

*The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* SCHOOLS DAY PERFORMANCE

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

Date: Wednesday 20 June 2007

Venue: SYDNEY THEATRE

Pre-performance forum 10.30 am

Lunch Break 11.15 am

Performance commences: 12.15 pm

Performance concludes: 2.15pm

Post performance Q+A concludes 2.40pm

We respectfully ask that you discuss theatre etiquette with your students prior to coming to the performance.

**Running Late?**

Please contact Sydney Theatre Company's main switch on 9250 1700 and a message will be passed to Front of House.

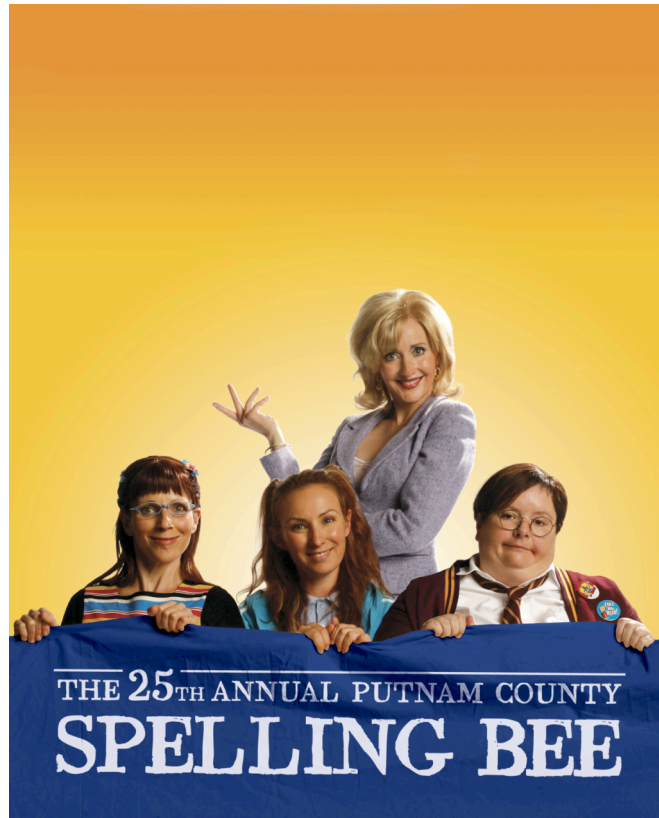
**Booking Queries**

Please contact Barbara Vickery on 02 9250 1778 or [bvickery@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:bvickery@sydneytheatre.com.au)

**General Education Queries**

Please contact Helen Hristofski, Education Manager, on 02 9250 1726 or [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)

Sydney Theatre Company and DP World Australia present  
a Melbourne Theatre Company production



by  
William Finn (Music and Lyrics) and Rachael Sheinkin  
(Book)  
Directed by Simon Phillips

## Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Elizabeth Surbey

### Acknowledgements

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes: Laura Scrivano, Helen Hristofski and Barbara Vickery of the STC.

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# Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities. Richard Wherrett was appointed Artistic Director from 1979 to 1990.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

Under the leadership Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, STC's annual subscription season features up to 12 plays including: recent or new Australian works, interpretations of theatrical classics and contemporary foreign works. In addition STC regularly co-produces and tours productions throughout Australia, playing annually to audiences in excess of 300,000. STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. In 2006 STC began a new journey of artistic development with the inception of The Actors Company, the STC ensemble.

**To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at [jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

## Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original **productions** and **workshops** that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its mainstage productions through the **schoolsdays** programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

STC works to support educators in their Drama and English-teaching practices. Every year dynamic **workshops** are held by leading theatre practitioners to support curriculum content, detailed resources are provided for all productions and an extensive work-experience programme is available to students from across the state.

The annual Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Theatre Company **Young Playwright's Award** continues to develop and encourage young writers. The winning students receive a cash prize and a two-day workshop with a professional director, dramaturg and cast – an invaluable opportunity and experience.

Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive **on-line resource** for teachers and students. Visit [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education).

We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access **heavily discounted** tickets and special offers/

**For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

# Production Credits

Music & Lyrics By William Finn Book By Rachel Sheinkin  
Conceived By Rebecca Feldman

## Cast

### Facilitators

Ms Rona Lisa Peretti Marina Prior  
Vice-Principal Douglas Panch Tyler Coppin  
Mr Mitch Mahoney (Comfort Counsellor) Bert Labonte

### Finalists (In Order Of Appearance)

Chip Tolentino Jamie Mcgregor  
Logainne Schwartzandgrubeniére Christen O'leary  
Leaf Coneybear Tim Wright  
William Barfee Magda Szubanski  
Marcy Park Josie Lane  
Olive Ostrovsky Lisa Mccune  
Female Understudy Jackie Rae Lythgo  
Male Understudy Daniel Fletcher

### All Other Roles Played By The Cast

Director Simon Phillips  
Musical Director Ian Mcdonald  
Choreographer Ross Coleman  
Designer Dale Ferguson  
Lighting Designer Matt Scott Sound Designer Peter Ripon  
Assistant Director Dean Bryant  
Associate Musical Director Mathew Frank  
Additional Material Written By Tyler Coppin  
Piano Ian Mcdonald  
Synthesizer Mathew Frank  
Reeds Graham Jesse  
Cello Marcus Hartstein  
Percussion Iain Scotland

Production Manager (Stc) Neil Kutner  
Production Manager (Mtc) Margaret Bourke  
Stage Manager Adam Smith  
Stage Manager Tanya Leach  
Assistant Stage Manager Jamie Twist  
Hair, Wig & Wardrobe Supervisor Lauren A. Proietti  
Head Mechanist Kevin Sigley/ Stephen Mason  
Head Flyman Will Perez-Ronderos  
Head Electrician Andrew Tompkins  
Lighting Board Operator Kayne Johnson  
Head Of Sound Kevin White  
Sound Engineer Adam Iuston  
Follow Spot Operators Jemima Flett, Andrew Williams  
Production Photographer Tracey Schramm

***This Production Opened 14 June 2007 At Sydney Theatre. There Will Be No Interval***

## Plot Synopsis

*'Warm and fuzzy may be totally unfashionable, but this little Broadway musical about spelling is g-o-l-u-p-t-i-o-u-s (delicious...)...a hilarious evening of entertainment.'*

The Age

*'Irresistible and entirely lovable nimble, upbeat, riotously funny.'*

The New York Times

**2005 Tony Award** (Best Book of a Musical)

**2005 Drama Desk Award** (Best Book of a Musical)

**2005 Lucille Lortel Award** (Outstanding Musical)

Welcome to Survivor for nerds.

