



Do not miss the SJ Rep's Putnam County Spelling Bee

By [Cynthia Corral](#)

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I attended the Opening Night performance of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* with open expectations. I had never heard anything about the show before and did not know what to expect, and I got the same feeling from other audience members in attendance. Two hours later we filed out of the **SJ Rep** with euphoric hearts and maybe a tear in an eye or two. This is a production that draws you in from the moment you step into the theatre, and it continues on with a catharsis of hysterical laughing, hopeful rooting for your favorite speller, and heartbreaking sorrow for the losers. It is an interactive production like no other and simply put, is not to be missed.

My guest and I stepped into the theatre and gasped with delight when we saw the stage had been turned into an extraordinarily detailed gymnasium. It was brightly lit even as the audience was finding their seats, and the bright colors and fun details from floor to ceiling really helped make the audience excited before the play even began. When the play started at 8pm the house was packed full and ready to see what this play was all about.



Every character in this play is the protagonist of their own little story, and we slowly learn about each student as the play goes on. Four members of the audience are also chosen to participate on stage and are given spelling words until they have been eliminated from the competition. There is a lot of playful fun-poking and the audience cheered loudly for all the students whether they won or lost.

There is no fourth wall in this production and the audience is a fully participating part of the play. Fifteen minutes into the production on Friday the audience was uncontrollable in our laughter and yelling and rooting for each speller. Halfway through the play the character of Chip Tolentino walks through the aisles with a candy box and slings M&Ms and Kit Bars at the crowd while singing about his "Unfortunate Erection". But soon after this we started to quiet down as the student characters in front of us slowly opened up and we saw some of the sadness and hurt and disappointment they held inside.

As the play tells us, "Life isn't fair," "Life is pandemonium," and "the good don't always win." These are hard lessons that we all have to learn in life, and the students in the spelling bee are dealing with extraordinary pressures put upon them from their parents, society and themselves to succeed. There is only going to be one "winner" at the end of the spelling bee. But as director Timothy Near tells us, this play shows that "working hard, being creative and making good friends in the process IS winning."

The actors in this production were incredible. You never *for one moment* believe you are looking at adults playing children, you only see six hopeful preteens sitting in the gym waiting for their turn to spell.

Clifton Guterman as Leaf Coneybear and **Dani Marcus** as Olive Ostrovsky were special standouts who make you fall in love with their characters. **Berwick Hayes** as Mitch Mahoney brings comic relief and much love and comfort to the characters and participating audience members. But every member of this cast was amazing. I also give high marks to scenic designer **Robert Broadfoot**, costume designer **Shigeru Yaji** and musical director **Dolores Dura-Cefalu**.

But this review would not be complete without a special thank you to play director and **Senior Artistic Advisor Timothy Near**. After 21 years as Artistic Director this is her final play at the SJ Rep. **Stan**

Anders, SJ Rep President, Board of Trustees, says that “under her leadership, the Rep has become nationally recognized and award-winning theatre. She was the driving force in getting this beautiful theater built, and her true legacy will be the artistic excellence that she has instilled in the organization. In addition to the countless awards and honors that have been bestowed upon Timi, starting next season, the board will give Timothy the honorary title of **Emeritus Artistic Director.**” Timothy Near will definitely be missed, but we would like to thank her for bringing this wonderful last production to San Jose.

The Tony award-winning musical hit ***The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.***

Opens: May 15th, 2009

Closes: June 7th, 2009

Price range: \$33-\$62

Students (full-time, with valid ID) - 1/2 off tickets for all performances, all seats.

Seniors (65 yrs +) and Teachers - \$6 off tickets all performances, all seats.

ADA or ASL discount - \$6 off your ticket and your companion's ticket.

Subscriber Single Ticket Discounts - \$6

Rush Ticket Discounts - Balcony price for that performance

By phone: 408.367.7255

Online: www.sjrep.com

By mail: Rep Box Office, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA 95113

By fax: 408.367.7236

In person: Rep Box Office, [101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose](#)

Between South 2nd & 3rd Streets

For group sales: 408.367.7295

There is an excellent [Study Guide](#) at the SJ Rep website with Pre- and Post-Show Discussion Questions. I highly recommend you take a look through it before you see the play.