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(From left) Richard Everley, Carla Guevara-Laforteza, Joel Trinidad, Noel Rayos, Cathy Azanza-Dy, and Johan Dela Fuente topbill Atlantis Productions' *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. It is being staged at the RCBC Plaza in Makati City until April 29, 2009.

Jocelyn Dimaculangan

### PEP REVIEW: Spelling Bee is a "very nice beginning" for Atlantis' 10th anniversary season

Chuck Smith  
Monday, March 23, 2009  
09:12 PM

Rating  
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In Atlantis Production's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, all sorts of quirky characters rule the stage. This Tony award-winning one-act musical about winning and losing, growing up and being a grown up—and everything in between—may not be as grand or elaborate as Atlantis' previous productions, but it doesn't take much to fall in love with this terrific production.

Borrowing from one of the songs of the musical, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is a "very nice beginning" for Atlantis' 10th anniversary season.

Directed by Bobby Garcia with choreography by Chari Arespacochaga (the duo behind Atlantis' hit musical *Avenue Q*), *Spelling Bee* is a sweet little tale about six children trying to win the titular competition and a spot at the National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C., all the while dealing with their own personal juvenile issues.

The musical opens with former Putnam Spelling Bee champion Rona Lisa Peretti (Cathy Azanza-Dy) talking to the audience as she walks to the stage. This sets up the mood of the production. Together with Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Joel Trinidad) and "comfort counselor" Mitch Mahoney (Noel Rayos), Peretti moderates the six spellers.

There's last year's champion Chip Tolentino (Felix Rivera) who has to handle the pressure of defending his title while dealing with the effects of puberty onstage. And then there's Marcy Park (Thea Tadiar), the over competitive speller who is all business. William Barfee (Richard Everley) and Leaf Coneybear (Johan Dela Fuente) are two of the more quirky contestants in the bee, while Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Pheona Baranda) is the Bee's youngest and most politically-aware contestant (thanks to her two overbearing gay fathers). Finally, there's Olive Ostrovsky (Carla Guevara-Laforteza), the timid and troubled newcomer who made friends with the dictionary.

*Spelling Bee*, with its relatively small cast and its simple stage design, has been described as a small and simple production during its Broadway run. However, the play offers a lot of "gimiks" that will keep the audience hooked, aside from the musical's already engrossing narrative.

One of these tricks is the musical's innovative concept of tapping two audience members and two celebrities as "guest spellers." The guest spellers will play as actual contestants on the spelling bee, although it's easy to see that they do not really stand a chance of winning the competition. Each performance will have two new celebrity guests so no show will be exactly the same as other performances.

The guest spellers have no idea what words will be spelled or what dance steps they will have to do onstage, making it quite comical to see their surprised expressions onstage. During the spelling bee, a hilarious "fact" is attributed to each contestant. (Click [HERE](#) to read a first-person perspective on being a guest speller.)

During the March 19 performance, *Tayong Dalawa's* Agot Isidro and singer-actor Sam Concepcion (of *I Love Betty La Fea*) were the eager celebrity guest spellers. Of the two, Sam seemed like he enjoyed the experience more. This made him look displaced onstage, looking more like an observer rather than a speller—which made the whole thing funnier.

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dreamlike feel, as if the scene is straight from the speller's imagination or subconscious. For instance, when the very masculine Mitch Mahoney suddenly transforms into one of Logainne's gay father during a flashback, the joke is not lost on the audience (Dela Fuente plays Logainne's second gay father).


But *Spelling Bee* offers more than just laughs. By the time all the guest spellers are eliminated (because you know they wouldn't stand a chance of winning), the musical takes a more serious tone, dwelling on each of the characters' insights and motivation. The characters are human, not the clichés and caricatures they first seem to be. The audience would feel bad every time a speller gets eliminated, although they may not be rooting for a particular contestant. It is easy to sympathize with Guevara-Laforteza's Olive and Baranda's Logainne, but everyone fits their parts to a tee.

The songs of *Spelling Bee* are simple, but there is no doubt that it reflects the problems that kids face today. But more than that, beyond the seemingly juvenile concerns of the songs is a deeper theme that transcends age.

Consider the lyrics of the song "Pandemonium": "It is such a calamity/ Where should we begin?/ The best spellers / Don't necessarily win." The words are simple, but the theme is universal: you don't need to be the best to win. And in the end, it doesn't matter who wins or who loses.

Watch *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* to see a totally hilarious yet thought-provoking play about dealing with competitive streaks (and the parents that foster them).

This interactive play will run until **April 4, 2009** at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza. For tickets, call Ticketworld at at 891-9999.



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