



## THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE @ San Jose Rep

THE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE: A Musical Comedy. Book by Rachel Sheinkin, music and lyrics by William Finn, conceived by Rebecca Feldman and directed by Timothy Near. San Jose Repertory Theatre (SJR), 101 Paseo de San Antonio / San Jose, CA 95113-2603. 408. 367.7255 or [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com). May 9 – June 7, 2009.

THEY ARE ALL WINNERS AT THE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE AT SAN JOSE REP.

If there were Tony Awards for West Coast shows, San Jose Rep's production of *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* would garner multiple nominations and winners. The nominations/winners would include best ensemble, best direction (Timothy Near), best staging (Robert Broadfoot, David Lee Cuthbert, Jeff Mockus) and best supporting actor (Steve Irish). In 2005, the original Broadway production did receive a Tony Award for Best Musical Book and a nomination for Best Original Score. This is Timothy Near's swan song as Artistic Director of SJR where she has consistently produced great shows for the past 21 years and now works as a freelance director. In that capacity, she won the Bay Area Critics Circle award as best director of *Uncle Vanya* at CalShakes in 2008.

Although the laughs come fast and furious, the story line has a bittersweet patina as we follow the tribulations of six juvenile contestants in a spelling bee. The ethnic makeup of the group reflects a true mixture of local and national contestants while their eclectic nature provides laughs. The contestants, in order of appearance, are: Chip Tolentino (March de la Cruz) last year's winner and on the verge of reaching puberty and has a great song "My Unfortunate Erection" that causes him to be eliminated. Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Molly Bell) with two gay dads and an unseen BM (Birth Mother); Leaf Coneybear (Clifton Guterman, flown in from the East Coast to replace the injured Alex Moggridge) who has been always told he is not too smart but makes his own clothes; William Barfee, (Mark Farrell) who has a "magic foot" that led him to finals in last year's contest before a peanut allergy did him in; Marcy Park (Sophia Oda) who speaks six languages, sleeps only 3 hours a night and placed ninth in the nationals; Olive Ostrovsky's (Dani Marcus) parents are not in attendance and the dictionary is her best friend.

Alison Ewing as the Spelling Bee moderator Rona, gives a performance reminiscent of Dorothy Loudon and knows how to belt a song and do a double take. Berwick Haynes has his moments as an ex-con doing community service as the "Official Comfort Counselor" and hands out juice boxes to losing students. It is Steve Irish as Vice Principal Douglas Panch who wins the supporting cast award for his subtle underplaying as a judge with unrequited love for Rona with a marvelous burst of self pity "causing an incident." Four contestants are selected from the audience to participate in the bee as they take their place on the bleachers and one by one misspell a word, being ushered off the stage with the rousing song "Goodbye."

There isn't a single weakness in the acting and all are winners even though there is only one spelling bee winner. There are touching scenes where each contestant learns the winning is not everything and there is rebellion against those who push their kids too far. You will have to see the show to find out the winner. Every High School in the area would love to have the realistic gymnasium set complete with a polished hardwood floor, retractable basketball backboard, real supporting beams and set of six doors that open and close flawlessly in unison. The visual projections high on the back wall are gems. Although the set



alone is worth a visit, the dynamic force making this an unqualified must see performance is the direction by Timothy Near  
Running time less than 2 hours without intermission.  
Kedar K. Adour, MD  
Courtesy of TheatreWorld Internet Magazine.