This tribe is a motley collection of six socially-challenged, philologically-industrious twelve-year-olds battling it out for glory: to be sole survivor in their local spelling competition.

Contestants are winnowed down to a winner via increasingly difficult, bizarre and multi-syllabic words. Along the way there is romance, cliff-hanging suspense, great songs and much wit. This is a fond and charming musical with a very big heart.

STC welcomes Simon Phillips' award-winning production which broke box office records in Melbourne.

## About the play

*Under the P-U-N-C-T-I-L-I-O-U-S eye of the Vice Principal Mr Panch, a P-R-E-C-O-C-I-O-U-S bunch of kids, who have memorised every E-S-O-T-E-R-I-C and S-E-S-Q-U-I-P-E-D-A-L-I-A-N word in English, from A-B-H-O-R-R-E-N-C-E to Z-A-B-A-G-L-I-O-N-E, assemble at their local L-Y-C-E-U-M in order to decide the victor or, perhaps, V-I-C-T-R-I-X of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.*

*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is a musical centering around a fictional spelling bee in a geographically ambiguous Putnam County. It was work shopped and developed at the Barrington Stage Company in the Berkshires prior to its off-Broadway run at the Second Stage Theatre before transferring to Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre. It was directed by James Lapine.

One unusual aspect of the show is that real audience members are invited to compete in the spelling bee alongside the performers. In each performance, four audience members compete against six actors. During the 2005 Tony Awards, former Presidential candidate Al Sharpton had a cameo as one of the competitors.

Another unusual aspect of the show is its periodic "Parent-Teacher Conferences," also known as "adult night at the Bee," in which audience members must be over 44 to attend. These performances are peppered with sexual references and cursing, and grew from R-rated ad-libs made during rehearsals. Another amusing aspect of the show is that the official pronouncer provides ridiculous usage examples when asked to use words in a sentence. For instance, for the word "palaestra," he said, "Euripedes said, 'What happens at the palaestra stays at the palaestra.'"

The musical was based upon C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E, an original play by The Farm, a New-York-based improvisational comedy troupe. Sarah Saltzberg, Wendy Wasserstein's weekend nun, was in the original production, and Wasserstein



recommended that Finn see the show. Finn brought Shenkin on board and the improv show became a scripted musical. Dan Fogler, Rebecca Feldman, Jay Reiss, and Sarah Saltzberg were the only cast members that remained from C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E. Robb Sapp (later replaced by Jose Llana), Dashiell Eaves (replaced by Derrick Baskin), Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Celia Keenan-Bolger (who joined the cast as Olive Ostrovsky in the summer to replace Rebecca Feldman's character of Beth Margolies in the workshop), Lisa Howard, and Deborah Craig were added to the cast and a full script was created. Dana I. Harrel served as the Producer of Stage II and oversaw both productions. Michael Barakiva and Rebecca Feldman directed the workshop, and Michael Unger and Rebecca Feldman directed the summer production. Dan Knechtges choreographed both the workshop and summer.

There are currently two other productions of the musical in addition to the New York production running in the United States: Chicago and The National Tour. The Chicago production began performances on 28 March 2006 at the Drury Lane Theatre – Water Tower Place. The National Tour began in Baltimore, Maryland at the Hippodrome Theatre on 19 September 2006 and is currently touring many cities across the U.S.

There were two additional U.S. sit-down productions of the musical which are no longer running: San Francisco and Boston. The San Francisco production opened on 1 March 2006 at the Post Street Theatre and closed on 3 September 2006. The Boston production opened at the Wilbur Theatre on September 26, 2006 and ran until 31 December 2006.

The first production outside the United States was at the Melbourne Theatre Company in Melbourne, Australia in January 2006. It starred Marina Prior as Rona Lisa Peretti, David Campbell as Chip Tolentino, and Magda Szubanski as William Barfee.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

## Songs

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee  
*Company*

The Spelling Rules/ My Favourite Moment of the Bee 1  
*Mr Panch, Rona Peretti & Spellers*

My Friend, the Dictionary  
*Olive Ostrovsky & Company*

Pandemonium  
*Company*

I'm Not That Smart  
*Leaf Coneybear*

Magic Foot  
*William Barfee & Company*

Pandemonium (Reprise)/ My Favourite Moment of the Bee 2  
*Chip Tolentino, Mitch Mahoney, Rona Peretti & Company*

Prayer of the Comfort Counsellor  
*Mitch Mahoney & Company*

My Unfortunate Erection (Chip's Lament)  
*Chip Tolentino*

Woe is Me  
*Logainne Schwarzandgrubeniene, her Dads & Company*

I Speak Six Languages  
*Marcy Park & Girls*

The I Love You Song  
*Olive Ostrovsky, Olive's Mom & Dad*

My Favourite Moment of the Bee 3/ Second  
*Rona Peretti, Olive Ostrovsky, William Barfee & Company*

Finale  
*Company*

The Last Goodbye  
*Company*

## Overview of the Writer

William Finn

### *Music and lyrics*

As the old style Broadway musical slowly died in the eighties from the combined effects of inflation, imaginative failure and a cat and phantom invasion, the seeds of the next generation of American musicals were sprouting in the fertile ground off-Broadway. *March of the Falsettos*, a one-act, small-scale musical on a theme of gay identity, opened at Playwrights Horizons in 1981. The show was intimate and emotional, and Frank Rich of the *New York Times* couldn't praise it highly enough. In William Finn's music, he found 'the unmistakable, revivifying charge of pure talent.'

A native of Boston, William Finn was new to the game. Twenty-nine at the time, he had taught himself guitar and piano in his teens, but only became involved in musical theatre as a sideline at college. The sketches and songs he wrote there led to a Hutchinson Fellowship for Musical Composition, and by the mid-seventies he was sharpening his composing skills in a post-graduate year at the University of California, Berkeley. Moving to New York, he wrote his first musical, *In Trousers* (1979), a flop that nevertheless contained some strong songs and gave an indication that Finn was more interested in telling a story with heart than landing the big show-stopping number. 'Good musicals, successful musicals, rarely depend on the music; they're more often about the story,' he recently told an interviewer, before adding: 'Great musicals, however, are always about both.'

