

Written by Thom White

Monday, 16 August 2010 06:00

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The Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is both outrageously hilarious and poignantly touching. I laughed harder than I've laughed in a long time during Thursday's opening-night performance, and I wasn't alone in offering up hearty guffaws, with the capacity crowd cackling with delight throughout the evening's entertainment.

Directors Jason Platt and Tristan Tapscott keep the musical story of a fictional spelling bee (and the oddball kids participating in it) flowing at a comfortable pace; it's never slow, but never so fast that the jokes fly by, forcing you to try to catch up with them. And there are wisecracking one-liners aplenty, most of them delivered by Pat Flaherty, who has a real gift for dry humor. His Vice Principal Douglas Panch has, inarguably, the show's funniest lines, and Flaherty elicits raucous laughter every time he helps define words for the contestants by using them in sentences. While a lot of the credit goes to Rachel Sheinkin for writing those side-splitters - "atheist," for example, is used in the sentence "Because she was an atheist, Suzy was not bothered by the other kids chanting, 'Go to Hell, Suzy'" - Flaherty's deadpan delivery punctuates the lines with seriously gut-busting subtlety.



Bryan Tank and David Turley are equally funny as, respectively, the home-schooled, ADHD-suffering Leaf Coneybear and the arrogant, germ-obsessed, grotesque William Barfee. ("It's pronounced Bar-fay.") Tank maintains a wide-mouthed smile, with his tongue often stuck out when he's especially happy, and creates a lovable yet freakish child with an intense, absurdly amusing spelling technique involving a cape. Turley is just as lovable, despite his

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character's unlikable nature. (William frequently wipes down his seat, his shoes, and the microphone with a tissue, but also picks his nose without the use of said tissue.) In portraying Barfee's social ineptitude, Turley consistently hunches his shoulders forward, maintaining an uncomfortably tense posture, and speaks in a deep but nasally voice that's ingratiatingly entertaining.

On the less weird end of the *Spelling Bee* scale, Liz Millea, as the politically aware Logainne SchwartzandGrubenierre, scrunches up the bottom of her skirt while smiling charmingly and speaking with a lisp. It's all so endearing, as she gaily spells and beautifully sings her way through the piece. And Logainne's go-get-'em attitude is topped only by that of Marcy Park, sensibly played by Sara King, fresh off of her admirably disturbing turn as Van's Sister in Harrison Hilltop's *Dog Sees God*. King effortlessly brags her way through Park's knowledge and talents, and earns extra points for using a Skip-It while singing and karate-chopping a board.



James Bleecker and Kelly Lohrenz fall somewhere in-between the show's character extremes as Chip Tolentino and Olive Ostrovsky. It's immediately apparent that Bleecker is in the right role when he enters the stage in a Scout uniform - costume designer Michael Tallon's wardrobe for Chip perfectly suits Bleecker's boyish good looks - and the actor doesn't fail to live up to his introduction, managing to balance a child-like innocence while singing about a problematic effect of adolescence in "My Unfortunate Erection (Chip's Lament)." The *most* innocent portrayal, however, is Lohrenz's, who out-cutes everyone on stage. With a sunny disposition, bright smile, and look of constant hope in her eyes, Lohrenz won over the hearts of many an audience member (including myself), judging by the "

aw-w-w-w

"s that followed any affliction tossed her character's way. While Lohrenz could project more on portions of her songs, she shines whenever she belts, and also employs this adorably annoying little laugh a couple of times, letting you know this child may be sweet, but she's also *weird*

Tracy Pelzer-Timm presides over the Bee as Rona Lisa Peretti - the number-one realtor in Putnam County and a former spelling-bee champ - and is never better than when singing, with her sultry tones and impressive volume. She also has the honor of delivering the little biographical tidbits on each of the contestants, including four randomly pulled from the audience, and gets laughs through her no-nonsense delivery.

While I've observed groups of theatergoers enjoy many shows over the summer, I haven't seen one that enjoyed a production so thoroughly and so thunderously as the audience for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

. Harrison Hilltop's offering certainly split

my

sides, raising my expectations for the rest of the theatre's season of plays and musicals.

E-X-C-E-L-L-E-N-T: "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through

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For tickets and information, call (563) 449-6371 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.