

The word is H-U-M-O-R-O-U-S

Odd, fun characters: Laughs abound in 'Bee'

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Conventional wisdom has it that it's the music and dancing that makes or breaks musical theater, not the plot. A notable exception is "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," winner of the Tony and Drama Desk awards for best book of a musical in 2005.



The book by Rachel Sheinkin is funny, but not so funny as to deserve those awards. Typical of Sheinkin's humor is when contestants ask for a word to be used in a sentence and outlandish examples are given. For the word "phylactery," we get: "Billy, put down that phylactery, we're Episcopalians." For "fandango," we get: "Scaramouch, Scaramouch, will you do the Fandango" from Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

This play humorously brings to light a whole host of foibles, fears and yearnings that plague teenagers, as well as a couple of screwball adults: Deanna Moon as Rona Peretti, who keeps reliving her long-ago win at the third annual spelling bee, and Jerod Nace as Vice Principal Douglas Panch, who tends to inexplicably go berserk from time to time.

Seldom has such an odd assortment of characters been brought together in one play. Just a few examples:

Vice Principal Panch is a buffoon of a school leader. Nace plays him deadpan, even while improvising, and he truly looks the part in his ridiculous wig and moustache.

Patrick Wigren, whom I loved as Rooster in "Annie," is equally amazing as Leaf Coneybear. (What a great name.) Leaf is something of a savant who is plagued by thoughts of not being smart enough. Wigren plays him with facial plasticity and weird arm movements that remind me of Dick Van Dyck at his klutzy best.

Harrison Fry is a great William Barfee (pronounced bar-fay, but everyone calls him barfy). William has a rare mucus membrane disorder and spells out his words with his foot in a funny little dance.

Stephanie C. Nace as the overly earnest Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre – who should win the spelling bee simply by spelling her name – reminds me of Lily Tomlin’s classic Edith Ann from “Laugh In.” Nace’s Logainne speaks and sings with a pouty little-girl voice that I found endearing.

Also very earnest is Danny Boman as Chip Tolentino, last year’s spelling bee winner who is constantly frustrated and complains the contest is unfair. Boman also helped choreograph the show.

Bailey Boyd plays Marcy Park as confident, cute, perky and a fierce competitor.

And Stephen Anastasia is endearing as the juvenile delinquent Mitch Mahoney.

The songs are not as memorable as the odd assortment of characters, but a few do stand out. Boman’s solo, “Chip’s Lament,” which opens the second act, is all about an embarrassing moment that affects almost every teenage boy. It is fall-on-the-floor-laughing funny, and Boman belts it out.

On a more serious note, Elise Campello as Olive Ostrovsky sings beautifully and powerfully on “The I Love You Song” with backup by Moon and Anastasia, and in duet with Fry on “Second.”

Audra Merritt’s costume design added immensely to the flavor, and kudos to whoever did the hair and wigs.

The play might be a bit too silly for some, but if you like outlandish humor, it could be for you.