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*The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.*

Psalm 46:8

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**THEATRE REVIEW: THE SPELLING BEE**

WE saw the press preview of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" and it's as entertaining as our favorite Broadway musical staged by Atlantis Productions, "Avenue Q". With songs by William Finn and book by Rachel Sheinkin (that won the Tony Award), the show is about a spelling contest set in Putnam Valley Middle School with six teenagers competing in the contest run by three quirky grown-ups. It started in Broadway in 2005 and has since been staged in various other countries, including Canada and Australia.

One unique aspect of the show is that during each presentation, three to four members of the audience are invited on stage to compete in the spelling bee with the six young characters.

The host is Rona Lisa Peretti (played by Cathy Asanza), the number 1 realtor in Putnam County and a former spelling bee champ. The official judge is Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Joel Trinidad) who had a previous nervous breakdown but says he's much better thanks to a high fiber diet. He is secretly in love with Ms. Peretti but she ignores him. Mitch Mahoney (Johann de la Fuente) is an ex-convict who's the comfort counselor who gives contestants a box of juice after they've lost in the contest. William Barfee (Richard Everley) was a finalist last year but was eliminated due to an allergic reaction to peanuts. He has a "magic foot" technique where he writes down the spelling of a word on the floor using his foot so he can spell it correctly.

Olive Ostrovsky (Carla Guevara) is a new contestant whose mom is in an ashram in India and whose dad is not very attentive to her.

Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (Peona Baranda) is the youngest speller who was raised by two gay men who push her to win. She speaks with a noticeable lisp.

Marcy Park (Thea Tadiar) is a transfer student from Virginia and placed no. 9 in last year's national spelling bee. She speaks six languages and goes to a Catholic school called Our Lady of Intermittent Sorrows.

Leaf Coneybear (Noel Rayos) is the second runner-up in his district who only got into the competition because the winner and first runner-up are not available. He spells words correctly when he's in a trance.

Chip Tolentino (Felix Rivera) is a boy scout who was the winner last year. He now returns to defend his title but his adolescence and raging hormones get in the way.

The play, presented without any intermission, is very fast paced. Each character has his own musical highlight. The whole cast is superb but it's the spellers who really shine, especially Thea Tadiar in the "I Speak Languages" fabulous song-and-dance number and Noel Rayos in the riotous "I'm Not That Smart." Also great are Carla Guevara in the touching "My Friend, The Dictionary," Richard Everley in "Magic Foot," Felix Rivera in "My Unfortunate Erection," and Pheona Baranda in "Woe Is Me." Four members of the audience are taken to participate in the show and at the press night, two celebrities were picked from the crowd, Agot Isidro and Sam Concepcion, who both gamely spelled and danced with the cast members.

Expertly directed by Bobby Garcia, the show is alternately hilarious, moving, joyous and even educational. It's also about family life, growing up and the insecurities and uncertainties one goes through as one reaches puberty.

You never know what happens next. It's an unforgettable theatre experience you shouldn't miss, it will run until April 4 at the RCBC Plaza in Makati. For details, call 892-7078 or 840-1187.

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