

Musical spells out f-u-n on Cottage Theatre stage

By RICHARD LEINAWEAVER
For *The Register-Guard*

Remember spelling bees? Where everyone in class or in a competition heard a word pronounced and then had to spell it out for the teacher or moderator? If you misspelled a word, you were eliminated from the competition, you sat down and had to listen to the rest of the competitors.

They went on forever, or seemed to, for the early "eliminees." BORING.

But wait! If it's bound to be bloody boring, how can it be adapted to the theater where plot, character, theme, action, dialogue and music seem to be a requirement?

Well, hop on down to Cottage Grove for a musical interpretation of the "25th Annual Putnam County SPELLING BEE" presented by Cottage Theatre.

The musical first opened in New York's Circle in the Square Theatre in May 2005, directed by the great James Lapine, and played for 1,136 performances, winning two Tony Awards and four Drama Desk awards. Its popularity continues throughout the English-speaking world.

"Spelling Bee" does not follow traditional theatrical form, in that there is no single protagonist whose story becomes the play's plot line, nor an antagonist to thwart the budding romance of William Barfée (pun intended), convincingly played by Donovan Seitzinger.

It's a play about six unsophisticated middle school students vying for first prize in the annual county Spelling Bee. We learn enough about each of them to empathize with them and feel their angst.

In addition to Seitzinger, the other speller hopefuls are played by Brittany Drier (hopelessly smitten by William,) Madison Baker, Joel Ibanez, Kyle Carillo-Enders and Maeve Dahlen, who gets him in the end. All of the "spellers" have a solo describing their fears, their joys, their uncertainties.

Directing and judging these young competitors are teacher Rona Lisa Peretti, a former spelling bee-er her-

PLAY REVIEW

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 14

Where: Cottage Theatre, 700 Village Drive, Cottage Grove

Tickets: \$25, and \$20 for ages 6 to 18 years (box office, 541-942-8001, cottagetheatre.org)

Note: Parental discretion is advised for a "frank but very funny puberty moment"

self, here authoritatively played by Tracy Nygard, along with Vice Principal Panch (Ward Fairburn).

Janet Whitlow designed the spare set, consisting of a microphone down center, a back wall, a small grandstand for the contestants and a desk and chair from which the principal and Ms. Peretti can announce the words to be spelled.

Mark Van Beaver, in addition to directing the show, serves as its music director, does some of the choreography, and conducts the small-pit orchestra.

Alex Holmes' dances are simple and enthusiastic, highlighted by a bizarre convention wherein Barfée cannot picture his spelling words until he has spelled them on the floor ... with the toe of his right shoe! Worth the price of admission.

If you perhaps were the spelling champion in your school, be sure to register at the ticket office to be called from the audience to participate in the spelling bee. From onstage, they'll keep giving you words until you misspell one. A challenge?

Oh, and if that doesn't inspire you to buy a ticket, this is probably your only opportunity to see a flying Jesus on a wire with a wig on his chin zipping over the audience. Good clean fun.

Richard Leinawever, a professor emeritus of theater arts, reviews theater for The Register-Guard.