

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 28 March 2012 06:00

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I attended Quad City Music Guild's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* on Monday, and before proceeding, it's important to stress that the performance I saw was actually a dress rehearsal that took place three nights before the show's official opening.

It's *only* important to stress this, however, as a means of suggesting just how sensational this charming, wonderfully well-sung, awfully funny production will be by the time paying customers see it.

I mean, seriously: Shouldn't that run-through have hit at least *one* major snag? An uncomfortable pause or a screeching body mic or *something*

? Barring a few slight, totally understandable lighting glitches at the finale, though, and a few equally slight lapses in confidence, director Ben Holmes' musical comedy, on Monday, was already in excellent shape. When I first learned that Music Guild had scheduled *Spelling Bee*

for a one-weekend run, I was a little bummed; this invigorating, witty show deserves as many performances as it can get. Having now seen it, I'm actually even *more*

bummed, but only when thinking about the revenue loss. It turns out Music Guild could've charged full-price for the production's final rehearsals and patrons wouldn't have asked for even

partial
refunds.

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Of course, considering how tuneful and sweet and riotous *Spelling Bee* is even *without* the first-rate presentation offered here, how could they? With its six driven, divinely eccentric grade-schoolers (and four brave audience volunteers) competing for a spelling-bee crown, and composer William Finn's songs routinely providing as many laughs as Rebecca Felman's book, the show seems a pretty tough one to screw up. But it's also a show whose full magic can't really be experienced without absolute fearlessness on the part of its (adult) cast, the majority of whom are playing the sorts of ultra-bright, breathtakingly obnoxious whippersnappers you generally cross the street to avoid.

It's to Holmes' immense credit, then, that beyond ensuring a snappy pace (including intermission, *Spelling Bee* runs under two hours) and, alongside choreographer Beth Marsoun, offering loads of imaginative staging (especially the clever handling of the competition's lightning rounds), he's guided these *faux* children to portrayals of such alertness and comic invention. As Olive, the poignant little weirdo who whispers into her hand before spelling words, Lindsay Anderson performs with delicate understatement and wry self-amusement – you giggle less at her jokes than at her giggly reactions

to
her jokes – and she finds an extraordinary opposite number in the hysterical Tyler Finley, whose William Barfee is a dyspeptic crank with an eternal grimace, a debilitating peanut allergy, and a coliseum-sized ego. (Informed that he's spelled a word correctly, Barfee snorts and deadpans, “I
know
.”)



Speaking with brusque assuredness that would be a hoot even if she *didn't* pronounce “sentence” as “thententh,” Sarah Lounsberry's Schwarzy – the entitled daughter of two gay fathers – is a constant delight. Christine Goodall's know-it-all Marcy delivers a joyous, high-energy number complete with somersault, cartwheel, and the splitting of a board with one karate kick. Troy Stark is fantastically smarmy as returning champ Chip and, on Monday, pulled off the show's subtlest visual gag with genius timing, slowly adjusting his waistline placard so no one would notice the “unfortunate protuberance” threatening to derail him.

And it only made sense that Dan Pepper's über-bizarre Leaf Coneybear was outfitted (by topnotch costumer Deb Holmes) in a bright red cape, as the actor here was less heroic than *su per*

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-heroic. Trembling, shouting, tugging at his pajama bottoms, picking his nose ... this kid is a true piece of work, and in Pepper's ferociously committed, big-hearted performance, he's as utterly endearing as he is comically repellent. (Pepper so disappears into his role that when he first showed up in a fantasy scene, portraying one of Schwarzy's dads, my immediate thought was, "Oh, *this* guy's good – who *is* that?")

While I also adored Kristine Oswald's former bee champion Rona, her boundless cheer helping to mask her egomania, I was admittedly hoping for more variety from J. Adam Lounsberry's "comfort counselor" Mitch Mahoney – on Monday, he was basically just an operatic grouch – and more comic confidence and consistency from Roger Akers, whose Vice Principal Panch never seemed fully defined, causing many of the show's best jokes not to land. But again: This was a *rehearsal*. And there's no reason to think that, by Thursday, everyone won't be on equal footing with music director Dave Blakey's splendid five-piece orchestra (whose tempos on Monday were *perfect*), John Weigandt's gorgeously hued lighting, and Mark Holmes' beauty of a gymnasium set. I kind of wished the thick rope that extended from ceiling to floor had been used a few more times during the show, but I'm also not sure how much higher this particular *Spelling Bee* could climb.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee *runs at Moline's Prospect Park Auditorium (1584 34th Avenue) through April 1. For information and tickets, call (309)762-6610 or visit QCMusicGuild.com*