

Logophiles unite!

Word up, Capital Playhouse. "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" delivers

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This Tony Award-winning musical comedy follows six young people in the throes of puberty, overseen by grown-ups who barely managed to escape childhood themselves.

I don't think I've ever seen an arts organization make a more swift and dramatic turnaround than Capital Playhouse. Is it weird to say I'm proud of them? For years I sat through shows that could've, should've been better, with listless or dissonant performances from actors I knew could act. Some of the credit for this explosion of quality has to go to CP's new managing director, Joe Vansyckle. He's an enthusiastic booster who subbed as house manager for Stephanie Nace at the final dress preview of a show she's in, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. What a fast-paced, hilarious two hours. I really can't say enough about *Bee*, except to beg for this level of excellence to continue.

What's unusual about *Bee*, aside from its lack of an intermission (the show clocked in at two hours less a minute), is that some of its lines and even structure are ad-libbed. Four audience members (were some of them plants? I couldn't tell) get pulled on stage to compete in the bee. How well they compete-and some do surprisingly well-affects the order of songs. I find most experiments in audience involvement clunky at best, but this cast is so dynamic and well-

rehearsed that they guide newbies through the proceedings with invisible grace; and that includes a busy dance number.

By way of full disclosure, I should mention my girlfriend was pulled on stage to spell, which upped my level of involvement. (I still maintain she was booted unfairly. Clearly "sp-space" meant one space, and phrases aren't used in spelling bees anyway.) I should also confess I won the Eel River Valley Spelling Bee for eighth graders, so this subject is right up my nerdy alley. I'm a word lover. But I'm also quick to bag on witless improv, sloppy choreography, or actors who phone it in. This show earned praise on all counts.

If the musical itself has a weakness, it's the songs themselves, which are instantly forgettable. For once, it's the book, by Rachel Sheinkin and an improv collective called The Farm, that shines. I read on Wikipedia there's a far more risqué "parent-teacher conference" version; put that on, CP, and I'll review it, too. Parents should be advised even the tame version includes a few oaths, a lament for pubescent erectile hyperfunction, and flagrant use of the word "tittup."

What struck me most about the show was how perfectly it was cast. Director Heidi Fredericks, who impressed me with *Into the Woods* at Lakewood Playhouse, deploys her talented cast with tactical precision. I've been rough on several of these performers before, so consider this a case of actors' best revenge. Danny Boman not only makes an unsettling Chip and benevolent savior, but also helped choreograph the show. Deanna Moon is spot-on as a onetime spelling bee winner turned Stepford teacher. And Patrick Wigren is terrific as a loose-limbed paste eater who might be an autistic savant.

Ms. Nace shines as a scrappy go-getter who's ill-suited to the utterance of words like "cystitis." Stephen Anastasia continues to impress in multiple roles, and Harrison Fry, Bailey Boyd, and especially Elise Campello shine as desperate spellers. But I want to give a special shout-out to Jerod Nace, whose quick rejoinders elevate what could've been a one-note character with an implausible arc. If it seems as if I named everyone in the cast, that's because I did. I even liked the ushers who worked concessions in character.

Not only is *Bee* one of the funniest shows I've seen in years, it serves to demonstrate the need for live comedy just a few feet away in the age of Must See TV. I'm happy to confirm the new precedent was set by *Little Women*: Capital Playhouse is back.