The central character of *In Trousers*, Marvin, a Jewish man who comes to accept that he is gay, would later reappear in *March of the Falsettos* and its 1990 sequel *Falsettoland*. With a book co-written with director James Lapine, *March of the Falsettos* follows Marvin as he moves into a gay relationship while still desperately trying to retain the love of his former wife and his little boy. *Falsettoland* picks up the story two years later, just as AIDS begins to claim its first American victims, one of whom is Marvin's partner, Whizzer. A falsetto, as Flynn has explained many times in interviews, is one who sings outside the normal range of the human voice, especially the male voice. Similarly, the characters in Finn's works tend to operate outside the margins. They are not mainstream all-American figures, but ordinary, confused people with messy lives, making it up as they go along. Audiences – and not just gay audiences – find plenty in this with which to identify. These two one-act musicals were combined to create a single show, *Falsettos*, which opened on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre in April 1992 and ran for over a year.

Although Jewish and gay himself, Finn has denied a strong autobiographical element in the *Falsettos Trilogy*: 'I write very personally and that is why people think that everything I write is autobiographical.' However, he freely admits that his 1998 musical *A New Brain* drew heavily on his serious illness in the nineties. A week after winning Tony Awards for Best Music and Lyrics in a Musical and Best Book for *Falsettos*, Finn was mistakenly diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer. Later he learned it was an arterial disorder, serious, life threatening, but curable. After he came through his successful treatment, *A New Brain* almost wrote itself. 'At the piano, there was all this gratitude that I was alive,' he once said, 'and all this life just spewing out of me – the piano was singing – and I was just there to write it down.' The musical, called by one critic 'a constantly surprising tone poem' is a funny, oddly upbeat chamber musical about a man entering and emerging from death's shadow.

His other work includes *Elegies* (2003), a suite of songs about close friends, family and others he has known, and *Romance in Hard Times*, an unsuccessful musical

from the mid-eighties. For the last decade he has been Adjunct Composer- Lyricist in Musical Theatre Writing at New York University.

In 2002, a friend suggested he go see C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E, a fun, off-off- Broadway show about a spelling bee devised by the New York improvisational troupe The Farm. Finn saw its potential and with one of his former students at NYU, Rachel Sheinkin, worked the piece into the musical, *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. After a season at the Barrington Stage Company in Massachusetts, the show opened at the Second Stage on 7 February 2005, directed by James Lapine. In May 2005, it transferred to the Circle in the Square, where it is still running.

## Rachel Sheinkin

### *Book*

In 2002, Rachel Sheinkin got a call from the composer and her former teacher William Finn, who had found a great subject for a musical in C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E, an off-off-Broadway show that had been a small hit for the improvisational group The Farm. Finn wondered whether she would be interested in writing the book, basing it on the original show but giving the characters stronger through-lines and song opportunities. Her agreement, followed by two months writing in Finn's apartment, a try out season with the Barrington Stage Company in Massachusetts and a transfer to Second Stage early last year, resulted in her winning a 2005 Tony Award for Best Book.

Currently living in Brooklyn, Sheinkin graduated *magna cum laude* from Brown University and holds a master of Fine Arts from Yale School of Drama. In 2001, she completed a full two-year Fellowship from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, studying under William Finn in the Music Theater Program. Her other work includes the book and lyrics for *Blood Drive* (with music by Joel Derfner) that received a production in London with Bridewell Theatre Company and at the O'Neill New Musical Theater Conference last year; *Striking 12*, a rock concert *cum* play in collaboration with the rock band GrooveLilly that played in Philadelphia, San Diego and Palo Alto; and the book and lyrics for *Serenade*, with music by Nils Olaf Dolvan. She was also Writer in Residence at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where she wrote *The Doctor of Last Resort*, produced off-Broadway in 2000 by the Clubbed Thumb Theatre Company.

## Context of the Play / Historical reference points / Form Style Overview

### The National Spelling Bee

The Scripps Annual National Spelling Bee is America's largest and longest-running educational promotion, occurring annually (save for a three year hiatus during the Second World War) since 1926. Today it is, technically at least, an international event, drawing contestants from America's Pacific dependencies, Europe, Canada, the West Indies and, for the first time last year, New Zealand, although the overwhelming number of finalists still come out of continental United States.

Since the forties, the finals in Washington DC have been sponsored by EW Scripps, a major media company, which has shown extraordinary generosity in bankrolling an event that won't stop growing. There were nine contestants at the first National Bee in 1926. Next year, at the end of May, Scripps will hold the 79<sup>th</sup> Annual National Spelling Bee by flying in and accommodating over 300 competitors with their guardians in Washington, giving them a few days of sight-seeing and fun educational activity before settling in to serious competition. The lucky 300 are the winners of their respective local bees that are separately sponsored, mainly by provincial newspapers. Scripps co-ordinates the setting up of local competitions from permanent offices in Cincinnati, from where they also offer advice and information through their website and publish a number of spelling books and teaching aids, including each year's *Paideia*\*, a list of over 3500 spelling bee words arranged by category and difficulty that is used as a basis for most local competitions.

Most national finalists have run a gauntlet of smaller contests, winning at grade, school, school district and county level. A disproportionate number of finalists are home schooled, probably less a sign of the value of home schooling generally than that national success requires a great deal of parental and teacher coaching. Learning all the words in the *Paideia* might get a keen kid up to the county finals on his own, but after that most of the words are 'off-list', drawn at the compiler's discretion from Webster's Third New International Dictionary and its supplements: an unmemorable half million words. A good coach can teach a child to draw clues from answers to the questions permitted by the rules. Drilled for a few years in spelling conventions, word formation and morphology, the roots, suffixes and prefixes from Greek and Latin, and the peculiarities and spelling conventions of major foreign languages, a bright child should be able to make a decent stab at most unknown words. The rest is luck.

In the history of the US National Spelling Bee there have been eighty champions, including three pairs of co-champions. In the ability to spell, at least at this level, there seems to be no significant difference between the sexes: forty-two champions have been girls, thirty-eight boys. There is no National Spelling Bee for Australia, although New South Wales inaugurated a state championship, the Premier's Spelling Bee, two years ago. Its stated aims are similar to those of the US bees: to help students improve their spelling, increase their vocabularies, learn concepts and develop correct English usage that will help them all their lives.

At base, a spelling bee is simple: in a succession of rounds, contestants attempt to correctly spell out a word chosen for its difficulty. A correct spelling advances them to the next round; an incorrect spelling means elimination. This continues until one speller remains, who is declared the champion. As with most games and

competitions, this simplicity of objective is necessarily complicated by a slather of rules to keep everyone honest. In the domain of spelling bees almost everyone looks to the media company Scripps, the sponsor of the National Bee in Washington DC, for guidance. They publish and recommend rules for local competitions which, although not binding, are almost universally adopted. Some rules are *de facto* obligatory, inasmuch as they determine eligibility for the National Bee, the most central requirement being that competitors shall be no more advanced than eighth grade and no older than fifteen at the time of the finals.

