

'Bee' generates a sweet buzz

Charming improv: Audience members can test spelling skills at Capital Playhouse comedy

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Before you go to see "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," you might want to do a little studying.

"Every night, we have four volunteers from the audience come on stage to be guest spellers in the spelling bee," said director Heidi Fredericks. "We just pick people who we think will honestly try to spell the words."



That's not to say they will succeed. The play, which opened Thursday at Capital Playhouse, was adapted from "C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E," a nonmusical play created by a New York City improv troupe – and the title is by no means the most difficult word volunteers might be expected to spell.

In fact, even if the dictionary is your best friend, you're only going to last so long. The deck is stacked against the hapless guest spellers, who appear only in the first half.

"It's up to the people playing the facilitators of the bee to choose the right words that are hard enough to bump off the people at the right times," Fredericks said.

"It is such a clever piece," she added. "It is so well written, and all of these contingencies are really well accounted for. Even though there's a great amount of improvisation, there's still a structure that keeps the play tight and organized."



"When you are doing live theater, productions vary from night to night based on audience response and things like that," said Stephanie Nace, who's playing the youngest speller, Logan Schwartzandgrubenierre. "When you add into the equation that we have four new people up on stage with us every night, it will be interesting to see what happens. Something will happen each night that will throw us. That will be exciting."

Nace, who also is the playhouse's marketing director, is no stranger to playing characters much younger than herself. "I put in my bio that one of my favorite things to do is play little kids and animals," she said.

"It's not a stretch for me to put myself back in that physicality and pick up those traits of how an 8-year-old might move across the stage and sit in the bleachers and how she'd be fidgety or hold her legs." She laughed. "It's my youthful spirit."

If an adult playing an 8-year-old sounds a little unbelievable, it is – but it's the reality of "Putnam County."

"It's not like we're trying to put one over on the audience," Nace said.

The silliness of adults playing kids, joined on stage by adults playing adults, and then by adult audience spellers just being themselves, is part of the show's charm, Fredericks said.

"It's probably the funniest show I've ever seen and certainly the funniest show I've ever worked on," said the director, who also is the artistic director for the playhouse's Students on Stage program. "Even after we've run the show for the 10th time, we are just laughing."