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Society : St Albans Musical Theatre Company
Production : The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee
Date : Friday 19th November 2021
Venue : The Abbey Theatre

Show Report

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a musical comedy with music and lyrics by William Finn, a book by Rachel Sheinkin, conceived by Rebecca Feldman with additional material by Jay Reiss. The show centers on a fictional spelling bee set in a geographically ambiguous Putnam Valley Middle School. Six quirky adolescents compete in the Bee, run by three equally quirky grown-ups.

SAMTC (St Albans Musical Theatre Company) are known for presenting productions of high quality. The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was no exception and it was a masterclass in musical theatre. It had a very strong cast with no weak links which must have made it a very enjoyable experience for all involved especially the creatives.

The production was cleverly directed by Elise Betts and polished to perfection in every aspect, with great attention to detail. For Elise's directorial debut it was a job well done and I see a lot more work coming her way. The choreography by Andrea Campusano was slick and aided the development of the characters, and each performer embodied their distinctive character with ease. Each performer was immersed in character throughout, even when sitting in the background, and this was pure magic to watch. The music is not that memorable, but every musical note, phrase, character was delivered exceptionally well under the baton of Clive Ogden as Musical Director.

From the moment we walked into the Foyer, we noted two of the actors in character, gathering names for the audience participation part of the show. This created a nice set up to what was in store. I really liked the simple, yet effective set designed by Elise, albeit the person who made it was missing from the credits in the programme. The set also included artwork from year 2 St Johns C of E Primary School, Watford showcasing community spirit which gave it a nice finish.

A lot of work went into the programme which was bright and colourful with a yearbook approach. It also provided an opportunity to promote the sponsors of this production and whose funds are really appreciated, following the last two years. I had also noticed and admired the amount of marketing and publicity done by Sarah Dunning, Danielle Agar and Justin Jeffreys behind the scenes.

At each performance the actors are tasked with bringing three to four audience members onto the bleachers with them, and they also take part in the Spelling Bee. The words that the audience members were asked to spell added great humour. I particularly found the "seaward" very funny as I wasn't sure what was going to come out.

Ruaridh Macphee played the part of Chip Tolentino and Jesus. I found his comical timing and confidence in performance to be something special.

Alex Handley played the part of William Barfee and I think this was a really good role for Alex. I was really impressed by his performance as I've not really seen him play a major role before. A very energetic performance that interacted well with Jo Goddard's character Olive.

Gareth Edwards played the part of Leaf Coneybear and Olive's Dad and he really took the role to the next level. There can be a tendency to overplay this type of role, but Gareth's performance was very real, genuine and felt believable and was a stand out performance.

Cate Brooks played Marcy Park and I loved her almost Veruca Salt take on the character. Cate delivered the song 'I speak six languages' with great gusto.

Kerry Lee played Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre. Kerry never fails to deliver, and I particularly loved her quiriness about her character, especially her lisp.

Nicola Martinus-Smith who played Rona Lisa Perretti gave a stand out performance. The character was brilliantly portrayed - facial expressions and comic timing was sublime. Effortlessly portrayed - Nicola was a pleasure to watch.

As an all rounder Joanne Goddard as Olive Ostrovsky gave a good solid performance, bringing vulnerability and sweetness to the role which made her character very likeable.

Matt Clothier played Douglas Panch/Dan Schwartz with a good poker face which added to the comedic tone of the production.

Charlotte Gregory played Mitch Mahoney normally a male part, but I preferred this take on the character as it really worked due to Charlotte's exceptional stage presence.

Supporting cast members Martin Scott and Sarah Dunning played many parts to support the plot. These parts were much more than supportive roles and each held their own with great confidence. I particularly liked Sarah's voice when she sang 'The I Love You Song' and Martin Scott's comical timing worked a treat.

In terms of costume, each character had their own distinct style which really supported the actor and I loved how unique each costume was. A lot of consideration went into the overall look which demonstrated that SAMTC is a well oiled machine.

Chris Rook was Stage Manager and whenever Chris is SM you know you are in safe hands. Sound was provided by Seventh Wave who always do a great job.

Congratulations and thank you to all involved.