At all levels, spelling bees are oral competitions, although contestants might qualify through a written spelling round. One by one the spellers step up to receive their word from 'the pronouncer', who takes the pronunciation and definition from Webster's Dictionary. As soon as the word is pronounced, the speller has two-and-a-half minutes to spell it. In the first two minutes, the speller can ask questions about the word's meaning and derivation, hear it in a sentence and have it pronounced again. At two minutes, if the speller hasn't started to spell, the pronouncer will declare Finish Time, thirty seconds in which the speller must complete the spelling of the word or be eliminated. While spelling out their word, spellers may stop and start again, but if, in retracing their steps, they change any letters or their sequence they will be eliminated. As the competition progresses, either the difficulty of the words is stepped up round by round, or there is a point, usually after all but a handful of spellers have been eliminated, where a special list of tough words comes into play. (In the National Bee, the twenty-five Championship Words are admitted when two or three spellers remain.)

Scripps suggests two methods for deciding a winner. In Option A, used in the National Bee, when only one speller correctly spells their allocated word in a round, they will not be declared champion until they correctly spell the next word on the list. That is, the winner must correctly spell two words more than the runner-up. If the speller fails with the second word, those eliminated in the previous round are re-admitted and spelling continues until there is a winner by two correct spellings. If a winner isn't decided before the twenty-five Championship Words are exhausted, first place is shared. In Option B, which is recommended for local spelling bees, when only two contestants remain and one has spelt incorrectly, the next speller must first correctly spell the word the rival misspelled before correctly spelling the next word on the list.

Since previous winners of the National Bee are not eligible for competition in any of the Scripps-affiliated spelling bees, a victory in Washington marks both the apotheosis and the end of a child's spelling bee career.

\* 'A child's education'; from the Greek root *paed* meaning child. The writers of spelling bee literature, as you might expect, love littering their prose with such arcane but precise words.

Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelled, and, if you do not remember, turn to a dictionary. It produces great praise to a lady to spell well.

President Thomas Jefferson's advice to his daughter Martha

## The Art of Spelling

Spelling remains our language's chief embarrassment. Proud of its voluminous vocabulary, its generous absorption of useful words from other tongues, its global primacy as the language of commerce and communications, we English-speakers

tend to shuffle our feet and apologise when foreigners bring up its maddeningly inconsistent spelling. In such situations one can go on the offensive and point out that, actually, more than eighty percent of the words in a standard dictionary are regular. But any savvy debater will riposte that among the most common words in our language (the ones that children and foreigners encounter first when they begin to read and write), the rate of irregularity is very high. Of the one hundred most common words, about forty are irregular, and in any paragraph of ordinary prose, allowing for repetitions, up to half of the words will be exceptions to English spelling rules.

A bad system cannot be created overnight. A great deal of dedication, hard labour and good intentions over more than a millennium has created the mess that English spelling finds itself in. The first transcribers of the language, the Roman missionaries of the eighth and ninth centuries, wrote down the vernacular the best they could, using the twenty-three letters of the Latin alphabet in all kinds of imaginative and idiosyncratic ways to represent the forty or more phonemes of Old English. With local dialects also varying greatly, it meant that virtually all the far-flung monasteries had their own systems of writing English. When the Normans invaded in the eleventh century, they too came with their own ideas of how English should be spelt – it should be spelt more like French. On top of hundreds of French words with their Gallic spellings that flooded the vernacular, many English words were given French touches. The notorious ‘gh’ combination was brought in to represent the back palate ‘ch’ sound then pronounced in words such as *night* and *light* (‘*neecht*’ and ‘*leecht*’), and all initial ‘cw’ spellings were replaced with ‘qu’ as in *quick* and *quell*. Finding confusion in the way wedge-shaped letters bunched up in common Old English words such as *cum*, *luv*, *wun*, and *sun*, the Normans made them easier to read by replacing the ‘u’ with the less-phonetic ‘o’, forming *come*, *love*, *one* and *son*.

Spelling conventions, let alone rules, were slow to catch on until the printing press forced the issue in the latter part of the fifteenth century. The printer William Caxton chose the sound of English spoken around London as the basis for his spelling, and later printers followed suit. This hardly put paid to spelling variants – think of the variation in Elizabethan texts, even within the work of a single author such as Shakespeare. But the advent of printed books, the first form of mass communication, needing to be easily read throughout the kingdom, led to single accepted spellings of many common words.

But the sands were shifting even as the first pylons were being driven into the ground. In Caxton’s day, English pronunciation was undergoing what is known as the Great Vowel Shift. Over a few generations, six vowel sounds shuffled around so that, for example, *want* that once rhymed with *pant*, ended up rhyming with *font*; similarly, *do* was once pronounced ‘*doe*’, and so on. For other reasons, the ‘k’ in *know* and *knee* was losing its voice, and so too the terminal ‘e’ found in, for example, *name* that, with a longer vowel, had been pronounced by Chaucer as ‘*narm-a*’.

Worse was to come – intellectuals got into the act. The explosion of the arts, law and sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth century saw thousands of specialist terms entering general discourse, sporting their peculiar Latin and Greek spellings: *psychical*, *foetus*, *affidavit*, *pneumonia*, *diarrhoea*, *paraphernalia*, *onomatopoeia*, and so on. It was perhaps out of this that English speakers developed their taste for welcoming foreign words and not expecting them to conform to our spelling conventions: *bizarre* (French), *bazaar* (Farsi), *berserk* (Icelandic), *banzai* (Japanese), *borzoi* (Russian) – to name just a few old buzz words.

Yet even as strange spellings were being admitted, there rose a call, not so much to reform spelling but to stabilise it. Beginning with the Elizabethan teacher William Mulcaster and continuing throughout the seventeenth century with a line of

educational and phonetician campaigners, wayward spellings were abjured, and the new lexicographical sciences of phonology, morphology and etymology brought some rationality and regularity to English spelling. By the time Samuel Johnson published his great dictionary in 1755, most of the 40,000 words in it had established spellings, and any still wavering between variants had only one acceptable spelling once he made his magisterial decree on the matter. With surprisingly few exceptions, Johnson's spellings apply today.

