

## At San Jose Rep, a 'Putnam Spelling Bee' that's d-e-l-i-g-h-t-f-u-l

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William Barfee is not a popular lad. He has a drippy sinus condition. He spells out words with his foot. Oh, and did we mention that they call him Barf, for short?

Only in the geekdom of "25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" could such a fellow be the man of the hour. Welcome to the realm of desperation, juice boxes and bleacher seats known as middle school. The posters may declare it a "bully free zone," but most days it's open season on the brainiacs. It's only during the bee that these pint-size competitive spellers can feel free to get down with their nerdy selves. These kids read the dictionary to relax. They can't wait to get their phonics on. Suffice to say, they make the mathletes look cool.

Timothy Near's thoroughly adorable production — her swan song at San Jose Rep after more than two decades — wins us over from the first utterances by a tongue-tied tween, to the last audience-participation schtick. Along the way, the gang encounters one highly protuberant organ, power-hungry parents, the pressure to succeed at all costs and the dawning realization that "life is random and unfair."

This delightful Tony-winning musical may not have an ageless score (some of William Finn's lyrics are forgettable), but there are few Broadway musicals with this much quirkiness and heart — flowing from the witty book by Rachel Sheinkin. Certainly, the show's sly subtext, that a society that prizes winning above all else may well be setting itself up for a fall, has only gained traction since its 2005 Broadway debut.

### Cast of characters

Naturally, Barfee (Mark Farrell) isn't the only one desperate to win the spelling bee crown. Meet Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Molly Bell), a stressed-out lisper with braids as tightly wound as her dad. There's also doleful Olive Ostrovsky (Dani Marcus), who is best friends with her dictionary (sigh). And who could forget hippie-dippie Leaf Coneybear (Clifton Guterman), who wears a cape because he feels "supersonic?" The poor dear also has to wear a helmet indoors because he has a tendency to fall down and hit his head. (For the record, Guterman stepped into the role at the last minute because of an actor injury, but he's clearly born to play flaky little Leaf.)

Initially, they are all intimidated by all-business overachiever Marcy Park (Sophie Oda), who speaks six languages, plays the piano and knows karate. She's so smug that she prays to God for harder words and is not the least bit taken aback when Jesus actually shows up. In a way, The Lord answers all of their prayers. All but those from Chip Tolentino (Marc de la Cruz) that is. He's the unlucky lad who gets disqualified because of a body part that's always on the up and up.

Sensitively directed by Near, the powerhouse cast just keeps topping itself. Marcus channels the vulnerability of childhood like a lightning rod, especially in the heart-melting "I Love You Song." Guterman keeps taking Leaf to new heights of dorkiness. He wisely doesn't force the zaniness, especially when Leaf slips into his spelling trance. De la Cruz is a hoot as the Almighty.



(l to r) Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Molly Bell), Rona Lisa Peretti (Alison Ewing), Olive Ostrovsky (Dani Marcus) and (center) Marcy Park (Sophie Oda) dance together in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of The 25th Annual Putnam Spelling Bee. (Kevin Berne)

## Judges' asides

And yet it's the judges, the well-intentioned Miss Peretti (Alison Ewing) and the questionably motivated Vice Principal Panch (Steve Irish) who often steal the spotlight. Their devilishly snarky asides just get funnier and funnier. The fact that Ewing and Irish have to ad-lib many of these deadpan jabs because the contestants change every night (four spellers are drawn from the audience) only heightens the hilarity. "Project Runaway" couldn't come up with pithier fashion put-downs and the wry use-it-in-a-sentence punch lines are Jon Stewart-worthy.

So if you know your way around words like crepuscule, capybara and cystitis, get your diphthongs in gear and volunteer for the "Bee," but be forewarned. If you get kicked off the island, mockery will ensue. That's how we spell schadenfreude.

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## "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

Book by Rachel Sheinkin, music and lyrics by William Finn, conceived by Rebecca Feldman, additional material by Jay Reiss

Upshot: A thoroughly adorable musical about puberty, spelling and competition that is a sure to win big at the box office.

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

Through: June 7

Running time: 2 hours (no intermission)

Tickets: \$33-\$62; 408-367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)