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ENTERTAINMENT

My fun moments with the Bee

By Cathy Azanza-Dy Updated July 03, 2009 12:00 AM



That's me as Rona Lisa Peretti, Putnam County's top realtor and host of the Bee.

MANILA, Philippines - "Have fun, guys!"

That was our director Bobby Garcia's final instruction for all of us in the cast of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* before we took the stage on opening night last March.

Spelling Bee is a musical comedy about six quirky who duke it out in the country finals for a chance to go to the National Spelling Bee in Washington. Along the way we see them make friends, go through crushes, and deal with their own individual neuroses and life struggles, all while trying to keep their wits about them in order to spell the weirdest and most esoteric words you've heard.

It had taken about three weeks to get to opening night, and everyone in the cast was experiencing a mixture of jitters and excitement. Those feelings were probably not so different from the emotions coursing through an actual spelling bee contestant before the bee begins.

At the start of every show, I got to burst into the theater as Rona Lisa Peretti, Putnam County's top realtor and host of the *Bee* for nine consecutive years, and that was always an experience for me. I very quickly got used to getting strange looks from when I first approached them — and really, I don't blame them. I myself would not know what to think of a strange woman with coifed hair, blue eye shadow, and a trophy in hand, trying to make conversation with me. But, soon after I introduced myself as the host of the *Bee*, I was always greeted with a warm smile and a handshake. Starting the show always gave me the chance to witness something truly wonderful. I got to see everyone in the audience slowly realize that they're not just watching a show — they're actually part of it.

Of all the shows I've done so far, I believe nothing has taught me better about delighting in treading the unknown better than *Spelling Bee*. At each show, we would welcome four new cast members to the stage — volunteers from the audience and some celebrity guest spellers. The additions to the cast made each show a particularly unique experience for our audience as well as all of us in the cast. We could never really tell what was going to be thrown at us, and the audience and our guest spellers could never really tell what was going to be thrown back. It's that dynamic dialogue that makes the show feel so fresh every single time.

As Ms. Perretti, I took charge of the "color commentaries" — interesting tidbits to introduce our contestants and clue the audience in on the lives of our spellers outside of the *Bee*. Joel Trinidad, who plays Vice Principal Douglas Panch, the official word pronouncer, handled the spelling words and definitions, as well as the use of the words in a sentence.

Every show, Joel and I would tailor-make each introduction and each word for our guest spellers. Back when we were rehearsing, we did some brainstorming to try to figure out what sort of structures and lay-ups work best. One time I even sat outside a coffee shop in Fort Bonifacio and wrote introductions for people passing by to practice. I think I still have the napkins where I wrote those introductions lying around my apartment somewhere.

Come show time, it was like speed writing an episode of a comedy in your mind. Joel and I could never exactly predict how a particular group would react, but every time they got into it, there was

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absolutely nothing like it. It was such fun for us to sit at our desk and pretend like there was absolutely nothing funny going on while the audience chucked away.

I do have to thank and salute all our guest spellers who joined us and lit up the stage with their personalities and candid reactions. Sometimes it's easy to underestimate how tricky it is to stand in front of a lone microphone onstage and spell out a word. It is, honestly, a challenge. You have to be brave or crazy — or both.

Each show is tagged in my memory based on who took the stage with us as guest spellers. We were joined by Rachel Alejandro and Lea Salonga, who are really just amazing spellers. There was also Cherie Gil, who kept asking her seatmate, boy scout Chip Tolentino (played by Felix Rivera) if he knew what the next word was going to be. Jon Santos gave Comfort Counselor Mitch Mahoney (played by Noel Rayos) an extra hug right before leaving the stage. And on the last show, we had a business professor, Mr. Darwin Yu, who was just smiling all the way through, simply happy to see the events unfold from his seat onstage.

Spelling Bee was filled with so many wonderful instances between the actors, the guest spellers, and the audience that you just couldn't have planned. Literally everyone inside the theater at the particular time, on that particular day, makes each and every show special.

When we finally did have to close the show in April, I was asked to make a very welcome announcement after curtain call — the repeat of *Spelling Bee* this month. You don't often get to revisit a role and return to the company of characters you've grown to love after a show closes, so this was certainly a gift for all of us. We'll also be welcoming two old friends, Sheila Valderama-Martinez and Loy Martinez, to the cast for our run this July, and it's going to be exciting to see what new adventures we'll all be getting into together.

There were a couple of times during a show of *Spelling Bee* when I would run into my castmates backstage and would say to each other, "Hey, that was fun, wasn't it?"

And it really was.

As it turned out, it wasn't that difficult to follow Bobby's opening night instructions. And we can't wait to do this all over again.

Spelling Bee runs from July 3 to 12 at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Makati.

For details, call Atlantis Productions at 892-7078 or 840-1187.

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