## **Potatoe: Former Vice-President Dan Quayle's spelling of the edible tuber at a spelling bee at the Luis Munoz Rivera School in Trenton, New Jersey on 29 June 1992.**

### **Simplified Spelling**

Let's face it, the case for spelling reform is compelling. The arguments of the Simplified Spelling Society and other like-minded organisations are axiomatic. If English spelling was stripped of its irregularities, forced to represent speech sounds strictly, it would be easier for children and foreigners to learn to read and write; rates of illiteracy, which are high in Anglophone countries, would fall; dyslexia would be less crippling; unfamiliar words would hold no terrors for readers and writers; teaching hours would be cut; and with all those awful silent letters, *-ough* words, doubled-up consonants and other inefficiencies assigned to the dustbin of history, English texts would be shorter. Yes, trees would be saved!

But the difficulty facing spelling reformers is the same difficulty faced by the mice in the Aesop fable: How are they going to put the bell on the cat? It is a great idea, but how can it be done? Of course, one could tinker around the edges, as Noah Webster, an early spelling reformer, did when he produced his American dictionary, changing *grey* to *gray*, *honour* to *honor*, and so on. But Webster knew that to go further would invite revolt. Imagine the uproar if, from a certain date, *is*, *was*, *be*, *of*, *said*, *have*, *one*, *night*, *enough*, *through* and other basic irregularities became the phonetic *iz*, *woz*, *bee*, *ov*, *sed*, *hav*, *wun*, *nite*, *enuf*, *thru*, etcetera. *Thru* enrages some people when McDonald's use it, so how will they react when it is on the front page of *The Age*? You can expect pig-headed rebellions to break out in every school and office, every newspaper copy room, every government department.

And how are the spelling reformers going to get the various English speaking nations to reform together when no one can agree on beef subsidies? Reformers point as proof that it can be done to the German-speakers, who have gone through a seven year process, completed last year, to rationalised spelling. But the changes there were relatively minor, the majority of affected words merely exchanged the *eszet*, their blobby *ß* symbol, for a neat pair of esses. Yet even so, strong opposition continues. Many older people ignore the reforms, and one major paper, the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, after a few years grumbling about the changes, went back to the old spelling. If spelling reformers can't get Germans to accept greater efficiency, what chance Australians?



Indeed, the German experience has shown that the problem is not so much practical (although the logistics of even minor change are daunting) but emotional. A language, including its spelling, becomes part of a speaker's identity, a key component in their culture; it places them in the world. Anglophones have gone to great pains to learn to spell and, notwithstanding our spelling's often maddening irrationality, we feel we own it. Our baby is ugly but we love it all the same. For spellings do not merely represent the sound of the word, despite linguists' claims that that is all they do. Irrational though it may be, we sense a link between the world and the word. We feel that the specific sequence of letters somehow belongs to the object, action or quality being denoted, essential to its complete identity. To look down and see your *foot* is to know that all is as it should be; but to look down and realise that since the spelling reforms the object is a *fut* is to be cast into a strange and uncertain state (worse when the *fut* is encased in a *shu*). This is the real reason why major spelling reform is a non-starter. While we sympathise with grade schoolers, ESL students and dyslexics, psychologically *enuf* is much too much.

# The Musical

Musical theatre – a history

**Musical theatre** is a form of theatre combining music, songs, spoken dialogue and dance. The emotional content of the piece – humor, pathos, love, anger – as well as the story itself, is communicated through the words, music, movement and technical aspects of the entertainment as an integrated whole.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical\\_theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_theater))

## Introduction

The three main components of a musical are the music, the lyrics, and the book. The **book** of a musical refers to the "play" or story of the show – in effect its spoken (not sung) lines; however, "book" can also refer to the dialogue and lyrics together, which are sometimes referred to (as in opera) as the libretto (Italian for "little book"). The **music** and **lyrics** together form the **score** of the musical. The interpretation of the musical by the creative team heavily influences the way that the musical is presented.

The creative team includes a director, a musical director and usually a choreographer. A musical's production is also creatively characterised by technical aspects, such as set, costumes, stage properties, lighting, etc. that generally change from production to production (although some famous production aspects tend to be retained from the original production, for example, Bob Fosse's choreography in Chicago).

There is no fixed length for a musical, and it can range from a short one-act entertainment to several acts and several hours in length (or even a multi-evening presentation); however, most musicals range from one and a half hours to three hours. Musical today are typically presented in two acts, with one intermission ten to 20 minutes in length. The first act is almost always somewhat longer than the second act, and generally introduces most of the music. A musical may be built around 4-6 main theme tunes that are reprised throughout the show, or consist of a series of songs not directly musically related. Spoken dialogue is generally interspersed between musical numbers, although the use of "sung dialogue" or recitative is not unknown, especially in so-called "sung-through" musicals.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical\\_theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_theater))

Let's start with a basic definition

**Musical (noun):** a stage, television or film production utilizing popular-style songs - dialogue optional - to either tell a story (book musicals) or showcase the talents of the writers and/or performers (revues).

**Book musicals** have gone by many names: comic operas, operettas, opera bouffe, burlesque, burletta, extravaganza, musical comedy, etc. **Revue**s have their roots in **variety**, **vaudeville**, **music halls** and **minstrel shows**. The best musicals have three essential qualities –

**Brains** – intelligence and style

**Heart** – genuine and believable emotion

**Courage** – the guts to do something creative and exciting.

# Musical

In the beginning was chaos. Gypsy bandits prowled in packs, high-kicking chorines advanced in formation, sopranos trilled of love everlasting, low comics leered, English lords danced in ragtime, and when the stars hogged the apron for an encore or three, the applause went through the roof and the plot went out the window. This was the American musical before The Great War. Great entertainment but what a schlimazel! If it wasn't an operetta set in a *Merry Widow* waltz-world of goulash and hogwash, it was an overblown vaudeville of revolving décor, star turns and girls! girls! girls!

The history of the Broadway musical between the wars is the history of its integration; how this fabulous mess coalesced into a great American art form - perhaps *the* great American artform. Nothing from the early days was completely discarded - romance, stardom and razzle-dazzle were always welcome - but everything gradually became subject to structure as, one by one, music, lyrics and story became equal parts of a coherent entity.

Revolutions sometimes begin quietly and this one began in a 299-seat theatre called The Princess on West Thirty-Ninth Street in 1915. With a stage too small for the big shows and finding it hard to make ends meet with straight plays, the management hit on the idea that an intimate musical might turn a profit. Big sets, fancy costumes and star names were too expensive, but maybe character and plot could take up the slack. And forget established composers and writers - a good, hungry writing team would do the job. And from the first, they had a good team - a freakishly good team - headed by composer Jerome Kern.

