Cabrillo’s ‘Spelling Bee’ is a whole lotta F-U-N

By JOANNE ENGELHARDT

Emotionally needy, quirky Olive Ostrovsky (an entralling Alexi Baker). All six draw exceptionally colorful pictures of their characters, although Baker takes the cake for employing her wide eyes, hands, arms, gestures and other mannerisms nearly every second she’s on stage. She’s simply riveting. Many in the audience had goose bumps when she joins her businessman father and far-away-in-India mother in a haunting version of “The I Love You Song.”

By contrast, most of the songs in this musical are humorous and light, especially Boynton’s second-act opening number “My Unfortunate Erection (Chip’s Lament),” Sheets’ “I’m Not That Smart,” and Johnston’s silly ditty “Magic Foot.”

Besides the excellent performances in “Spelling Bee,” what makes this musical unpredictable is that four members of each night’s audience are brought onstage to be spelling bee participants as well. (The actors help guide these people and become part of the fun.) It also means that no two performances will ever be exactly alike because the audience participants must come up with the right spelling of a word (sometimes ridiculously easy, other times likely a word they don’t know, let alone know how to spell).

While the primary purpose of this production is to entertain, Atkins points out that the six spelling bee competitors get the opportunity to discover a little about who they are and what is of value to them. For example, the ultimate overachiever Marcy comes to the realization that she doesn’t have to be perfect in everything—a huge relief for her. When some of the students are eliminated, they are able to accept that life is sometimes just random and unfair.

A number of other students fill out the rest of the cast including John Wasielewski as Mitch Mahoney who is getting community service credit for escorting eliminated spellers off stage (and offering them apple juice.) Bert Rankin does a nice term as a “fantasy Jesus,” and Olive’s mother Thais Hernandez performs an Indian dance behind transparent curtains. On opening night, one of Logaine’s dads had lost his voice and shouldn’t have been on stage.

Overall, “Spelling Bee” is a highly engaging show suitable for all but the very young.

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