

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee @ Stray Dog Theatre

Music and Lyrics by William Finn

Book by Rachel Sheinkin

Additional Material by Jay Reiss

Based on the play *C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E* by Rebecca Feldman

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When I discovered *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, I had the exact same reaction that everybody else had when they first heard of it: “a musical about a spelling bee? Really? How is this a good idea for a musical?” Well, it’s been about 20 years since it premiered Off-Broadway, and it has since moved to the Great White Way, ran there for three years, continues to have hundreds of productions mounted every year in the United States alone, and Disney is currently in the process of adapting the show into a feature film. The perfect example of how not to judge a book by its cover. In adulthood, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* has become one of my favorite musicals of all time, a status that has been solidified by Stray Dog Theatre’s excellent production.

The concept of the show is fairly simple: we are the audience members of an actual, literal spelling bee where six school-aged kids compete against one another to see who will earn a spot in the Scripps National Spelling Bee. But just like any deceptively simple show, what makes it great is its execution. This show is written to have a totally immersive production that demands active participation from everyone involved: four audience members are called up to compete with the main kids, we stand up to say the Pledge of Allegiance, one of the characters hands out snacks to the audience, the hosts improv fun facts about the audience participants – there is no such thing as a Fourth Wall in *Spelling Bee*. Director Justin Been simply dresses the stage with some chairs, some tables, a banner, some balloons, and a trophy upstage-center just waiting for a winner. Been doesn’t pretend that this spelling bee is taking place anywhere other than Tower Grove Abbey, and given the productions that I’ve watched on video, which traditionally set the show in a school gymnasium, this is so refreshing to see.

The best aspect of *Spelling Bee*, however, is not just the setup, but the fully-realized, intricately-drawn characters. The three adults in the show are Rona Lisa Piretti, the bee’s motherly host who constantly reminds us that she was once a champion speller herself; Douglas Panch, the bee’s extremely neurotic judge; and Mitch Mahoney, an ex-convict who is using his community service hours to be the “comfort counselor” for the losing kids (giving them hugs, juice boxes, and participation ribbons). The six kids are, in order of appearance, Charlito “Chip” Tolentino, a Boy Scout who has come back to defend his title as last year’s Putnam County Spelling Champion; Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre, the daughter of a gay couple whose life is defined by being overtly liberal; Leaf Coneybear, the hyperactive, absent-minded, homeschooled middle child of a family of hippies who got into the bee purely by chance; William Morris Barfee (pronounced *Bar-FAY*), a caustic nerd who was disqualified last year due to health reasons but has come back for vindication; Marcy Park, a parochial school girl who is constantly

pressured to be the best at everything; and Olive Ostrovsky, a girl from a broken home of distant parents who entered the bee purely out of her passion and love for the English language, a passion born from her reading the dictionary when her parents would give her barely any books to read.

Every actor in the bee puts 110% of their effort and thought into developing their own unique portrayals of these characters (and a few additional roles that they double), crafting performances that don't rely on caricature or stereotype, like too many productions of *Spelling Bee* do, and I'll explain after this paragraph why it's important that I say this. For now, the excellent Stray Dog Players are Stephanie Merritt as Rona, Jason Meyers as Panch, Chris Kernan as Mitch, Kevin Corpuz as Chip, Dawn Schmid as Logainne, Clayton Humburg as Leaf, Kevin O'Brien as Barfee, Sara Rae Womack as Marcy, and Grace Langford as Olive. Every cast member gets a chance to perform some fun choreography by Michael Hodges, and they are accompanied by a wonderful three-piece band led by musical director Leah Schultz on piano, featuring Kelly Austermann on the reeds and Joe Winters on percussion. Visually contributing to Justin Been's fully immersive, realistic, and honest directing are Tyler Duenow's lights, Eileen Engel's costumes, and Jacob Baxley's sound.

Okay, time for my final thoughts. I've seen some production videos of theatres around the country performing *Spelling Bee*, and after finally seeing it live, I think Stray Dog's was the production that truly did the material the most justice. Too many productions of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* treat the show as a piece of sketch comedy — productions that cast local comedians rather than professional actors, mugging to the audience, making funny faces, and using funny voices. Even though the show is hilarious, the reality is *Spelling Bee* is not one of those wacky, silly shows that prioritize gags and bits. It's actually a very serious social commentary about the unnecessary, perverse pressures that adults place on children. Hell, the reason why the kids are played by adult actors is that it forces us to recognize the ridiculousness of the adult pressures that children are expected to withstand nowadays, as well as recognize how childish adults can behave when they are put under pressure.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is so beloved by so many people (as evidenced by Stray Dog's totally sold-out run) because there's no bullshit in it. All of the characters in the show have qualities that we all remember having as kids and that we recognize in ourselves as adults; we either knew these kids or were these kids. Making funny faces and using funny voices distracts the audience from thinking about the important social issues that *Spelling Bee* is addressing: parenting culture, gifted children, what it means to be different, competition, expectations, the emotional roller coaster that is childhood, and the pressures that come with adulthood. There is a depth and humanity to this story that I don't think many productions explore enough.

The reason why *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is one of my favorite musicals of all time is that it's a story that takes characters who would normally be the misfits of the world and fully embraces their quirks, their epic fails, their hangups, their strengths, and their weaknesses. William Finn, Rachel Sheinkin, Rebecca Feldman, and Jay Reiss wrote these

characters with respect, and Stray Dog Theatre treats them that way. *Spelling Bee* was the musical that made me feel okay with being an autistic queer man who unironically loves musical theatre. This was the show that taught me that the social outcasts and the misfits of the world are the ones who get the recognition they deserve at the end of the day. Stray Dog Theatre reminded me that *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is the show that makes me get up every morning to give the middle-finger salute to the toxic deification of competition and perfectionism in America.