

# 'I like, no I love, to spell.'

*Touching and hilarious, 'The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee' is now on stage at Artistree*

By Sharon Groblicki  
Standard Correspondent

Artistree's Grange Theatre is opening its eighth season with an over-the-top, dynamic, fast-paced production of the musical, "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee." There is nothing not to love. The cast is talented; the direction by Matthew Robert and Associate Director Jade Evangelista is inventive and makes creative use of the space; and the music, under the direction of Parker Eastman, is dynamic and bright.

And the choreography! Joshua Huffman has done an amazing job of designing choreography that is hilarious, based on each actor's character and best moves, and is fascinating to watch. The fact that every one of these actors moves and dances like they were born dancing doesn't hurt. The cast has the opportunity to belt out individual songs at the top of their considerable voices, and when the whole group is full-out singing and dancing, the audience is transported. The musical number "Pandemonium" is so over-the-top funny that it is hard to catch a breath between laughs.

There is an amazing amount of spontaneous humor that is improvised. For example, some of the political humor in the musical is from news that is only two days old. Therefore, it is a different show every time. Additionally, members of the audience are chosen as volunteers to appear onstage as



Tyler Miranda, Anna Nicole Ventor, Sara Giacomini, Kevin Iardi, Juan Castro, Sawyer Whitted, Aubrie-Mei Rubel, Michael Gardiner, and Beth Siegling hit the last notes of a group song in Artistree's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" that is playing now through Sunday, Sept. 29.

Olivia Stanley Photo

contestants — a factor that creates many moments of spontaneous hilarity. Sometimes even the order of the songs will be changed because the audience involvement determines when certain songs are sung.

The premise of the play,

written by Rachel Sheinkin with music and lyrics by William Finn, is very simple. Six quirky middle school students are competing in the county spelling bee and it is the opportunity of a lifetime for each of them. The moderator of the event is Rona Peretti (played by Beth Siegling), a former winner of the spelling bee, now a real estate agent. Assisting her is Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Michael Gardiner), who is the official word pronouncer, and Mitch Mahoney (Tyler Miranda), who is the comfort counselor. Vice Principal Panch, it seems, has been absent from the Spelling Bee for the past five years, due to an "incident" at the 20th Bee. He is, he declares, in a better place now due to a high-fiber diet and Jungian analysis.

The role of Panch is an exciting opportunity and also a challenge for the actor who plays him. Much of his material is improvised, and he is given the opportunity to choose ridiculous definitions to completely esoteric spelling words and to have fun with the audience members who are chosen as additional spelling bee contestants. Gardiner does his

role to perfection. He is wry and witty and totally hilarious in his stone-faced responses to audience members and spelling bee contestants. This role is a tour de force for Gardiner, who aces it with his deadpan absurdities.

Siegling's Miss Peretti is lovable, albeit officious, and her delivery of her songs is earnest and rich. She embraces our interest immediately by her wholesome countenance and generous voice and so we are not put off by the amount of ego our moderator has invested in this contest. She is perfect in her role.

Mitch Mahoney, the Official Comfort Counselor, is an ex-convict doing his community service. Miranda's portrayal shows both the hard edges of Mahoney's past and the warm and nurturing nature of his present persona. He has an amazing singing voice!

Then the audience meets the contestants. Olive Ostrovsky (played by Sara Giacomini) is adorable and earnest. Her

mother is in India and her father is working late, so she doesn't have the \$25 participant's fee, but she is perky and undaunted and forges ahead despite her innate shyness because she has spent her life reading the dictionary. Giacomini is so endearing in her portrayal that we are invested

while all the other contestants have placed first in theirs. Whitted is funny, uninhibited, and just plain enchanting in his role.

As each contestant gets up to spell, Miss Peretti shares a piece of information about them. When Coneybear is called up, he reveals that he is there only because the number one winner in his district could not come because she had to attend her Bat Mitzvah — and the runner-up was also attending the Bat Mitzvah — so he doesn't feel as smart as the other contestants. His song "I'm Not That Smart" is animated and perfect!

When William Barfee (Juan Castro) is first called up, Miss Peretti tells the audience about his special technique in which he spells out words on the floor with his toe to visualize the spelling. Castro is a completely captivating performer and his song, "Magic Foot" is gloriously

See SPELLING BEE - Page 3C



Tyler Miranda, Sara Giacomini, and Beth Siegling sing together.

Olivia Stanley Photo

## IF YOU GO

### 'The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee'

Artistree's Grange Theatre, South Pomfret  
Thursday, Sept. 19 through  
Sunday, Sept. 29

Tickets are \$35-40 and are available at  
[tinyurl.com/bddmw44r](http://tinyurl.com/bddmw44r)

in her from the beginning. She belts out her song, "My Friend, the Dictionary" with energy and panache, and her wonderful facial expressions betray as much character as her lines do.

Leaf Coneybear (Sawyer Whitted) is a homeschooler and even quirker than the others. He makes his own clothes, including the superhero cape he dons for the contest and he totes a sock puppet. He has placed third in his district,