

Arts & Entertainment

CDC Theatre Knows How to Spell H-i-l-a-r-i-o-u-s at This Spelling Bee



WIT AND HUMOR...The cast of the Cranford Dramatic Club's (CDC) production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* provides lots of wit and humor. The comedy runs through Saturday, February 22. For tickets, visit cdctheatre.org.

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

CRANFORD — The Cranford Dramatic Club's (CDC) production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is a roller-coaster ride running full tilt with its wit and humor. Spelling champions from a fictional county find that winning (or losing) shouldn't account for one's worth in this Tony and Drama Desk Award winner for Best Book.

This isn't your typical musical with leads, supporting actors and chorus. Oh, no. This is an ensemble piece all the way. With music and lyrics by William Finn, book by Rachel Sheinkin and conceived by Rebecca Feldman, this comedy is, as the title states, the silver celebration of the county Bee that will crown one winner. An eclectic group of six socially awkward over-achieving middle schoolers gather in a school gymnasium to vie for the championship of their dreams. Some of these kids have been coached and prodded by parents and some just want to realize the fulfillment of their hard work. Throughout the night, the contestants reveal personal, hilarious and sometimes poignant stories about their home lives. Their idiosyncrasies and quirks are endearing and we secretly root for our favorite tween who may or may not walk off with the four-foot trophy.

The show is interactive in the broadest of ways. Audience members are pre-selected to participate in the zaniness by sitting onstage in the bleachers with the other actors/contestants. They take their turn to spell easy or sometimes impossible words. The dreaded ding of the bell signals that they have incorrectly spelled a word and are given the bum's rush with a juice box and a hearty handshake by a tough looking "Comfort Counselor" (Mitch Mahoney), whose participation in the Bee is part of his court-mandated community service duty.

The other two "adults" on the stage have great roles. Rona Lisa Peretti (Alexa Teebo), the moderator, is a former Bee winner who reminisces wistfully of her glory days. Ms. Teebo has a versatile and lovely voice that she shares in "My Favorite Moment of the Bee". In Act II, she plays the mother of one of the contestants.

Accompanying her at the official table is a last-minute replacement, Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Ian Federgreen), the official word pronouncer who gives additional information about each word to the contestants when he's asked. He's got a suspicious backstory that won't be revealed here. When it rears its ugly head, we are swept into his wonderfully wacky world.

Chip Tolentino (Sean Lynch-Littlejohn) is a hoot in his boy scout uniform complete with tight-fitting short shorts. Later, Mr. Lynch-Littlejohn gets a cameo as one-third of the Holy Trinity.

An unusual technique is employed by speller William Barfee (Zach Love) when he spells out the word in question with what he calls his "magic foot." He needs to see the word before he can say it, so he does some fancy footwork of a soft shoe/tap combination. His number "Magic Foot" is a showstopper. Mr. Love's interpretation of his character is perfect; William is slovenly dressed, wild

hair rules him and because he can only breathe out of one unclogged nostril, he wheezes. You gotta love this nerdy kid whose confidence is through the roof. After each time Mr. Panch tells William his answer is correct, he repeats under his breath, "Of course."

Likewise, Olive Ostrovsky (Patrina Caruana) writes the word on her arm to visualize it. Olive has one of the more serious backstories and handles the most poignant moments with panache in an otherwise quirky, over-

nally learns his self-worth when he surprises himself at his correct answers.

Marcy Parks (Mallory Ann Wu), decked out in a Catholic school uniform and saddle shoes, is perfect at everything. We're not sure if she has been Tiger Mom-ed into all of her achievements, but when she sings, "I Speak Six Languages," she realizes (with the help from a vision of Jesus Christ) that although she can accomplish anything she sets her mind to, including log carving, she realizes



SELF CONFIDENCE SHINES...Leaf Coneybear (played by Zach Mazouat) is elated when he spells his toughest word correctly at the Cranford Dramatic Club's comic hit *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Moderator of the Bee Rona Lisa Peretti (Alexa Teebo) and word pronouncer Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Ian Federgreen) are pictured, seated.

the-top show. In her "My Friend the Dictionary," Olive, an only child, confesses that the unabridged version she lugs everywhere with her is a comfort and constant companion since her mother is off in an ashram and her father is always working.

Rachel Valovcin plays the hilarious character Logainne Schwartzandgrubeniery with the requisite lisp and indignation. She's marvelous. In one of many mini flashbacks, we see she's been raised by her two gay fathers who constantly test her on every word imaginable.

The song "Pandemonium," is what literally breaks out with everyone undertaking all sorts of physical gyrations. It's a three-ring circus unfolding before our eyes. Upstage, there's a person swinging on a rope like Tarzan, while another person walks on his hands, and the physical turning of the school bleachers dizzies the audience members onstage who hang on for dear life. Kudos to Michelle Massa, whose inventive, energetic choreography has the actors dancing and hopping to the delight of the audience.

