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Student Actors Prepare for "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

By Celia Magidson and Sophie Braccini



Young actors rehearse for "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" production at Town Hall Theatre. Photo Dennis Markam

During the summer Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette resonates with the laughter and youthful energy of the students who spend most of their waking hours in the dark confines of the large showroom. Working on one show, sometimes on two, the teens are there for the love of theater. If you did not see their last production, "Much Ado About Nothing," mark your calendar from Aug. 16-18 to see the multiple award-winning musical "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" - an amusing and tender play about a group of overachievers vying for the championship of a lifetime.

The play is based on a book by Rachel Sheinkin with music and lyrics by William Finn.

"The first time I saw it, it was about four years ago," recalls Joel Roster, Town Hall Theatre's director of education. "It was just this incredible story of young people who are pushed by parents or society to be overachievers. I thought it was something that these guys (the middle- and high-school level students at THT) could relate to, and they did, because it's also very, very heartwarming."

Dennis Markam, who directs the play, enjoys working with the passionate young cast. "They already know the basics of theater," he says. "We can really work on timing, placement, character development and more complex music, taking them to a higher level of performance."

Markam says the actors themselves are evolving and adding nuance to their characters as rehearsals progress. They also work one-on-one and as a group with Margaret Halbig, THT's music director, who plays live every night of the performances.

Some of the actors of "The Bee" were also in the July play, "Much Ado." According to Roster, they would literally spend their entire day rehearsing, not wanting to go home at night.

All the actors are very enthusiastic about the play. "It's ironic, good and funny," says 11-year-old Alton Gray Schmitt, the youngest actor in the group.

"There is a character for everyone. You can always relate," adds 17-year-old Michael Kirk, who is the group's oldest member.

And actress Jennifer McFarlane, who also starred in "Much Ado," says: "This play is easier and completely different."

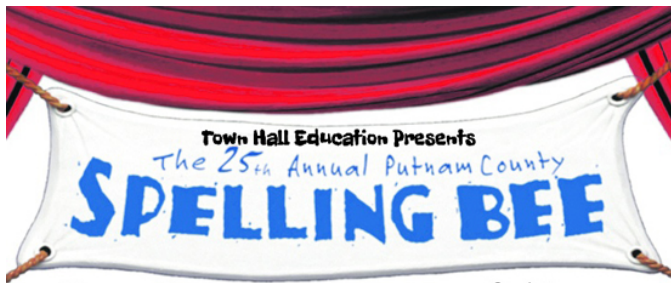
This is Schmitt's first time on stage, but most of the other actors have been with THT for some time, taking classes during the year and performing. Louis Kehoe has been taking theater classes for four years; he also goes to the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, "but I mostly play at the Lafayette Town Hall Theatre. The mood in the group is very good," he says.

"We all get along," adds McFarlane. "Some of us have known each other for four, five years now. It's also cool to get to know new people."

After the rehearsal, the students go over the notes taken by Markam to make corrections. They all pay close attention, adding their own suggestions on how to make the play even better.

One aspect of the play is that members of the audience can be called on stage. Before the show, the characters who play the school's principal and the organizer of the Bee set up a table in the lobby and up to four members of the audience can sign up, if they are good spellers, and are called up during the show to sit on stage and participate in the spelling bee. "They can ask for a definition, or the language of origin, and if they get eliminated there is a song that is sung as they go back into the audience," says Roster, "but in one of the performances I saw, a spectator who was an excellent speller staying on stage for about three-quarters of the show!"

There will be four performances, the evenings of Aug. 16, 17 and 18, and a matinee on Aug. 17. For more information and tickets, visit www.thtc.org.



Music and Lyrics by
William Finn

Directed by
Dennis Markam

Book by
Rachel Sheinkin

com*pe*tition /kəmpeˈtɪʃən/ noun

- 1 - The activity or condition of competing
 - an event or contest in which people compete
 - [in sing.] the person or people with whom one is competing

August 16-18

Town Hall Theatre.com - 925.283.1557

Warning: This show does contain language that may not be suitable for younger audience members.



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