

# *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

By Noble Fool Theatricals

*By Dan Zeff*

**St. Charles** - "The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" is one of the most delightful, and unlikely, musical comedy hits of the new millennium. Who would expect a show about six nerdy kids competing for a spelling championship to become a major Broadway hit?

Noble Fool Theatricals is the third theater to present "Spelling Bee" in Chicagoland in the past few seasons. The musical had a healthy run at the former Drury Lane Theatre in Chicago and was successfully revived at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. Both were excellent productions but the presentation by Noble Fool Theatricals may be the best of the lot. Add another gold star for artistic director John Gawlik as he reinvents Noble Fool into a major player in the regional theater scene.



In 95 intermissionless minutes, "Spelling Bee" introduces the audience to six young people

Bee introduces the audience to six young people gathered in a high school gymnasium in Putnam County (exact location unspecified but probably somewhere in middle America). The six will battle for the local spelling championship and a chance to move on to the next competitive level. Along the way, we learn a good deal about each participant and enjoy some pleasant songs and lots of witty dialogue, much of it deliciously politically incorrect.

Along with the six young spellers, the show includes three adults who run the spelling competition. Douglas Panch is the school assistant principal who announces the words and Rona Lisa Peretti is his co-moderator. Mitch Mahoney is a hulking black man who is "serving his community service" as the spelling bee's bouncer. As an added gimmick, the show plucks four people from the audience to join the six kids in the spelling competition.

Each of the six kids has a back story. They are all geeky types and face some personal anxiety. The show is a comedy, but it does use the young characters to score points about young people struggling with excessive expectations or trying to survive dysfunction home environments, as well as dealing with issues of self esteem and identity. "Spelling Bee" is no psychodrama, but it does point out that growing up is highly stressful, even for champion spellers.

What won over the audiences and reviewers in New York City was the show's freshness and charm, qualities sustained at a triumphant level at the Noble Fool. Guest director Kevin Bellie perfectly orchestrates the spot-on ensemble in delivering an irresistible mix of humor, singing and dancing, and juvenile passions.

The six young spellers are played by Ian Paul Custer (William Barfee), Samantha Dubina (Olive Ostrovsky), Chie Isobe (Marcy Park), Erik Kaiko (Chip Tolentino), Cara Rifkin (Logaine Schwartenrubiniano), and Jack Guzman (Leaf

Schwartz (Grubben), and Jack Sweeney (Leaf Coneybear). They are all superb but first among equals is Dubina as Olive, a waiflike teenager from a broken home. Dubina is funny, sings expressively, and altogether creates a character who deftly blends comedy and pathos.



The adult characters control the action on stage. Michael Weber, who was the best actor in the Marriott production, returns as the droll Douglas Panch, a constant hoot as he recites the spelling words and illustrates them in hilarious politically incorrect sentences. Randolph Johnson delivers tough love to the losers as Mitch Mahoney.

Special commendation goes to Liza Jaine as Rona Lisa Peretti. Jaine gives one of those assured, versatile performances that sends the spectator to thumbing through the playbill to learn more about her. Jaine has a decent resume, but she possesses the looks and talent for a big role in a big production. Sarah Brown in "Guys and Dolls" came immediately to mind.

One quibble. The performers need to allow better spacing between the dialogue and the audience reaction. Too many funny lines were buried in the audience's laughing reaction to the previous witticism.

All the technical credits are first rate. The efficient technical crew did a terrific job of

efficient three-piece band is directed by Peter Storms. Bob Knuth designed the gymnasium interior that perfectly encloses the action. John Horan designed the lighting, Kimberly Morris the costumes, and Joseph Fosco the sound.

"The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" runs through June 13 at the mainstage theater at the Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 East Main Street. Regularly scheduled performances are Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m., with additional performances on selected Thursdays and Saturdays in May. Call 630 584 6342 or visit [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com).

Tickets are \$29 and \$39 with dinner packages available. Jambalaya is a solid choice for on site pre-theater dining. The restaurant is informal and the prices are right. An appetizer of spicy chicken wings and a steak sandwich entrée will set up the customer for the abundant pleasures of "Spelling Bee."

The show gets a rating of four stars. May 2010

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