In those early Princess musicals, Kern, who had made his name adding American flavour to English musical imports, quickly adapted his technique for the small auditorium. The trick he soon mastered in musicals such as *Very Good Eddie* (1915), *Oh Boy!* (1917) and *Leave It to Jane* (1917) was to create music that seemed an expression of character and situation and that never seemed a stretch when the performer moved from dialogue to song. His charming melodies were greatly helped by book-writer Guy Bolton who, scrimping on the set and costume budget, wrote stories about ordinary American Joes and Janes getting into scrapes and falling in love. Whether he was adapting an existing play or cooking up something original, Bolton kept the plot tight and moving forward into the songs.

The third and most surprising member of this team of innovators was lyricist P.G. Wodehouse. The creator of Jeeves and other characters of relentless Englishness took to colloquial American with astonishing facility. Rejecting both high-faluting operatics and ragtime new-fangleness, he wrote lyrics that sounded the way American people spoke - or thought they spoke - expressing their modest aspirations and emotions with wit and verve. 'When it's nesting time in Flatbush,' goes an early Wodehouse lyric, 'We will take a little flat/With Welcome on the mat/Where there's room to swing a cat.' This may not seem much of an innovation, but with every pert syllable sitting pretty on a note of Kern's catchy melody the American popular song was given a new personality: colloquial, graceful and unaffectedly sentimental.

Other songwriters saw the future and knew that it worked. Porter, Berlin and Gershwin wrote songs before the Princess musicals and after, but they were not the same kind of songs. Everyone followed the Kern-Bolton- Wodehouse lead, though the musical of the twenties and thirties, while being more of a piece than its predecessors, was not completely integrated. The reason why so few musicals of the period are revived is that the books are flimsy, sometimes little more than pegs to hang songs on, and the runs of plot tend to swerve in order to hit solid song opportunities.

This is where Oscar Hammerstein II comes in - twice. Hammerstein revolutionised musicals with the book and lyrics for *Show Boat* (1928) with Jerome Kern, but apparently nobody was paying attention, including Hammerstein, whose subsequent musicals were the same old same old. Speaking about *Show Boat*, Hammerstein's son James summed up the achievement: 'There's no explanation for it. It came from nowhere in an era when silly musicals with silly books with silly Mitteleuropean comedians were the rule. You wrote the book around what your best songs were and hoped it would make sense. Not only did [Jerome Kern] and my dad not do that, but they tried to embed the songs into the characters and the story.'

Perhaps *Show Boat* was so ahead of its time that no one properly recognised the innovation. Fifteen years later, teamed up with Richard Rogers, Hammerstein staged the revolution all over again with *Oklahoma!* This time it took, scaring the bejeezus out of established composers and writers. Up and down Broadway in 1943, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter could be heard lamenting that their careers were over, although they both subsequently turned out excellent musicals in the new style, such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Kiss Me Kate*.

The integration of music, lyrics and book into an indissolvable whole, each element supporting the other, gave the American musical durability and stability. The hits post-*Oklahoma!*, unlike those before the war, have been resilient to changing times and are routinely revived. The structure has proved robust enough to bear almost any subject matter, from the rise of Nazism (*Cabaret*) to *St Matthew's Gospel* (*Godspell*) to serial murder (*Sweeney Todd*). A sure sign of its importance as an art form is how often the musical has satirised itself, its recognisable conventions sent up even while they are being adhered to, most recently on Broadway by Mark Hollmann and Greg Kotis in *Urinetown*. ([www.musicals101.com](http://www.musicals101.com))

## Score

In opera, the score is just the music. In modern musical comedy, the score refers to both music and lyrics. This reveals the difference between the art forms. In opera, the words take the back seat. Thus Don Giovanni is a Mozart opera, not a Mozart-da Ponte opera, and that is fair enough: all the art is in the music. Not that da Ponte was a poor librettist. For the needs of eighteenth century opera, he was the best around, but his job, as he knew, was to place words that sat well on the melody and showed off the composer and voices. Character development didn't matter all that much, plot development didn't matter at all, and if the music lasted longer than the lyric, the words cycled until Mozart was through with them.

In the modern musical, lyrics and melody have equal weight. It is right that we speak of a Rogers and Hammerstein musical, or Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret*, or *Urinetown* by Hollmann and Kotis. (This, of course, leaves the book-writers out in the cold again, but they're used to it) The collaboration between composer and lyricist needs to be very close if the story is to be told through the songs and not around them. 'You must talk very clearly about what a number is to accomplish emotionally, in terms of the plot, in terms of the character,' says Stephen Sondheim. 'I mean over-talk it, so you are sure that you are both writing the same song.'

Apart from working closely, there are few common work-methods for Broadway songwriters. The music comes before the words more often than not, mainly because it avoids the rumpy-tumpty sound that occurs when lyricists try to confect rhythm. (*Cats*, based on the children's verse of T.S. Eliot, is packed with rumpy-tumpty songs) However, some lyricists knew the sound of a good lyric well enough to be able to write on spec and hand it to the composer for musicalisation. One oft-used trick is to set a lyric to a known tune but not reveal the crib to the composer, who, left to his own devices, will always come up with his own melody. Some teams like to work individually and come together once their respective elements have been completed; others like to huddle over the piano and nut it out together. Some lyricists never suggest musical ideas to the composer, and vice versa; others bounce lyric and music ideas off one another all day. Lyricist Irving Caesar always thought the idea that anything came first, music or lyrics, was 'all baloney'. 'George Gershwin and I wrote *Swanee* in five minutes,' he said. 'Five minutes, I tell you! Now when everything's happening that fast, who knows who does what to whom when?'

(STC program for *Urinetown* 2006)

The chief principle for the score of a musical, that it fits so tightly with the book that you can't perceive the join, is also its chief pleasure. *Cats* and *Les Miserables* director Trevor Nunn loves 'that moment when the music enters, when text becomes underscoring, then introduction, then song - when something that has been explored in one form then moves into another.'

# Character Summaries

## The Spellers

**Olive Ostrovsky:** A young newcomer to the competitive spelling word. Her mother is in an ashram in India and her father is working late, as usual, but he is trying to come at some time during the bee. She made friends with her dictionary at a very young age, helping her make it to the Putnam County Spelling Bee. She comes in second place in the spelling bee.

**William Barfée:** A Putnam County Spelling Bee finalist last year, but eliminated because of an allergic reaction to peanuts. His famous “Magic Foot” method of spelling had boosted him to spelling glory, even though he only has one working nostril, a touchy personality, a severe peanut allergy, and the mistaken belief that he looks good in shorts (not to mention an often mispronounced last name; it's *Bar-fay*, not *Bar-fee*). He has a crush on Olive. He is the winner of the spelling bee.

**Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre:** Logainne is the youngest and most politically aware speller, with two overbearing gay men as parents. She comes in third place in the spelling bee.

**Marcy Park:** A recent transfer from Virginia, Marcy placed 9th in last year's nationals. She speaks six languages, is a member of all-American hockey, a championship rugby player, plays Chopin and Mozart on multiple instruments, sleeps only three hours a night, hides in the bathroom cabinet, and is getting very tired of always winning. She is the poster child for the Over-Achieving Asian. She is also not allowed to cry.

**Leaf Coneybear:** The second runner-up in his district (the winner and first runner-up had to go to the first runner-up's Bat Mitzvah), Leaf comes from a large family of former hippies and makes his own clothes. He's not really that smart, but correctly spells words as though he is possessed. Most of his words by some amazing coincidence are South-American rodents some with quite amusing names.

**Chip Tolentino:** Champion of the 24th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. He returns to defend his title, but he finds puberty hitting at the most inopportune moments. (he rather likes the look of Leaf's sister Marigold in the front row.) He comes in last place in the spelling bee.

**Three or four spellers from the audience:** Audience members are encouraged to sign up to participate before the show, and several are chosen to spell words onstage.

## The Adults

**Rona Lisa Peretti:** The #1 Realtor in Putnam County, a former Putnam County Spelling Bee Champ (at the 3rd annual Bee) and returning moderator. Sweet but stern. She won the 3rd spelling bee by spelling *zyzygy*.

**Vice Principal Douglas Panch:** After five years' absence from the Bee, Panch returns as judge. (He claims to be in a better place now thanks to a high-fiber diet and Jungian analysis.) He is infatuated with Rona Lisa Peretti, but she does not return the favor.

**Mitch Mahoney:** The Official Comfort Counselor. Mitch is performing his community service with the Bee, and hands out juice boxes to losing students.

## The Parents and Others

**Carl Grubenierre:** One of Schwartzandgrubenierre's dads, he's set his heart on his little girl winning the bee, no matter what he has to do. Tries to sabotage William's foot. Played by the actor who plays Leaf.

**Dan Schwartz:** One of Schwartzandgrubenierre's dads, he's slightly less insane than Carl but still intent on his daughter winning the bee. Played by the actor who plays Mitch.

**Leaf's Mom:** Overprotective and doubtful of her son's abilities to stand up to the competition. Played by the actress who plays Logainne.

**Leaf's siblings, Marigold, Brooke, Pinecone, Landscape, Raisin, and Paul:** Not very confident of Leaf's abilities. Played by the actors who play Olive, Marcy, Chip and the volunteer spellers.

**Olive's Mom and Dad:** She's in India, he's working late, but they appear in Olive's imagination to encourage her and tell her they love her. Played by the actors who play Miss Peretti and Mitch.

**Jesus:** Appears to Marcy in a moment of crisis. Played by the actor who plays Chip.

## Setting

We find ourselves in the standard 'American' school auditorium cum gymnasium. (In my school it's called the multi-purpose hall). The home team is evidently the *COMETS* and a separate wheeled bleacher has been pushed to near centre stage under the basketball hoop offering three tiers of unadorned bench space. A cup is on display and the adjudicators desk host non-matching chairs before two microphones. The space is wonderfully original – ceiling emblazoned with the comets star insignia, fluorescent tube lighting hangs down amongst the ceiling fans. So evocative of 'local' – right down to the proudly sponsored by signs – Putnam Optometrists "lookin' Spectacle – ular". Across the stage another banner – The Putnam County Spelling Bee Champions over the past 25 years. The cup itself looms large down stage right. We cannot forget the illuminated digital tally counter of the scoreboard just off from the auditorium's velvet curtained stage behind which we will find the onstage band. They are a simple 5 piece group of Piano, keyboard, cello, percussion/drums and flute/saxophone.

## Interview

# BUZZ WORDS

**Marina Prior's voice bubbles up the phone line from Melbourne:  
"It's such a joy. In 22 years in the theatre, I've never had such fun."**

*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is still running on Broadway, two years after its opening. Prior, and most of the cast who first created it for the Melbourne Theatre Company in early 2006, will be bringing it to STC in June.

When it won Best Musical at the Helpmann Awards, it took quite a few people by surprise. This isn't your blockbuster, pull-out-all-stops musical. "There are no moving parts," is how Prior expresses it. "But there are wonderful, quirky, personal stories that capture people's minds and hearts.

"I think in musical theatre, things tend to be rather cyclical – musical theatre goes big, and then it goes small. But whatever point of the cycle it's at, ultimately the success of any work is about the integrity of the piece. If it captures people's minds and hearts, that's what counts."

In the US it certainly did. "Gold stars all round," the New York Times enthused of this "little engine that could"-type tale, featuring six adolescent kids (played by adult actors) – a mixed-bag including a defending champion, a dorky girl with two gay fathers (her unpronounceable surname comes from the combination of their Jewish surnames), the adolescent male overcome, at the very worst possible moment, by his sexual fantasies...

Then there are the adults - including a demented presenter, Rona Lee Peretti, reliving her own glory days as a one-time winner of the bee, the "word-pronouncer" and vice-principal of the Hemingway-Dos Passos Junior High, Douglas Panch,, and Mitch Mahoney, the "comfort counsellor" who has the unenviable task of escorting the losers from the stage and somehow persuading them that winning isn't everything – despite all society's evidence to the contrary.

*Spelling Bee* started life in 2004 as a workshop, leading eventually to a full Off-Broadway production written by William Finn, Rachel Sheinkin and Rebecca Felman which went on to a full-blown Broadway show at Circle in the Square, directed by James Lapine. There it was nominated for no less than six Tony Awards, winning for both Best Book of a Musical, and for Best Actor Award.

One of its quirks is to enlist four audience volunteers to come on stage in each performance to join in the bee as contestants. This can be tricky, Prior admits, but from the Melbourne run, certain hard-and-fast rules emerged.

Before each performance, she and Tyler Coppin (playing Panch) would meet the contestants briefly backstage. Ostensibly it was to explain the rules of the spelling bee "but really we were sussing them out. Having four different volunteers every night means an unknown quantity is being injected into the show every single night, so it certainly keeps you on your toes.



“You don’t want any amateur actors in there because it’s a beautifully structured script and so you can’t really have people trying to trump the characters and the script. So we just say to them “Please don’t act. Just be gracious, smile, and spell the best you can!”

