

THEATER

Putnam County Is The Place To Bee On Broadway

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The breaking down of the infamous 'fourth wall' is what makes a Broadway experience so magical. It's why we pay a few days' salary to take in a two-hour production with our family and friends. It's the sense that we're taking part in a unique experience, one that can't be found anywhere else. But *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* takes this sentiment one step further, not only because it's unique to anything else that's ever been on Broadway, but because it has created a *fifth* wall...a wall perfectly crafted for hilarious destruction.

In the months leading up to the Tony Awards in June, much of the award buzz came from one little *bee*. In much the same way that *Avenue Q* became the little-show-that-could as it won the 2004 Tony for Best Musical, *Spelling Bee* appeared to be 2005's smallest contender with the biggest heart. After moving from a smaller venue at Off-Broadway's Second Stage in May, the Broadway hit was nominated for six Tony's, two of which it won.

How does a Broadway production about a spelling bee (a musical no less!) become such a hit with New York theatergoers? The fact that they themselves take the stage certainly helps. Who wouldn't enjoy a show that features none other than their own sister or mother, their friend, or even themselves? That's right. *Spelling Bee* takes members of its own audiences and dares them to join in the fun on stage. Anything can happen as six hysterically well-developed spelling competitors discover the ups and downs of rivalry while being forced to spell words such as 'pakapoo.' "It's the improvisational roots of the show," said Tony Award winner Dan Fogler, who plays speller William Barfee (lovingly pronounced "Barfay"), of the show's success. "It has that energy to it, it's electric. It gives the feeling that anything can happen. You got the audience members coming up on stage, so the audience gets a new show every night. Because of the audience participation, it's great in there!"



Photo Courtesy Joan Marcus

One of the surprise Broadway hits of the year, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, has riveted audiences and found itself at the top of the heap with critics. The show was nominated for six Tony Awards in 2004 and took home two, including Best Musical.

Spelling Bee is playing at Circle in the Square Theatre, an arena that couldn't be home to a better show. Raised seats surround the stage on three sides, creating a dimensional trick for the viewer's eye. The adult ensemble cast becomes even more pre-pubescent than their acting skills allow for. The entire theatre has been transformed into a gymnasium, and director James Lapine has the actors utilizing every inch of the space.

But the most fun aspect of the must-have evening that is *Spelling Bee* is the eccentricities and pure dementia that defines the personalities of the characters. Fogler won the

Tony for Best Supporting Actor in a Musical because of Barfee's congested voice, his unkempt demeanor, and his need to spell words with his foot. "The character is all me. The inspiration for the character came from what was my take on the uber-nerd, the kid drowning in his own mucus," said Fogler backstage at the Tony's. "He has a deviated septum, he has a collapsed nasal passage. I stole that from my brother. Barfee is made up of all those moments when I was growing up and I was in my awkward stages."

The actors took part in the creation of their characters, another rarity on Broadway. Some favorite spellers include Leaf Coneybear (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), a cross-eyed nincompoop with a warm heart; Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Sarah Saltzberg), a political firebrand contender raised by two gay fathers; Chip Tolentino (Jose Llana), a hormonally challenged returning champ; and Olive Ostrovsky (Celia Keenan-Bolger, another Tony nominee for her role), a poor loner with no friends, family ... or entrance fee. Plainview native Jay Reiss plays Vice Principal Panch, who delivers hysterical words and definitions with the driest of sensibilities, creating some of the biggest laughs of the evening.

The only weakness in this production is the music itself. Simplistic, though somewhat catchy, the tunes merely seem to be filler for a comedic play that is too short. If you're going to the theater for a big, theatrical musical with enormous special effects, look elsewhere.

But this is not to say that the production isn't special in and of itself. The entire evening has all the ingredients of what every Broadway production should have - heart, talent, and the ability to take us to new places. *Spelling Bee* literally takes us on the coveted New York stage (where most of us have not yet been), but it reminds us how much fun a truly creative and imaginative production can be. A true gem, this little-show-that-could is a major s-u-c-c-e-s-s.

To purchase tickets to *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, visit www.spellingbeethemusical.com.