
Musical Theatre Alums Take *Spelling Bee* by Storm

From Broadway to Chicago to San Francisco to the national tour, nine graduates from the University of Michigan Musical Theatre Department—that’s right, nine—have been cast in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, a musical comedy conceived by Rebecca Feldman, with music by William Finn, book by Rachel Sheinkin.

It’s the mostly hilarious and sometimes tender story of six—let’s face it—geeky kids, ages 10-13, in the throes of preadolescence in its many exotic permutations, competing in a spelling bee. It’s also the story of nine U-M musical theatre graduates who are starring in these six leading roles.

“I think U-M is turning out the best young musical theatre performers in the business these days,” says James Lapine, the musical’s director. “They’re really well-rounded and well-educated actors, not just people who can sing and dance.”

The first recruit was Celia Keenan-Bolger (BFA ’00), in the cast early on when the comedy sketch *C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E* was transmogrifying into the musical *The 45th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at the Barrington Stage Company in the Berkshires, bringing in director Lapine and songwriter Finn.

Word-of-mouth and rave reviews were all it took to get the newly transformed musical to the next level, the Second Stage Theatre off-Broadway. “It stayed pretty much the same,” says Keenan-Bolger, “but James made some structural changes and emphasized the importance of playing the roles as real kids, not as caricatures.”

Soon it was on to Broadway’s Circle in the Square Theatre, where the original cast won a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Ensemble Performance. The musical was nominated for six 2005 Tony Awards—including one for Keenan-Bolger as best featured actress—and won two, best book and best featured actor.
Lapine introduced the sometimes-risky notion of audience participation, an element that gives the show both an extra kick and an unpredictable edge. Before each performance, four audience members are asked to join the bee. Anything can happen—and pretty much has. “One lady smacked me on the helmet,” recalls Stanley Bahorek (BFA ’03). Now audience members are carefully screened beforehand.

“Because the show started with improvisational roots, that element remained intact throughout the run,” says Keenan-Bolger. “Having new audience members onstage every night was such a blessing for the actors because the first half of the show was always different.”

“It’s not natural for human beings to do the exact same thing eight times a week,” says Barrett Foa (BFA ’99), a veteran of the equally offbeat Avenue Q, “so anything that breaks the monotony is a godsend.” Foa plays Leaf Coneybear in the Broadway cast, a character he describes as “a 12-year-old home-schooled space cadet. His siblings remind him so often that he’s dumb that they have him believing it. But once he realizes he has a gift for spelling, you can see him discovering his latent abilities and watch his self-confidence soar. As an actor, it’s a great journey to take every night.”

Keenan-Bolger, now in the role of Eponine in the Broadway revival of Les Misérables (along with fellow alum Alex Gemignani, BFA ’01, in the lead as Jean Valjean) played speller Olive Ostrovsky in the Broadway cast, a girl neglected by self-absorbed parents who turns to the dictionary for comfort and company. In addition to Olive and Leaf, the six spellers include Marcy Park, the stereotypical Asian high achiever who speaks six languages and is so over-committed that she sleeps a mere three hours a night. The showoff speller is William Barfee, thin skinned about the pronunciation of his last name, afflicted with a collapsed nasal passage, who gets words like “lugubrious.”

Chip Tolentino is an overgrown Boy Scout just entering puberty who has the most at stake as defending champion. Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre has both a pronounced lisp and two gay daddies who combined their last names in a show of solidarity. Logainne usually gets words like “cystitis,” all a lisper’s nightmare (and a comedian’s showcase).

And it seems that it’s the chance to laugh at that remote yet still painfully remembered rite-of-passage that draws audiences in. The New York Times described Bee as “a flashback to preadolescence, providing the cathartic kick of classical tragedy except with more embarrassment.”

The show’s popularity has led to a national tour and “sit down” (long-run) productions in Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston. “One of my favorite things about being part of this show has been knowing how many of my Michigan classmates are also part of it,” says Michael Zahler (BFA ’05), who plays Leaf Coneybear in the national tour. “And the show itself is such a complete emotional experience.”