Like the professional contestants, the amateurs get a range of words to spell, some ridiculously easy, others utterly obscure. It’s not rigged against them, says Prior: “If one turns out to spell very well, we’ll get them through to the end...”

She describes her own character, Rona, as “funny, egocentric, a saccharine cross between an NBC news reporter, a game show host and the real estate agent that she now is. In Rona’s mind,” the actor continues, “the whole thing is about her!”

At the very beginning of the show, she has a vivid flashback to the moment of her own triumph:

“Miss Peretti – please spell syzygy”. (And yes, that is a word, according to the Oxford Dictionary a term from astronomy meaning a conjunction or opposition, especially of the moon with the sun)

As she reflects

“It’s a marvellous memory  
If you win the spelling bee  
One’s life improves from A to Z  
The minute you are crowned here...”

Remembering that past triumph, revelling in her continued presence at the *Spelling Bee*, Rona is “vampy, sexy, loads of fun” to play, says Prior, and because in improvising with the amateurs, she gets some of her own stuff to write each night, the whole performance is “a terrific challenge because it can go off anywhere”.

Indeed, the whole cast has terrific fun with this production. “Simon Phillips [the MTC director] says that it was all so much fun that we never really rehearsed it at all – we just sat around and laughed. It was such a joy because it’s really all about the ensemble.” And she repeats her earlier comment: “In 22 years, I’ve never had such fun.”

But beneath the froth and fun, the play has undercurrents that will resonate with most of us in this driven, competitive society. “You could see it as an expose on the American culture of success at any cost, of success as the only measure of a life,” Prior reflects.

“But you know, that’s our own culture, too. We can all relate to that sense of ‘I must achieve at any cost’, that life is all about success and winning. Here in Australia we get so smug about the US, but those ideas translate here so well. I don’t really think we can be smug.”

“By the end of the show, we are celebrating the uniqueness of the individuals, we are not celebrating the culture of winning.”

## Resources for Teachers

An interesting site is the official site for the original production  
<http://www.spellingbeethemusical.com/>

### *Winning Words in the US National Spelling Bee*

1925 gladiolus, 1926 abrogate, 1927 luxuriance, 1928 albumen, 1929 asceticism, 1930 fracas, 1931 foulard, 1932 knack, 1933 propitiatory, 1934 deteriorating, 1935 intelligible, 1936 interning, 1937 promiscuous, 1938 sanitarium, 1939 canonical, 1940 therapy, 1941 initials, 1942 sacrilegious, 1946 semaphore, 1947 chlorophyll, 1948 psychiatry, 1949 dulcimer, 1950 haruspex, 1951 insouciant, 1952 vignette, 1953 soubrette, 1954 transept, 1955 custaceology, 1956 condominium, 1957 schappe, 1958 syllepsis, 1959 cacolet, 1960 troche, 1961 smaragdine, 1962 esquamulose, 1963 equipage, 1964 sycophant, 1965 eczema, 1966 ratoon, 1967 chihuahua, 1968 abalone, 1969 interlocutory, 1970 croissant, 1971 shalloon, 1972 macerate, 1973 vouchsafe, 1974 hydrophyte, 1975 incisor, 1976 narcolepsy, 1977 cambist, 1978 deification, 1979 maculature, 1980 elucubrate, 1981 sarcophagus, 1982 psoriasis, 1983 Purim, 1984 luge, 1985 milieu, 1986 odontalgia, 1987 staphylococci, 1988 elegiacal, 1989 spoliator, 1990 fibranne, 1991 antipyretic, 1992 lyceum, 1993 kamikaze, 1994 antediluvian, 1995 xanthosis, 1996 viviseulture, 1997 euonym, 1998 chiaroscuro, 1999 logorrhea, 2000 demarche, 2001 succedaneum, 2002 prospicience, 2003 pococurante, 2004 autochthonous, 2005 appoggiatura.

### The one hundred most common words in English.

the\* of\* and a\* to\* in is\* you\* that it he\* was\* for on are\* as\* with his\* they\* I at be\* this have\* from or one\* had by word\* but not what\* all were\* we\* when\* your\* can said\* so there use\* an each which\* she\* do\* how their\* if will up other\* about out many\* then them these some\* her would\* make like him into time has\* look two\* more write\* go see number no way could\* my than first water\* been call who\* oil its now find long down day did get come\* made may people\* part (\* irregular or non-phonetic spelling)

### One hundred commonly misspelt words in English

absence accept accidentally accommodate acquire address amateur apparent argument atheist believe bicycle bureau calendar ceiling cemetery changeable conscience conscious descent definitely disastrous discipline drunkenness embarrass exhilarate exceed existence fascinate February fiery foreign fourth gauge grammar guarantee harass height hierarchy immediate independent intelligence its jealous judgement knowledge leisure library license maintenance manoeuvre mediocre memento millennium miscellaneous miniature mischievous misspell noticeable necessary occasion occur parallel parliament pastime pigeon playwright possession precede principal privilege questionnaire receive recommend referred religious restaurant ridiculous rhythm sandal schedule scissors sensible separate sincerely special success too tomorrow they're truly twelfth tyranny until vacuum vicious weather Wednesday weird you're

## Activities Before The Play

It might be rewarding to brainstorm a similar scenario to the Musical and play out some scenes devised by the class.

If any are at all musical they might develop a song around an incident or character – (their own words perhaps to a pre-existing tune, even a nursery rhyme can work well) This might get the class to begin to understand contemporary musicals.

Discuss with the class, through line ideas and divergent themes and stories and how these can play alongside the main idea to keep the audience interested.

Discuss humour based around 'gags' – sight gags, event gags, character 'gags'. What do audiences find humour in? What is funny?

Do the students have spelling successes or challenges they can recall from their days in primary school? Are the words they find hard on the 'commonly misspelt words' list?

## Questions After The Play

What were the traits that made the characters come alive? Discuss also costume design choice.

Could the story have ended any other way? How? Why?

Why do you think there wasn't an interval even though the show is long enough for one?

How successful was the audience involvement as volunteer spellers in the competition? Do you think it would work differently in an evening show with mostly an adult audience?

How did it affect you to have the characters/actors move amongst the audience?

What do you think was the main story of the musical? How many stories can you identify from the characters? Were any difficult to follow? What was your favourite and why?

Discuss the setting and the details onstage. Which were important to the story (stories)?

Discuss special effects and lighting.

Was it important to have the musicians on stage? Discuss the band and choice of instruments for the music. Did you have a favourite song? Why? Has it stayed with you since seeing the production?