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Theater review: 'Putnam County Spelling Bee' showcases comic wit, tunefulness

By Jeff DeBell Special to The Roanoke Times Jun 27, 2017



Chip Tolentino (played by Alex Vinh) is given a word by Rona Lisa Peretti (Jillian Hannah) and Vice Principal Watson).

Courtesy Ginger Poole

The warm-weather outbreak of high-quality local theater continues. First, there was the Little Town Players' "Promises, Promises." Then, "The Importance of Being Earnest," courtesy of Showtimers.

And now comes "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," a rollicking musical comedy from this year's summer apprentice troupe at Mill Mountain Theatre. It's on the Waldron Stage in the theater's Wells Fargo Auditorium (that cozy little theater you enter from Church Avenue).

Like others before them, 2016's teen apprentices are loaded with the talent they will need in the showbiz careers for which they seem destined. A nod to director Jay Briggs and music director Seth Davis for shaping it all into a fitting showcase of the tunefulness and comic wit of the show's creators.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" was written by Rachel Sheinkin from an idea by Rebecca Feldman. Jay Reiss is credited for "additional material." The music and lyrics are by William Finn. The 2005 New York premiere was an immediate and deserving hit.

The show's single set is the yearly bee in fictional Putnam County, Anywhere, USA. Vying for the championship are half a dozen teenagers whose backstories are both touching and comical:

n William Morris Barfée (Brian Wittenberg). Has one functioning lung, a pesky sinus condition and gets touchy when introduced as William "Barfy." "It rhymes with parfait!" he fruitlessly insists of his surname.

n Logainne SchwartzandGrubenierre (Claire Hilton). Politically attuned (expect Trump jokes), speaks with a lisp and has two gay fathers.

n Marcy Park (Rosvic Siason). An over-achiever who speaks six languages, plays classical piano, excels in sports and doesn't much care for other people.

n Leaf Coneybear (Christopher Castanho). Makes his own clothes, spells as if in a

trance and is regarded by his family as “not that smart.”

n Chip Tolentino (Alex Vinh). A Boy Scout type who’s the returning champ and who suffers from spontaneous physical evidence of a hyperactive libido. Vinh also appears as Jesus Christ.

n Olive Ostrovsky (Lizzy Hinton). Soft-spoken. Yearns for the attention of her mom, who’s “finding herself” in India, and workaholic dad.

Four brave audience volunteers also compete.

Non-contestant characters are bee moderator Rona Lisa Peretti (Jillian Hannah), word pronouncer William Panch (Scott Watson) and “comfort counselor” Mitch Mahoney (Josh Walker). Peretti is a former bee winner currently in real estate. Panch returns to the bee after an unspecified “incident” five years earlier. His sentences using the bee words are among the show’s funniest lines.

Mahoney is an ex-con who’s doing his community service at the bee. He hands the losers juice boxes and gently but firmly escorts them from the stage.

The show is best suited for more mature members of the family. The S-word pops up, as does “penis,” and Chip devotes an entire song to his inconvenient mid-bee erection. Try explaining that to your 6-year-old during a play.

Chip’s tune is one of more than 20 solos and ensemble numbers in the show. They’re accompanied by a particularly sharp combo led by keyboardist Davis.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

Presented by Mill Mountain Theatre's Summer Apprentices Company

When: Thursday and Friday at 7 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.

Where: Waldron Stage at Mill Mountain Theatre, 20 Church Ave. S.E., Roanoke

Cost: \$15

Family-friendly? PG-13 if it were a movie

More information: 342-5740, millmountain.org