Written by Thom White
Monday, 23 July 2012 06:00

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The Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is a delightfully entertaining musical comedy that I wouldn't mind seeing over and over again, as Friday's performance of director Tommy Iafrate's production was funny, touching, and energetic, serving as an exceptional rendering of the musical's charm, wit, humor, and high level of enjoyability.

With music and lyrics by William Finn and a book by Rachel Sheinkin (with additional material by Jay Reiss), the piece finds its county-bee finals set in the middle-school gymnasium. Rona Lisa Perretti – Putnam County's top realtor and former winner of the bee – serves as moderator, and in the Showboat's production, Bailey Holland plays the part quite well, with visible pride (as if constantly reliving her own victory), a sometimes matronly sternness, and a hint of empathetic care for the other characters. Holland's Rona is aided by Adam Michael Lewis' Vice Principal Douglas Panch, who acts as judge, gives the contestants their words to spell, and, when requested, offers the words' definitions and uses in sentences – offerings which are always unhelpful and oftentimes the funniest lines in the musical. (Amusingly, Lewis also delivers his sentences in the accents of the words' languages of origin and, in one instance here, as Yoda.)

There's also Darian Lunsford's thug-with-a-heart-of-gold and "comfort counselor" Mitch Mahoney, who consoles each disqualified contestant with a juice box and a hug, thereby fulfilling his community-service requirements. Outfitted in sagging pants and lots of gold chains, Lunsford's Mitch is so wholly different from his nerdy Seymour in the Showboat's *Little Shop of Horrors* earlier

this summer that I'm left with no doubt of his range, as the actor can obviously play multiple stereotypes (including the limp-wristed, flamboyantly gay father of one of the *Spelling Bee* competitors) to a "t."

As for the bee's contestants, they're a mix of kid neurotics – three girls and three boys (plus four audience volunteers). Monique Abry plays Marcy Park, an overachiever who speaks six languages, plays hockey, rugby, and multiple instruments, and practices karate. Abry makes the obvious choice to play the girl with self-certainty and arrogance, but also adds impressive nuance by making her Marcy an awkward loner, uncomfortable while sitting with the other kids. Steph Garrett's Logainne Schwartzandgrubenniere, meanwhile, is anything but shy. Dressed in rainbow-striped socks and suspenders (one of costume designer Dusty Shaffer's many creations that are notable visualizations of the characters' personalities), she's a poster child for LGBT rights, herself the daughter of gay parents. And Garrett's energy doesn't falter from beginning to end, as her perky, politically aware Logainne excitedly makes her way through the rounds of competition, and with a consistent lisp, to boot.

Caitlin Houlahan's Olive Ostrovsky rounds out the female spellers. With her mother "cleansing her spirit" in India and her father working late (as usual), Olive arrives by bus and without the required entry fee, and Houlahan's character is so adorable, innocent, sincere, and wanting for love that she's almost pitiable, and easy to root for.

Among the boys, Matthew Gorgone plays Charlito "Chip" Tolentino, a scout and returning bee champion dealing with a newly-discovered sexual awareness that causes a physical distraction at an inopportune time in the contest. Gorgone's Chip possesses a self-confidence bordering on cockiness (pun not intended, but appropriate), but his air of suavity also morphs into hilariously angry frustration when resigned to sell snacks. (Gorgone literally whips candy at the audience.) Anthony Sagaria well-defines his Leaf Coneybear – a home-schooled boy from a large family – with social awkwardness and unabated joy, exemplified in his outfit of bell-bottom jeans, foam Hulk hands, a long sleeve shirt under a T-shirt under a scarf under a cape, and a helmet with jester-hat points arranged like spikes on a dragon's spine. (Sagaria does, however, tend to lose that definition while emoting, almost forsaking Leaf's childlike nature.)

Judging by the level of audience laughter, though, the crowd favorite was William Barfée – a name pronounced, as he repeatedly says, as "bar-FAY, not BARF-ee," explaining that "there's an accent aigu." I'm not sure Brian Cowing could make his William any more awkward than this weird nerd of a dorky kid with a constantly snot-filled nostril (yes, "nostril" singular), countering his touchy quirkiness with an abundance of self-confidence, and stating "I *know*" after being told

his spelling of a word is correct. (As the production's choreographer, Cowing also impressively incorporates the audience volunteers into a couple of the cast numbers.)

Set designer Steven P. House also deserves props, particularly for painting the stage floor to look like a hardwood gym floor. It looks so realistic that I had to check twice just to be sure that House hadn't actually installed a wood floor, and I also wouldn't mind taking another look at the Showboat's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* a second or even third time. Peppered with ad libs from the actors, I'm sure a repeat viewing would be a different, but equally delightful experience.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee *runs at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre (311 Riverview Drive, Clinton) through July 29, and information and tickets are available by calling (563)242-6760 or visiting* *ClintonShowboat.org* .