

# Theatre Three just passes the Putnam County Spelling test; Mary Poppins does a fly-by

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If you're willing to really, really suspend disbelief, then sure, these guys from Putnam County pass as adolescents.

Details:

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee continues at Theatre Three through October 25. Call 214-871-3300.

Mary Poppins continues at the Music Hall at Fair Park through October 18. Call 214-631-2787.

Subject(s):

[Mary Poppins](#), [spelling](#), [Theatre Three](#)

Those high school misfits who sing and dance their way to higher self-esteem in the new TV series *Glee* could be the older siblings of the six middle-school oddballs who compete for the trophy in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Now playing in a B-plus production at **Theatre Three**, the modest little musical comedy by William Finn (music and lyrics) and Rachel Sheinkin (book) uses a spelling contest as a rite of passage. One by one, the adolescent characters—all played by adult actors—stand at the microphone in the "gymnacafetorium" and slam their way through multisyllabic tongue-twisters such as "strabismus" and "phylactery." Each round results in one of the kids hitting some noteworthy milestone in the maturation process.

The wonderful-terrible growing pains of this show's tween geeks are supposed to remind us how it feels to be a 14-year-old who's anything but cool. "We are the slightest bit bizarre," sings the lumpy William Barfeé (John Garcia), whose unfortunate surname is a continuing source of humiliation. He spells with the aid of his "magic foot" and suffers from chronic sinus blockage as well as a warped fashion sense that deems wingtips acceptable with high-waisted shorts.

Home-schooled free spirit Leaf Coneybear (Chad Peterson), a towel-caped superhero in flannel pants he sewed himself, spells well enough to realize he's not so dumb after all. Pigtailed, lisping sixth-grader Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Megan Kelly Bates), a success-driven daughter of two gay dads, learns to lose with dignity. Previous bee victor Chip Tolentino (B.J. Cleveland), decked out in full khaki scout garb, earns his first merit badge in public tumescence. Dour polymath Marcy Park (Alexandra Valle) considers throwing the contest just to break her own streak of perfect accomplishments. And sad little Olive Ostrovsky (Arianna Movassagh), neglected by self-involved parents, achieves her first meaningful boy-girl connection.

It could all tip over into barfee-inducing cutesiness were it not for Sheinkin's acidly witty book—the R-rated word definitions alone make this show about kids probably unsuitable for those under 16—and for Finn's infectiously fun, bouncy-ball score.

There's also the clever conceit of having four prescreened members of the audience plucked to participate as spellers. Their authentic looks of panic as they're called to navigate the tricky orthography of rare medical terms and Yiddish slang, plus on-the-spot participation in some lively choreography, are far funnier than the actors' rehearsed reactions. We wince as the amateurs flounder, we sigh at their success, and suddenly it's the acne years for all of us again.

Keeping the singing and spelling from spinning out of control over the two-hour show is the bee's pronouncer and adjudicator, the lactose-intolerant vice principal, Mr. Panch (Paul J. Williams). Allowing for plenty of comic improvisation, this is a role divinely suited for Williams, an A-plus stand-up comic. He ad libs some great zingers with the shaky audience volunteers. Panch's assistant is perky Rona Lisa Peretti (Amy Mills), whose job is to intro

each speller with a bit of bio trivia, true or not. (At the preview performance reviewed, as an elderly lady patron gingerly stepped onto the stage to spell, she was described by Rona as "earning extra cash as a Britney Spears impersonator.")

Comforting bad spellers as they're dinged out of the competish is dreadlocked Mitch Mahoney (Darius-Anthony Robinson), working off community service hours by dispensing hugs and juice boxes to the losers. Just like the kids, he too is changed for the better by the bee.

Cheerful as it is, there is a touch of darkness percolating under all the happy pep of *Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Every kid comes in a little damaged and a lot needy and leaves a little more worldly wise, if only for having seen the emptiness of glorifying something as basic as knowing how to spell (although in this age of spell-check and shorthanded texting, it's a skill that's losing value all the time). And the adults in the show turn out to be even weirder in the end than the "magic foot" kid. True geekery isn't easily outgrown.

Theatre Three's production, directed by Bruce R. Coleman, is better than average, but less of a *Bee* than it might have been with stronger casting. Only Peterson and Valle, the youngest members of the ensemble, are the right age to get away with playing teens without too strenuous a stretch of the imagination. Cleveland and Bates over-mug, but are amusing. Garcia uses a strangled-sounding voice as Barfeé—sort of Nic Cage in *Peggy Sue Got Married*—that works against the rumpled charm of the character.

Casting Amy Mills and Garcia in big parts that need show-stopper voices spells disappointment in a production that is otherwise c-o-p-a-c-e-t-i-c.

From a show about kids but aimed at adults to a story for kids that's been ruined by profit-hungry grown-ups. Disney's bloated and unwieldy Broadway tour of the musical *Mary Poppins* has just blown into the **Music Hall at Fair Park** for a three-week run.

Everything quaint and delightful about P.L. Travers' stories of a magical child-minder who floats around London by bumbershoot has been steamrolled by gigantic scenery and special effects (Mary "flies" over the audience like a stiff-backed Peter Pan), deafening amplification and acting so broad and shrill it could frighten youngsters out of 10 years' growth.

Take the title role, played here by Ashley Brown, who also did it on Broadway. She stretches her lips into a fierce, icy grimace and smiles the same scary Joker smile for two hours and 45 minutes. Where is Mary's winsome air of mystery, her warmhearted love of a good adventure? This Mary is more of a steel-wool super-nanny, imposing her will on unruly charges.

Any hint of storyline has been obliterated by soulless musical numbers, which pile up one after another in a disjointed assortment. One minute Mary and the children are dancing on the rooftops with an army of chimney sweeps, the next they're waltzing with half-naked living statuary in the park. Then it's off to Mrs. Corry's word shop, occupied by what look to be extras from the cast of *Wicked*. None of it makes a lick of sense.

At least the tour co-stars English actor Gavin Lee, a 2007 Tony nominee as Bert, Mary's artist-chimney sweep pal. But on opening night in Dallas, he was out with laryngitis. Understudy Dominic Roberts went on instead and proved that it is possible to play the role with a worse Cockney accent than Dick Van Dyke's in the 1964 film.

This *Mary Poppins* is simply supercalifragilisticexpial-atrocious.