

SVCT opens 45th season with ‘Spelling Bee’

Gilroy Dispatch

Posted: Wednesday, September 5, 2012 1:37 pm | Updated: 3:34 pm, Tue Jan 28, 2014.

by Carol Harris



Christy Wright, Mark Blattel, Vivienne Castillo, Antonio Silva, Peter Mandel and Amy McElroy perform in “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.”

For its upcoming 45th season SVCT is departing from the usual offering of tried and true family favorites with its season opener, “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.” Winner of the 2005 Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical and Best Featured Actor in a Musical, it also won the 2005 Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding New Musical, Outstanding Director of a Musical, Outstanding Book of a Musical and Outstanding Ensemble Performance.

The slightly edgy comedy is about six children (played by adults), a former felon completing his community service and two quirky adults who run a spelling bee at the Putnam Valley Middle School in Putnam County, N.Y. As the competition progresses, the spellers – adolescents on the throes of puberty – reveal their individual personality idiosyncrasies while learning that winning isn’t everything and losing doesn’t necessarily make you a loser. A surprising element of the show is the random selection of audience members who are invited on stage. The audience will wonder at times whether the dialogue is scripted or ad lib.

Director Andrew Cummings who also directed SVCT’s production of “The King and I,” has created a brilliant ensemble of actors who bring just the right amount of humor to the roles. Anyone who has had a child, known a child, taught a child or has recently been a child will undoubtedly feel a connection to the characters onstage.

After a five-year hiatus, Antonio Silva is back on stage playing Chip, the reigning spelling champion of Putnam County. Things have always come easily to him until the onset of puberty.

Logainne Schwartzandgrubbeniere, a political activist with a keen sense of justice, is the youngest of the bee participants. Played by Christy Wright, she voices the concerns of many of today's kids.

Peter Mandel takes on the role of Leaf Coneybear, who has severe Attention Deficit Disorder but delights in his own wandering focus. Mandel prepared for the role by picturing kids he has known.

"I hope I'm capturing characteristics but not mocking," he said. "It's a fine line."

Appearing recently as the Cowardly Lion in SVCT's "The Wizard of Oz," Mark Blattel has mastered the role of William Barfee (pronounced Barfay), the bully who has always been picked on and is shaken by the unexpected friendship he encounters during the competition.

"I tune everything out and become this little enclosed ball of prickliness," said Blattel. "As a kid I had the nerdiness but not the problems of my character." Barfee spells everything out first on the floor with his "Magic Foot."

Vivienne Castillo, the youngest cast member, graduated from Live Oak High School where she was befriended by Cummings and Wright. Like her character, Olive Ostrovsky, she had no self confidence while growing up. When she became emerged in the theater program at Live Oak, she realized that she was good at something. "The I Love You Song" – a trio with Elizabeth Calisi and Manuel Silva – is absolutely beautiful and heart wrenching.

Amy McElroy, mother of two outstanding young actors, makes her SVCT debut as the ultimate over-achiever, Marcy Park, who's parents expect perfection. You'll be impressed with her talents!

Manuel Silva, like his brother Antonio, is back on stage after a lengthy break. Last heard (but not seen) as Audrey II in "Little Shop of Horrors," he takes on the role of Mitch Mahoney, the bee's "comfort counselor."

Jason Stebbins, father of two and branch manager of Guild Mortgage, Morgan Hill by day, plays Vice Principal Douglas Panch. A frustrated underachiever, Panch hopes to impress Rona Lisa Peretti.

Elizabeth Calisi, recently seen as Glinda in "The Wizard of Oz," portrays Rona Lisa Peretti, a former spelling bee champion and the county's top realtor. She thinks of the bee as a complex cerebral sporting event.

Sound like fun? I hope to see you at the Bee!

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The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee at South Valley Civic Theatre

Paul Myrvold's Theatre Notes, Monday, September 17, 2012

<http://www.myrvoldstheatrenotes.com>



The Spellers – (l. to r.) Christy Wright, Mark Blattel, Vivienne Castillo, Antonio Silva, Peter Mandel and Amy McElroy – In South Valley Civic Theatre's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" at the Community Theatre in Morgan Hill through October 6.

Photo: Rebecca Little

As soon as Elizabeth Calisi as Rona Lisa Peretti, a former spelling champion and now producer of Putnam County's spelling bee, commandingly took the stage, I started to smile. And when she started to sing, belting out in a confident soprano, the smile turned to a grin. As each of the contestants, adults pretending to be children, was introduced and sang it was clear that this is perhaps the best total ensemble of singers that South Valley Civic Theatre has had the good fortune to gather. Each one has a unique voice and style and, clearly, the entire company has been directed, coached and liberated to swing for the fences committing to the over-the-top comedic style the play demands. Kudos to the creative staff lead by Director Andrew Cummings, Vocal Director Carol Harris, Musical Director Mike Rubino and Choreographer Christine Carrillo.

The plot is simple – a local spelling bee in which school champions compete and, eventually, one wins. It's the personal arc of each character that fascinates. In order of appearance Boy Scout Chip Tolentino (the effervescent Antonio Silva) has a certain military rigidity that unfortunately extends to a nether part of his anatomy at an inopportune time, a predicament not unfamiliar to any adolescent boy. Driven, lisping Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre (powerful Christy Wright) has issues with her two gay dads, one a go-for-blood type, the other soft and conciliating. Leaf Coneybear (Peter Mandel as delightful and endearing as I have ever seen him) has another problem. One of a tribe of creatively named individuals spawned by parents who obviously eschew birth control, he suffers from being told he is stupid when in fact he is smart in a unique way. The driven 'tween William Barfee (played with farcical abandon by Mark Blattel)

has a unique strategy for winning – he spells the word out by writing it on the floor with the toe of his shoe – and is burdened with a name that no one will pronounce correctly, Barfée (please note the accent aigu).



Foot speller William Barfee (Mark Blatell) in South Valley Civic Theatre's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

Hyper-energetic overachiever Marcy Park (Amy McElroy in a spring steel characterization that uncoils beautifully) speaks six languages, plays the piano, dances and on and on, but is nasty to everyone until her epiphany. And Vivienne Castillo is adorable and touching as Olive Ostrovsky, an emotionally abandoned child whose parents are literally a half a world apart. Vocally gifted with a superb instrument, her song "The I Love You Song" (with her parents played by Elizabeth Calisi and Manuel Silva) is the high point of the show.



Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Jayson Stebbins) and Spelling Bee organizer Rona Lisa Peretti (Elizabeth Calisi) in South Valley Civic Theatre's "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

Finishing out the ensemble, Manuel Silva plays tough guy Mitch Mahoney who carries out his public service sentence by providing security for the spelling bee. He is tough and sweet with a lilting falsetto. And Jayson Stebbins is endlessly funny as the official word reader Vice Principal Douglas Panch, a somewhat troubled individual whose dry wit finds expression when the spellers ask for definitions or sentence use.

The show is extremely well produced with a convincing gymnasium set by the multitalented Andrew Cummings and made visible by the creative lighting of Peter Mandel. Eleanor Grace Harnett's costumes are ideal. The small orchestra under the crisp baton of Mr. Rubino is one with the show, excellent.

Sometimes when you swing for the fences you come up with a grand slam.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" runs through October 6 at Morgan Hill's Community Theatre. It would be sad if you missed it.