

THEATER REVIEW

# Cast nails timing in 'Spelling Bee'

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

Monday, May 18, 2009



**The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee:** Musical comedy. Book by Rachel Sheinkin. Music and lyrics by William Finn. Directed by Timothy Near. With Dani Marcus, Mark Farrell, Alison Ewing, Molly Bell et al. (Through June 7. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. One hour, 50 minutes. Tickets: \$33-\$62. (408) 367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).)



Kevin Berne

Just the concept of a school spelling bee is such a sure-fire crowd-pleaser that it still comes as a surprise how much more there is to William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee." The comedy of the very smart, misfit kids and the tension of the competition is only part of its charm. Sheinkin's book and Finn's songs explore adolescent anxieties, varieties of modern parenting and other topical topics to blithely satiric and unexpectedly moving effect.

A former Broadway hit, now popping up at theaters everywhere, seems like an unambitious choice for former artistic director Timothy Near's San Jose Repertory Theatre swan song, after building the company through 22 challenging years. But "Bee" plays to her strong suits for comedy and music.

Finn's bright melodies are handled beautifully by most of the cast and music director Dolores Duran-Cefalu's sharp five-piece ensemble in the "Bee" that opened Friday. If the choreography isn't as engaging as in the version at Post Street Theatre three years ago, Near and her actors land every punch line and ad lib with near perfect timing.

Ad libs have been part of "Bee" since it was conceived by Rebecca Feldman and developed with a group called the Farm. Alison Ewing handles her quick quip tasks with perky aplomb as the excited emcee who delivers color commentary. Molly Bell, as Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre - political activist daughter of two dads - delights with topical cracks about marriage equality.

Dani Marcus brings the show to its heart-tugging climax on lonely, downcast Olive Ostrovsky's "The I Love You Song," in beautiful harmony with Ewing, as her enlightenment-seeking absentee mom and a honey-toned, soul-stirring Berwick Haynes (who plays the parolee "comfort counselor"). Mark Farrell is an appealing, mucus-challenged William Barfee, and Clifton Guterman is an impressive last-minute replacement for an injured Alex Moggridge as the flighty Leaf Coneybear.

The strong cast includes Marc de la Cruz as the school star with an "Unfortunate Erection," Steve Irish as the vice principal with boundary problems and Sophie Oda as the overachiever Marcy Park. As enjoyable as it is, though, the prolonged standing ovation at its end was probably more of a tribute to Near than the show. She's earned it.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at [rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/18/DDUF17JI93.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 2** of the San Francisco Chronicle