

Noble Fool stages wacky, winning 'Spelling Bee'

By Scott C. Morgan | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 5/7/2010 12:04 AM

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Those bright and charmingly quirky kids of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" are back, and this time these adults playing pre-adolescents inspire fits of uproarious laughter courtesy of Noble Fool Theatricals.

Rachel Sheinkin's 2005 Tony Award-winning script (which ingeniously blends in audience-interactive improv comedy) and William Finn's peppy and idiosyncratic score both work wonders in a cozy space, as shown by previous local triumphs of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" in a yearlong 2006 Chicago run at Water Tower Place and a 2009 engagement at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire.

At Pheasant Run Resort, Noble Fool continues in that winning "Spelling Bee" tradition with a strong staging led by director/choreographer Kevin Bellie framed in set designer Bob Knuth's picture-perfect parody of a school gym festooned with "Putnam Pandas" trophy banners.

Two invaluable veterans from Marriott Theatre's "Spelling Bee" return to wow for Noble Fool: Chie Isobe as the overextended Asian-American whiz kid Marcy Park (who can do all sorts of amazing physical feats during her song "I Speak Six Languages") and Michael Weber as Douglas Panch, the tightly wound vice principal and spelling bee judge who dispenses hilarious "word usage in a sentence" advice.

Weber pairs up nicely with Liza Jaine's poised and polished take on the Realtor Rona Lisa Peretti, a co-judge who also amusingly thinks on the fly with her

competition commentary.

Jaine's lovely soprano voice blends wonderfully with Randolph Johnson's dusky baritone as the "consolation counselor" Mitch Mahoney, particularly during their dream depiction as the neglectful parents of meek contestant Olive Ostrovsky (Samantha Dubina) in "The I Love You Song." Dubina masterfully pulls off this number which is the show's most serious moment of compassion and heartbreak amid all the enjoyable juvenile high-jinks.

As usual, it's the boys who truly get to play up the wacky physical humor. Ian Paul Custer has a ball as nerdy know-it-all William Barfee (who spells his words with the aid of his "Magic Foot"), while Jack Sweeney gets loads of laughs as the spacey home-schooled kid Leaf Coneybear (who also makes his own clothing).

Authors Sheinkin and Finn throw in some wry political commentary with the youngest contestant, Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre, who has gay parents. Cara Rifkin is cute as a button playing Logainne, who feels the stress of outshining her fellow spellers since she represents a nontraditional family.

If there are any qualms to be had with Noble Fool's sparkling production, it's that director Bellie sometimes speeds by laughs or omits visual gags in the script that got great audience responses in previous "Spelling Bee" productions. And on opening night, Erik Kaiko sounded slightly overtaxed vocally in Chip Tolentino's big number.

But in the overall scheme of things, this is one solid "Spelling Bee" filled with plenty of laughs and comic suspense. If ever there was a modern Broadway musical comedy that could boast a money-back guarantee to make you laugh, then "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" would never hand out any refunds.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

Rating: ½

Location: Noble Fool Theatricals at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 E. Main St., St. Charles, (630) 584-6342 or noblefool.org

Showtimes: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 8

Running time: Approximately 95 minutes; no intermission

Tickets: \$29-\$39

Parking: Nearby lots

Rating: For teenage audiences and older (some swearing and sexual content)