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High energy, quirkiness define 'Spelling Bee'

CHATHAM — Almost by definition, spelling bees lend themselves to moments of sheer elation, agonizing failures and comic possibilities. The same thing might be said of junior high school.

Capitalizing on the pathos and humor inherent in both of these microcosms of life, the musical comedy "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" follows six quirky adolescents in their pursuit of the trophy, a sense of belonging and self-acceptance — not necessarily in that order.

A great choice for Monomoy's fairly intimate setting, "Spelling Bee" calls to mind two other smallish shows, "Godspell" and "Greater Tuna," though in ways related more to approach than content.

Like "Godspell," it's very much an ensemble affair, with the whole gang dressed in offbeat attire (fun, distinctive, personality-enhancing costumes by Amanda Cleveland-Davey) and frequently breaking into song and dance numbers. "Spelling Bee" even happens to feature a cameo by Jesus (Stephen Mir), who enters the gymnasium's doors in a puff of clouds. He reassures one contestant he won't be upset if she loses. "But I won't be disappointed if you win either," he says. "This isn't the sort of thing I care much about."

In the case of "Spelling Bee," musical numbers usually reflect the characters' inner worlds — expressing their feelings or revealing glimpses of their lives at home. The music is hardly as tuneful as that of "Godspell," but it's pleasant enough and the lyrics are generally amusing and/or moving, adding much insightful content to the show.

(Certainly the in-house orchestra provides fabulous accompaniment, secreted away in the rafters above the stage.) The choreography is engaging and inventive, blending some pretty cool moves with a geekiness in keeping with the students' personalities.

To the extent that "Spelling Bee" resembles "Greater Tuna," it's in the array of broadly drawn characters (totally minus the biting humor and mean-spiritedness). In presenting this warm-hearted story of a silver-anniversary competition, director Annmarie Kelly Davis, musical director Phil Rittner and their strong cast have buffed performances until they shine. Although it takes a little while for things to gel amid this production's high-energy shenanigans, the idiosyncrasies of the students and the three adults conducting the bee soon stand out in high relief.

Ella Mora gives a luminous performance as Olive Ostrowsky, a lonely girl who has grown up feeling that her family's oversized dictionary is her friend. She comes to the competition alone on a bus because her mother's at an ashram in India and her father is working late, as usual. While looking Dresden-doll delicate, Mora sings with soul and has fine-tuned comedic instincts (including a flair for facial expressions), along with a touching vulnerability.

Juwan A. Crawley is another standout. Looking a bit like Twiddle Dum (or Twiddle Dee) in shorts held up awkwardly high with suspenders, he plays William Morris Barfee, a contestant who uses his "magic foot" to help him visualize his words. Crawley brings this unusual habit to life in a way that somehow touches the heart along with the funny bone.

In addition to his funny turn as Jesus, Mir is great as Charlito "Chip" Tolentino, a Boy Scout whose raging hormones lead to his defeat. As overachiever Marcy Park, Justine Rosales strikes an air of blasé indifference to her accomplishments — along with impressive balletic positions — as she sings "I Speak Six Languages" ("and say hello in at least seven more").

Sari Koppel is highly likable as Logainne "Schwarzy" Schwartz and Grubbeniere, a girl under pressure from her two gay fathers to win. Mac Westcott is spot on as Leaf Coneybear, a rather flighty homeschooler who hails from a family of hippies and offers the plaintive song "I'm Not That Smart."

Collen Welsh is sheer perfection as Rona Lisa Peretti, the spelling bee's moderator, with Curtis Longfellow absolutely superb as Vice Principal Douglas Panch, the official word pronouncer. Bryce Wood plays Mitch Mahoney, a convict who's completing his community service with a stint as the bee's "comfort counselor." He certainly does the role more than justice, but it is easy to imagine an actor with a rougher, tougher look being more incongruous, so perhaps even funnier.

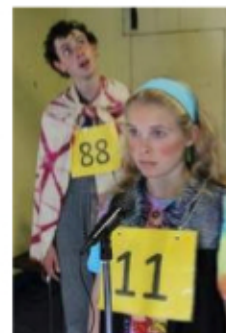
Originally presented as the play "C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E" by the New York-based improv troupe The Farm, "Spelling Bee" was further developed at Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield before opening off-Broadway and then on Broadway in 2005, where its book won a Tony and Drama Desk Award.

Probably owing to its improvisational roots, the show boasts the added attraction of a few volunteer audience members participating as contestants. They all joined in good-naturedly at Friday night's show, with Jordan Weber-Flink looking particularly calm under pressure. (He works in computers, but confessed at intermission to having had considerable acting experience in high school and college.) At one point, he was given the word "cow" to spell, sparking an outburst from the students in the form of "Pandemonium," a musical number lamenting that "life is random and unfair."

Those who, like Olive, love the dictionary (or at least find words intriguing) are sure to enjoy all the word-related humor and plot development. Panch's use of words in sample sentences are delightfully ridiculous; as in, for "Mexican," "Do not invite the Mexican to Donald Trump's hair-plucking party," or something

to that effect. Leaf finds himself in the unlikely position of continually having to spell the names of South American rodents — "agouti," for example. When Olive gets the word "chimerical" — defined as imaginary, or highly unrealistic — she envisions her parents telling her they've always known she was a winner in a touching rendition of "The I Love You Song."

Monomoy Theatre has a winner in "Spelling Bee," too. Nothing chimerical about that.



Mac Westcott and Ella Mora star in the "25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" at Monomoy Theatre through Aug. 8. Courtesy of Dawniella Sinder