And then there's Leaf Coneybear (Zach Mazouat). Ah, Leaf. What a sweetie. He has almost a dozen siblings who have drummed into him that he's nothing. It's heart-wrenching when he sings "I'm not Smart" because we know that's been brow-beaten into him by his family. Throughout the night, though, he champions a winning smile and fi-

she can stop putting pressure on herself to excel.

Veteran Director Nevil Schwartz (who is married to Choreographer Massa) has assembled a top-notch cast and crew to provide a terrific night where both the actors and audience have a ball.

The music, directed by the talented John Brzozowski on keyboard, and backed by four other musicians, complement the vocals without overpowering. Bravo to sound designers Matthew DiFabio and Michaela Pietrinferno.

Producer Elizabeth Howard, Director Schwartz, Music Director Brzozowski, Choreographer Massa and Stage Manager Sarah Coddington certainly know how to put on an entertaining show. CDC's 101st season is on a roll. After their smash hits of *Chess* and *It's a Wonderful Life* and now with *Spelling Bee*, CDC is cranking out hit after hit. For tickets, go to cdctheatre.org. The show runs through Saturday, February 22.

BUY, SELL, RENT, HIRE:
goleader.com/form/classified

Putting the "fulfillment" in fulfillment center.

BE HERE NOW

by Deborah Zoe Lauffer

Nicole Callender as Patty Cooper
Laura Ekstrand as Bari
Clark Carmichael as Mike Cooper
Daria M. Sullivan as LuAnne Cooper

Directed by Harry Patrick Christian

Feb. 20 - Mar. 8, 2020
Tickets \$39 | Seniors \$34 | Students \$25
DreamcatcherRep.org | (800) 838-3006
Oakes Center • 120 Morris Ave., Summit, NJ 07901

Silent Film *Suds* with Trent Johnson On Organ at FUMC Friday

WESTFIELD — Just as in the early twentieth century, silent movies were all the rage when accompanied by the theater organ. Trent Johnson, well known organist and choral director, will be at the console of the Aeolian-Skinner organ along with the gallery organ to accompany the Mary Pickford film *Suds* (released January 27, 1920) on Friday, February 21, at 7:30 p.m. in the sanctuary of the Westfield First United Methodist Church (FUMC), located at One East Broad Street. Donations at the door will be \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. The church and sanctuary are handicap and wheelchair accessible with parking available from Ferris Place off Prospect Street.

Mr. Johnson is the music director of the Oratorio Singers of Westfield and is the organist and assistant director of music at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. He is also a staff organist at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, where he plays for the annual Christmas Spectacular Show. As a concert organist, he has performed in venues throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. He has also composed and conducted new works and cantatas for chorus, orchestra and organ, which were premiered by the Oratorio Singers. These include *The Story of Martin Luther* (2018), *The Wisdom of Solomon* (2016) and *Saint Augustine* (2014). Mr. Johnson has also conducted works of many great composers such as J. S. Bach, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Bernstein, Mozart and Verdi.

In the movie *Suds*, Ms. Pickford recreates her ugly-duckling drudge from *Stella Maris* (1918) in this bright comedy co-starring Charles Chaplin and stock company regular Albert Austin. She is Amanda Afflick, the least appreciated employer in Madame Didier's (Rose Dione) French Hand Wash establishment. Even lower on



LIVE MUSIC, SILENT FILM...Trent Johnson is pictured at the organ of Newark's Basilica of the Sacred Heart. Mr. Johnson, well-known organist and choral director, will be at the console of the Aeolian-Skinner organ along with the gallery organ in the sanctuary of the Westfield First United Methodist Church to accompany the silent film *Suds* on Friday, February 21, at 7:30 p.m.

the totem pole is Lavender, the laundry's old nag, who Amanda manages to save from the glue factory with her entire weekly salary. A daydreamer, Amanda is much taken with one of her customers, Horace Greensmith, Esquire, whom, in her imagination, she turns into a knight in shining armor. The real Horace (Austin) is nothing of the sort, of course, but he does agree to pretend to be Amanda's fiancé for a day in order to impress her co-workers. Too ashamed of her appearance to take her to Hampstead Heath, he instead suggests the more secluded Epping Forest. But even a Cockney waif like Amanda has her pride. She spends the bank holiday instead with Benjamin (Harold Lockwood), the laundry's upstanding delivery boy.

Suds was based on a 1905 one-act play that had starred the legendary Maude Adams, Broadway's original Peter Pan.

Past organ/movie presentations by Mr. Johnson include "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "The Phantom of the Opera," "Safety Last" with Harold Lloyd, "Sunrise-A Song of Two Humans" and "The General" with Buster Keaton.

