

Monomoy Spells Success With ‘Putnam County’

by Joan Tacke Aucoin

The enormously talented Monomoy Theater Company, masterfully directed by Annmarie Kelly Davis, takes our summer theater audiences back to middle school years, that awkward prepubescent time of uncertainty and awakening, in Rebecca Feldman’s 2005 Tony Award-winning, “25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.” Six gabby, gushy, garrulous University of Hartford and UConn theater students prattle, chitchat, and confabulate directly to the audience while nervously winning their duels of word engagement, making for a very nice evening of uproarious laughter. The ensemble treats the audience very well, “all because they love to spell.”

Originally conceived Off-Broadway as a series of improv comedy sketches on the theme of a spelling bee, Rachel Sheinkin then won the Tony on Broadway for her book with music and lyrics by William Finn. Spelling volunteers are recruited from the audience before each show adding unique and unpredictable dynamics to each show. The playwright has encouraged theater troupes all over the world to ad lib with local color and current political jabber. Thursday night’s opening show was hilarious! Pay attention to every word. Bravo to brave-hearts Anthony Kutcher in summer shorts, Ms. Margie Erskine “who hates the color blue,” and young, gorgeous Brittany Hines who could easily pass for a model and spelled very well to boot, for literally taking places alongside the ensemble on stage in the middle school gym bleachers in raucous “Pandemonium” throughout Act 1.

Ella Mora shines in mime and song as Olive Ostrovsky, the shy, lonely girl named after a vegetable whose best friend is “The Dictionary.” Olive’s mom is off to India while dad is always working overtime. Olive has taken the bus by herself to the competition and is without the \$25 entrance fee.

Colleen Welsh is the in-charge, number one Putnam Valley realtor, Rona Lisa Peretti, who moderates the competition and makes an exception to “The Rules,” her favorite part of the Bee. Words that require thought and keep our heads spinning leads Rona to reflect on the word “syzygy” in a poignant remembrance of winning Putnam’s third spelling bee. Rona shows empathy for Olive’s predicament.

Mac Westcott truly is the most colorful character onstage and my favorite in this show. Leaf really came in third during the previous Spelling Bee, but since the first and second place winners chose to attend a Bar Mitzvah, he is there by default. Leaf is the one speller who retreats into a dreamlike trance to achieve success in flawless comedic timing!

Juwan A. Crawley makes all the right moves with a “Magic Foot” used for visual imaging to his William Morris Barfee character to see the correct letters before spelling each assigned word. Crawley is always a champion onstage despite singing Barfee’s reprises of “Second, Part One and Two” with Olive.

Justine Rosales shows amazing ballet splits and stretches as the over-achieving, athletic Marcy Park who haughtily corrects the moderator, “I speak six languages.” Rosales is a true powerhouse in voice while also assisting the company in choreography and culinary arts. Marcy twirls off to a higher power when a divine presence surprises all.

Sari Koppel emphasizes literary expressions to her lisp while speaking of two fathers who believe life demands perfection. The company joins in “Woe is Me” as her dads take another picture for her BM (birth mother) which is why she’s gotta win the Bee.

Stephen Mir consistently surprises the audience in energetic and enterprising portrayals. Playing Charlito “Chip” Tolentino who won the 24th Bee before puberty set in. Mir’s perfect Boy Scout “Chip” brings down the house while dreaming of a pretty girl. Chip stumbles over the letters in “tittup” and cries foul when ousted out of the competition. Chip will reappear briefly sporting words that rhyme with “erection” while selling snacks during intermission, a very funny bit!

Curtis Longfellow plays a school administrator, Vice Principal Douglas Panch, who craves power over others as competition judge returning after a five-year leave of absence. Longfellow is key to cueing the volunteer spellers’ entrances, speeches, and extemporaneous remarks that ignites the audience in instant jocularly.

And last but not least among this talented cast is Bryce Wood. In strong voice and physique, Wood becomes the ex-con Mitch Mahoney whose community service penance as Comfort Counselor makes him a valuable Bee assistant handing out juice boxes to the losers. Mitch played “Prayer of the Comfort Counselor” directly to Ms. Hines as the audience laughed hysterically.

Of course, as a retired schoolteacher, I felt every one of my former students in Olive’s sweet “I Love You Song” with her parents, what every child needs to hear. Ella Mora, Colleen Welsh, and Bryce Wood touched everyone’s hearts.

Test yourself before you come: crepuscule, capybara, acouchi, elanguescence, vug, and Weltanschauung. Kid’s night on Broadway in 2007: Audience volunteer Julie Andrews on stage missed spelling her Mary Poppins theme song: “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”.

Phil Rittner’s music direction and Friends of Monomoy Theater Orchestra need no spell-check to their enjoyable accompaniment! Costumes by Amanda Cleveland-Davey with Jordan Saylor presents a patch-work quilt of textures and designs winning the Bee in a pre-teen hallmark of unconventional styles. Nicole Bianco’s gym set is adorned with bully-free zone high school banners.

Details:

“25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” At Monomoy Theatre Through Aug. 8 Information and reservations: 508-945-1589