

## Musical spells 'charm' and 'hilarity' at San Jose Rep

By John Orr

Daily News Arts & Entertainment Editor

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As her going-away gift, San Jose Repertory Theatre's Timothy Near is presenting "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," which has audiences walking out the glass doors thoroughly charmed and wearing big smiles, if not whistling memorable tunes.

Near, artistic director of the Rep for 21 years, is off to the world of free-lance directing, leaving the excellent company she built in the hands of Rick Lombardo.

The Tony-winning "Spelling Bee," while well padded with music and dance, is funnier than it is toe-tapping, and almost as notable for its heart-touching moments as it is for its jokes.

It touches on age-old problems of being an adolescent, such as nasal infections and poorly timed erections, and more modern worries, such as being the female daughter of two gay fathers, or the clothes-designing son of a hippie commune, or of missing one's mother because she is off on a spiritual quest at an ashram.

We meet the six major competitors in the spelling bee in a bright gymnasium designed by Robert Broadfoot. Six red doors against the back wall, two blue doors to each side, bleachers, basketball backboard hanging down. Rona Lisa Peretti, a one-time winner and now mistress of ceremonies, immediately instructs the janitor to raise the backboard out of sight, and away it goes. To applause.

Alison Ewing (who recently was wonderful in "It Ain't Nothing But the Blues" at TheatreWorks), is hilarious and completely winning as Peretti, a real estate agent whose favorite moments in life have centered around the spelling bee — in fact, three of the songs are "Rona's Favorite Moment."

The main contestants include Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (a fabulous performance by Molly Bell) who has a lisp that would make Sylvester the Cat green with jealousy, and who of course gets all the words with lots of S's in them (sitting in the front row might not be advised); Leaf Coneybear (Clifton Guterman), from a family of hippies including an attractive sister; Chip Tolentino (Marc de la Cruz) who loses when he allows himself to be distracted by Leaf's sister, which leads to the song "My Unfortunate Erection"; William Barfee (Mark Farrell), who has a pudding-bowl haircut; Marcy Park (Sophie Oda), an over-achieving student who sings "I Speak Six Languages"; and Olive Ostrovksy (Dani Marcus), who very much misses her parents.

Steve Irish as Douglas Panch, a vice principal, shares most of the best jokes with Ewing.

As she introduces each contestant, Rona delivers such colorful bits of extra information as "William has a rare nasal disorder" and another's plaid shorts "are made of graph paper."

Douglas is the word pronouncer who is asked to use the competition's easiest word in a sentence, and replies "Spell the word 'cow.'" The definitions are often significantly hilarious.



Dani Marcus, front, with Berwick Haynes, left, and Alison Ewing during "The I Love You Song" in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of "The 25th Annual Putnam Spelling Bee." (Kevin Berne / San Jose Repertory)

Have we always put such pressure on our adolescents? Probably we have; what has changed now is how much attention we put on the process, and the new language and arts we use to illuminate it. We get a look at what drives each of these kids, and the dramas and comedies that affect their lives.

That all the main actors are obviously actually adults is never a problem; we immediately suspend that bit of disbelief through appealing performances by an excellent cast.

Marcus is the essence of mousy little girl, shy and unsure of herself, but delivers the show-stopper, "The I Love You Song," with real power and vocal ability.

Farrell gets a lot of laughs, including during a particularly key moment, when he says "All my life ... I have only been able to breath through one nostril."

Conceived by Rebecca Feldman, the book for "Spelling Bee" is by Rachel Sheinkin, music and lyrics by William Finn. While the story tells us how the dictionary is one girl's best friend, and how much they all have invested in it emotionally (one of Logainne's two fathers reminds her that nobody loves a loser), one of the best moments is when Jesus Himself appears before Marcy in a flash of smoke. Sure, he'll love her no matter what, he indicates, but spelling bees? Not the kind of thing he really cares about.

E-mail John Orr at [jorr@dailynewsgroup.com](mailto:jorr@dailynewsgroup.com).

"The 25th Annual Putnam County  
Spelling Bee"

Upshot: Highly recommended.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre,  
101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

When: Through June 7; dark Mondays; matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Tickets: \$33-\$62; [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com),  
408-367-7355 or at the theater.