

ENTERTAINMENT

MARY WYCZOLKOWSKI: LOCAL THEATER REVIEW

Delightful cast adds up to a memorable 'Bee'

The concept of a spelling bee is believed to be American by design, dating back at least to 1925 (the inaugural year of the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee) and, by some accounts, a teaching aid in American schoolrooms for more than a century before that.

By the time Frank Neuhauser claimed the first championship back in '25 with the word "gladiolus" (it's a flower), the country was hooked. The bee became a part of our nation's cultural backdrop.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" is a one-act musical comedy, conceived by Rebecca Feldman with music and lyrics by William Finn, which alights on the spelling bee as metaphor for life: For one child to ultimately succeed, all the others must first fail.

Random word draws ask one contestant to spell "logorrhea" (excessive, and often incoherent, talkativeness) and the next, "cow"; and for more than one of the fictional Putnam County spellers, the bee is the clearest way they have of trying to keep their

worlds in order.

The Champaign Urbana Theatre Company is presenting "Putnam County" under the direction of Jaclyn Loewenstein for one week only, meaning today's 2:30 p.m. matinee at the Parkland College Theatre is your last chance to see the unfortunately short-lived production.

CUTC managing director Mike Galloway cited low box office sales and an overall lack of sufficient funds for the shortened run, and he went on to solicit donations for the company from audience members through two different business-supported fundraisers (more information at www.cutc.org).

It is unfortunate "Putnam County" has been cut short, as the show had several standouts who deserve more than four performances to showcase their abilities.

I need only mention that Matt Fear is a member of the cast to imply his performance amazing, so consistently spot-on is he. Fear is usually at his best when given the opportunity to wobble between wryness and rage — which he finds multiple occasions to

do during his portrayal of Vice Principal Douglas Panch, an educator whose dire need for sensitivity training plays out to great comedic effect as he gives spelling bee contestants definitions and sentence usages so borderline wrongly awesome, you'd think it was Joe Biden at his first vice presidential debate.

Ranae Wilson is Rona Lisa Perretti, Panch's co-officiant for the bee. Wilson plays her role with enough heart and underlying warmth that we, as an audience, are given the freedom to superficially judge her negatively, comfortable in the knowledge that deep down we really like her, so it's OK (right?). Wilson also is a gifted vocalist, and I particularly enjoyed her contribution to "The I Love You Song."

By far, my favorite performance of the evening was by newcomer Christopher Cayari as William Barfee, the young spelling prodigy with a bit of a mad scientist twist. Cayari fully commits himself to the physical aspects of the show's comedy, and the results are well worth his effort. A large man,

If you go

What: The Champaign Urbana Theatre Company presents the musical comedy "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," with music and lyrics by William Finn, book by Rachel Sheinkin and conceived by Rebecca Feldman; directed by Jaclyn Loewenstein, with musical direction by Andrei Strizek.

When: The final show is 2:30 p.m. today.

Where: Parkland College Theatre, 2400 W. Bradley Ave., C

Tickets: \$16 for adults, \$12 for senior citizens 60 and older, \$12 for students through college and \$8 for children 12 and younger

Reservations: 344-3884, www.cutc.org

Cayari adroitly dances across the stage, pausing intermittently for well-placed high kicks and toe touches that many a weekend yogi would covet. I very much look forward to seeing future performances by Cayari.

Brittany Helfrich, Cole Huber,

Marah Sotelo, Chris Johnson, Ashley Gilbertson and Sherrika Ellison round out the cast, each performer giving characters depth and vitality and contributing to the success of the show as a whole.

It is likely no stretch to presume that most readers will miss this production's run of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," and that is unfortunate.

I hope that CUTC is able to find a way to replenish its coffers and continue to add to the artistic landscape of East Central Illinois with as few interruptions as possible in the coming season.

I also hope that anyone inclined to donate to the arts would just go and do it already instead of thinking about it and then forgetting until later — and then having the best intentions and never actually getting around to it. Preservation of the arts, after all, is not the appropriate place for one to be pocourante.

Mary Wyczolkowski is a freelance writer for The News-Gazette.