Proceeds from this event will benefit the Oratorio Singers of Westfield, which will present its 40th anniversary concert with orchestra and chorus at 3 p.m. on Sunday, March 29, in the FUMC sanctuary. Featured will be Josef Haydn's own English version of "The Creation." In honor of the occasion, Maestro Johnson has composed a new work, *Hallelujah!* for chorus and instrumental ensemble.

Premiere Stages at Kean Expands Bauer Boucher Award in 2020

UNION — Premiere Stages, the professional theatre company in residence at Kean University, has expanded the Bauer Boucher Award to offer two awards — one to a budding student playwright and one to an emerging alumni playwright. The expansion of the award is made possible as part of a major five-year sustaining gift from longtime Premiere Stages donors W. John Bauer and Nancy Boucher. In addition to a cash prize of \$1,000 or \$2,000, the 2020 winners also received a professional public reading of their play as performed by professional equity actors, followed by a Q&A with the playwright, audience, and the producing artistic director of Premiere Stages, John J. Wooten, who directed both readings.

The 2020 student winner is Emily Niemeyer, who received the \$1,000



STUDENT...John J. Wooten presents Emily Niemeyer with the Bauer Boucher Student Playwriting Award.

award for her play *Appointment at Three*. Based on a true story, *Appointment at Three* explores two families from different backgrounds, brought together by their fight against cancer. Emily describes the play as a "story about family, hardship, and the shared humanity that helps us persevere." The play received a professional reading by Premiere Stages at Kean University on January 21 that was attended by a large number of Emily's fellow students and patrons of Premiere Stages. The cast included: Dana Benningfield, Yeauxlanda Kay,

Nayale Quimis and Gareth Tidball.

Ms. Niemeyer is a Kean University student pursuing a dual degree in Theatre and Music. She has both acted and worked behind the scenes in theatre companies such as The Theatre Project, Dragonfly Multicultural Arts Center, Country Gate Playhouse, and Oldwick Community Players, as well as with the Kean University Theatre Conservatory. *Appointment at Three* started as a project for a playwriting class, and was inspired by Emily's own experiences with her mother's lost battle with ovarian cancer.

Emily Conklin, the winner of the \$2,000 alumni award, received a professional reading of her play *Fight Like a Girl* by Premiere Stages on January 23 at Lantern Hill in New Providence. Based on the life of Julie d'Aubigny, the play explores the adventures of the seventeenth-century female sword fighter as she struggles with love, loss, and finding her place in the world. *Fight Like a Girl* asks: how do we make our lives worth remembering? The role of Julie was played by Equity actress Sarah Cuneo, who was supported by a professional cast that included Tony Mowatt, Landon Woodson, Lauriel Friedman, Mason Hensley and Rene Mayo. The morning after the reading, Emily stated, "It was so incredible hearing my play read by such talented actors and to a packed room! I have so many ideas after last night of what I want to do with the next draft of this play and have already starting making edits!"

Other plays Emily Conklin has written include *Onyx Falling*, which

received the Bauer-Boucher Award in 2016, and *Flash, Float, Fall*, which premiered at the New Jersey Fringe Festival and had performances at Kean University, and *Walking on Glass*, which premiered at Reading Theatre Project's Fairy Tale Fringe Festival. Emily graduated from Kean University with a BFA in Theatre Performance and spent time studying at the Moscow Art Theatre.

"We are so pleased to be able to expand the project to offer two awards in 2020," stated Mr. Wooten. "John and Nancy's incredible generosity affords Kean affiliated dramatists en-



ALUMNI...Alumni Playwriting Award winner Emily Conklin with donors John Bauer and Nancy Boucher.

hanced visibility, dramaturgical feedback, access to professional artists, and financial recognition of their plays. It is extremely rewarding to see the work of these talented writers come to life as they develop their voices and establish themselves as playwrights."

Mostly Music

Presents

Haydn, Trio for Strings in G Major
Kodály, Intermezzo for String Trio
Beethoven, Trio in G Major for Strings
Penderecki, Trio for Strings
Dohnányi, Serenade for Strings in C Major

Featuring

Arnaud Sussmann Violin
Paul Neubauer Viola
Nicholas Canellakis Cello

Sunday, March 1, 2020, at 3:30
Temple Emanu-El, 756 East Broad Street, Westfield, NJ

Tickets: \$40, students under 21 free
Mostlymusic.org
Mostlymusicnj@gmail.com
908-789-8578

Follow Us
On Instagram
[@westfieldleader](https://www.instagram.com/westfieldleader)

LEADER/TIMES
CLASSIFIED ADS PAY

Coming This May
Our 48th
Annual Edition
This Is Westfield
To reserve your space
Contact Jeff Gruman,
Sales Manager
908-232-4407
sales@goleader.com