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Watch the interactive play *Spelling Bee* when it is staged from March 20 to April 4 at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza. Click [HERE](#) to buy show tickets.

Courtesy of Atlantis Productions

PEP REVIEW: Spelling Bee offers interactive fun!

Chuck Smith

Friday, March 13, 2009 01:50 PM

Rating
 ☆☆☆☆☆

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It's not everyday that you get to be part of a musical theater performance. Philippine Entertainment Portal (PEP) was fortunate enough to experience just that during the March 10 rehearsal of Atlantis Productions' *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Written by Rachel Sheinkin, with music and lyrics by William Finn, this 2005 Tony Award

winner for Best Book tells the story of six adolescents who compete in the spelling bee, all the while dealing with their personal issues through the course of the titular event.

Directed by Bobby Garcia, with choreography by Chari Arespacochaga, The 25th Annual Spelling Bee features acclaimed stage actors, all of whom have been part of past productions of Atlantis. Playing the adolescent spellers are Felix Rivera as Chip Tolentino, the former Putnam County Spelling Bee who had to deal with the effects of puberty during the competition; Richard Everley as William Barfee, the awkward speller with a "magic foot"; Thea Tadiar as the over-achiever Marcy Park; Carla Guevara-Laforteza as the timid Olive Ostrovsky; Pheona Baranda as the young, politically-aware Logainne Schwartzandgrubeneirre; and Johan Dela Fuente as Leaf Conebear, who struggles with a child who wants to stand out.

Also included in the cast are Joel Trinidad (Vice Principal Douglas Panch), Cathy Azanza-Dy (Rona Lisa Peretti), and Noel Rayos (Mitch Mahoney) as the equally quirky adults who run the competition.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION. What makes The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee different from other productions is the participation of the audience. Every performance, two audience members will be part of the spelling bee itself—as spellers! Together with blogger Otania Tiu and Lorna Lopez, I got to be part of the cast's rehearsals as one of their guest spellers.

I was apprehensive at first, since the prospect of misspelling an easy word in front of local theater greats wasn't a very appealing prospect. And I'm sure the experience would be magnified if it were done onstage, with possibly hundreds of people watching. But Lorna assured us that we didn't need to be smart to join and enjoy—and that our participation was necessary in their dry run of the musical.

Otania and I thought we will simply be props in the performance, to make it seem more like an actual spelling bee. However, we didn't expect our participation would move the story forward. When Lorna and I were asked to spell very easy words ("Lamb" for Lorna, and "Pig" for me), this prompted the cast to exclaim that "life is unfair" in one of the more rousing numbers titled "Pandemonium." And as if that wasn't enough, we were guided by the actors to stand, dance, and jump around as part of the number. It was, to say the least, a very exciting experience, especially for a greenhorn musical theater fan like me.

The experience of "performing" with some of the countries best theater actors was definitely elating as well. During the show, I got to seat behind Pheona Baranda and Richard Everley (who moviegoers would recognize as Ai Ai De Las Alas' Australian husband in the 2007 film *Ang Cute Ng Ina Mo*, although theater enthusiasts would know him as Brian in Atlantis' Avenue Q), who guided me—in character—through the course of the performance.

Otania more or less felt the same way. "Since I was a kid, I've always wanted to be a stage/film actress. However, that's not something my parents liked and they did pretty much everything they could to get me off that path. So to compensate for my dream not coming true, I keep going to musicals and get all excited when they require audience participation. So in this case, being able to do something with the actors

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dreamed of but never thought would happen so soon," she said.

POLISHED PERFORMANCE. Besides audience participants, Atlantis promises to feature two different celebrity spellers every night—so no two shows will be the same. The participation of the audience—and the celebrities—will make *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* a dynamic and unique experience every night, so people can watch more than one show and still be surprised.

Although we've seen the show up-close, Otania and I still plan to catch the performance once its run begins on March 20. The rehearsal itself was already polished and ready to be presented, and only the absence of the actual stage, props, and costumes made it less of a theater experience. The material is highly Westernized—spelling bee competitions are common in America, where it is set, and they have inspired a number of television show episodes, books, and movies—but the plot, the jokes, and the message are still delivered with a local flair.


The cast members who play the children are very effective in portraying their adolescent roles, and they do not come across as annoying or over the top. Felix, in particular, was perfect for the role of the role of Chip, while Carla Guevara-Laforteza, Thea Tadiar, and Pheona Baranda shine during their particular moments. Joel Trinidad's deadpan portrayal of Vice Principal Panch—normally played by improv comedians in foreign productions—is also spot-on.

"I am expecting the experience to be different and much like watching movies the second or third time around, I know that I'll pick up on details which I may have missed out while watching them during the rehearsals. Besides, my first couple of scenes were spent being with the cast and now I'm curious to see what those scenes look like from the audience's point of view," said Otania.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee will run from **March 20 to April 4** at at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza.

This interactive play is presented through special arrangement with Music Theatre International (MTI).

For tickets, call Ticketworld at at 891-9999.



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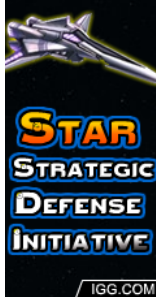
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