“It is funny how many Michigan alums are a part of the show,” says Jenni Barber (BFA ’05), who has played Olive in the San Francisco and Boston productions. “The Spelling Bee cast becomes a close-knit family, especially the six kids. When we lived in San Francisco, we all rented apartments in the same building; it was almost like The Real World: Spelling Bee, only with a lot less drama!”

When Bahorek auditioned for Spelling Bee, he was pretty sure he’d blown it. “The pianist was above the stage and people were having a hard time hearing the accompaniment,” he says. “I started
to sing, knew I was off from the music, and suddenly heard, ‘Stop! Stop! Stop! Can you HEAR??’ It was William Finn, so I was sure it was over. They asked me to climb a ladder to stand beside the piano, where I sang ten bars of ‘I’m not that smart.’ And then I was excused. Two days later, I got an offer. Go figure,” he laughs.

Foa, too, was convinced he’d auditioned badly. “I had seen the show three times already because two of my closest friends, Celia Keenan-Bolger and Todd Buonopane (BFA ’00), were in it. So I was familiar with the role and confident I could bring my own spin to it. I wore some odd Leaf-esque clothing, messed up my hair, and went in. I felt good about the audition material, but when they asked me to sing a song of my own choosing, I pretty much tanked.”

“But next thing I know, I’m signing a Spelling Bee contract.”

Andrew Arrington, the baby of the bunch, graduated this spring but took a break during his senior year to join the Chicago production, understudying both Chip Tolentino and Mitch Mahoney, the bee’s ex-con “comfort counselor” who dispenses juice boxes and hugs to the losers as he pays down his community service. Last year, Arrington won the CBS contest “My Broadway Debut,” sponsored by The Early Show, earning a cameo in the Broadway hit Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. “Spelling Bee was my first big gig,” he says, “and I was extremely grateful for the opportunity. Needless to say, I was nervous, but the company welcomed me with open arms.”

Jen Sese (BFA ’06), Marcy Park in the Chicago production, still loves the experience after some 400 performances. “In school, you work for weeks and have five performances,” she says. “It’s amazing to go to ‘work’ and do a show that you enjoy with a cast that you love eight times a week. You bond with your fellow cast members, make discoveries about your character, and learn the nuances of the material more than can in a short run.”

Katie Basile (BFA ’04) is understudy for the roles of Rona Lisa Peretti, the sweet but stern bee moderator, and Marcy Park in the Broadway production. Todd Buonopane, understudy for four roles in the Broadway Bee, has appeared in over 150 performances.

Yes, but can they spell? Sese admits, “I’m a horrible speller.” Bahorek is above average. Keenan-Bolger and Foa admit they are children of the spell-check generation. Arrington says it all in his answer to the question: “Indubitably.”

Lucky for them, talents other than spelling are all that matters when it comes to landing parts in the big musicals.

Congratulations to all nine! Go Blue!

Musical Theatre Alumni in Spelling Bee

Andrew Arrington, understudy for Chip Tolentino and Mitch Mahoney in the Chicago production

Stan Bahorek, Leaf Coneybear in the San Francisco and Boston productions (joining Broadway cast)

Jenni Barber, Olive Ostrovsky in San Francisco and Boston productions (joining Broadway cast)

Katie Basile, Broadway understudy for Rona Lisa Peretti and Marcy Park

Todd Buonopane, Broadway understudy who has played Chip Tolentino and William Barfee

Barrett Foa, currently in the Broadway cast as Leaf Coneybear

Celia Keenan-Bolger, Olive Ostrovsky in the original Broadway cast (now in Les Misérables)

Jen Sese, who originated the role of Marcy Park in the Chicago company

Michael Zahler, Leaf Coneybear in the national tour

Brent Wagner, musical theatre director for the past 23 years, preps students for a performance at Kennedy Center