using body language



PHOTO BY CHANTELE MEYER/SIUSLAW NEWS

Last Resort Players' comedy "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," continues this weekend at the Florence Events Center. It is appropriate for mature audiences.

and terse expression to paint a telling Rembrandt portrait of child prodigy Marcy Park, a scholastic and athletic phenom who is a stranger to desire and pleasure.

Tamara Cole delivers a warm and affecting performance as latchkey kid Olive Ostrovsky, whose only friends are in the dictionary; she's happy with her word friends but evinces a longing for human relationships.

You'll want to hug her.

The three adult characters are not avuncular; they are concerned with following the rules of the bee and keeping the spellers on track: Hilary Roach, with a voice that sustains high notes that shatter glass, is a hoot as perky bee moderator and top realtor Rona Lisa Peretti, whose bee victory decades ago seems the highlight of her life; Leah Goodwin captures the icy per-

sona of Donna Panch, disgruntled vice-principal and surly contest judge who is the tip of an iceberg globally warmed by frustrated dreams; and Jacob Ternyik is scary good as tattooed ex-convict thug Mitch Mahoney, doing community

service as a comfort counselor who would like everyone to believe he has a heart of gold.

"Spelling Bee" is presented on the FEC flat floor for an intimate theater experience.

You may even get to be a part of it! During each show, four audience members are recruited to join the competition. You're not scripted to win, but you will enjoy a few minutes of fame and reap buckets of applause upon exiting on the arm of Mitch.

Ultimately, this excellent production of "Spelling Bee" is all in good fun and everyone's a winner.

"Spelling Bee" played last weekend and concludes this coming Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Depending on demand for tickets, an additional performance may be added Saturday afternoon.

So move your Magic Foot and go see this spellbinding triumph.

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INGREDIENTS:
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•1/4 cup lemon juice
•1 (2-pound) salmon fillet
•1 medium onion, thinly sliced
•1 Untreated Cedar Plank

DIRECTIONS:
Soak the cedar plank in cold water for 2 hours; the cedar plank should be completely immersed in water, so weigh it down (a heavy bowl works well).
Combine marinade ingredients in a shallow non-reactive dish large enough to hold the salmon. Place the salmon in the marinade and turn to coat; let marinate at room temperature for 30 minutes.
Preheat a grill to medium heat.
Place the cedar plank on the hot grill. Once the cedar plank starts to smoke, place the salmon fillet on top of it, skin side down. Arrange the sliced onions on top of the salmon. Pour the marinade over all. Cover the grill and cook for 15 minutes. If the plank catches on fire, it can be lightly sprayed with water.

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