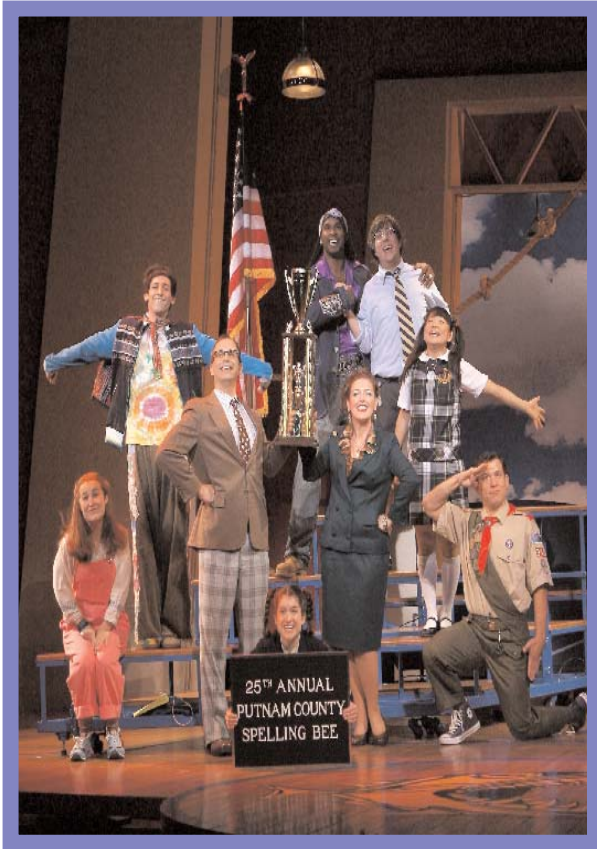




# Educational Study Guide



THEATRE UNDER THE STARS  
800 BAGBY, SUITE 200  
HOUSTON, TEXAS 77002

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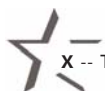
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*The 25th Annual Putnam  
County Spelling Bee  
Educational Study Guide*

Theatre Under The Stars  
Houston, Texas

**Written By:**  
Shay Thornton



# SECTION ONE

## Introduction



### History of Theatre Under The Stars

Founded in 1968, Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS, <http://www.tuts.com>) is currently under the direction of President and CEO John C. Breckenridge. TUTS was the first theatrical organization in Houston to perform free to the public in 1968 at Miller Outdoor Theatre in Hermann Park, and is the only Houston arts organization that has performed there free to the public every year since the building opened. Since its founding by Frank M. Young, TUTS has produced more than 275 musicals including many local, national and world premieres and is currently represented on Broadway with *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*. TUTS is also noted for mounting many International tours, including Debbie Reynolds in *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, Juliet Prowse in *Mame*, Robert Goulet in *Man of La Mancha* and the Tony Award-winning revival of *Carousel*.

As a way to continue the tradition of musical theatre, TUTS' Humphreys School of Musical provides instruction and stage experience for more than 1,700 students annually. Since 1972, Theatre Under The Stars' Humphreys School of Musical Theatre has provided a superb and thrilling forum for musical theatre training for children and adults. Housed at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, The Academy and The Studio at TUTS allow students to flourish in a year-round schedule of classes. Conducted by an outstanding professional faculty and renowned resident artists who inspire and train students in every aspect of musical theatre, TUTS' Humphreys School of Musical Theatre offers everything from vocal technique and choreography to costume design and prop construction. Specifically designed for the career-track student, The Academy offers Intermediate and Advanced Studies in Tap, Ballet/Jazz, Voice and Theory, Acting, Musical Theatre Workshop, and Directing. The Academy at TUTS gives students numerous opportunities to put their training to work in performance, with a final showcase at the end of each semester. Open to babies, teens, and the young at heart, The Studio offers a variety of classes for those on a non-audition basis. The Studio at TUTS is an exciting program for learning and fun that includes early morning and evening classes, Saturday workshops and summer and winter camps. TUTS also annually presents the Tommy Tune Awards, honoring the best and brightest in Houston's high school musical theatre programs.

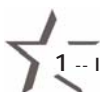
### Purpose of Study Guides

TUTS has designed online study guides such as this one to enhance students' theatrical experiences. Using the guide, teachers can encourage their students to explore both the story and the production elements of the show. Live theater can enrich young peoples' lives like few other experiences. The study guides contain various discussion questions, projects, and activities that allow students to engage in literary analysis, historical research, and personal reflection. TUTS' hope is that these young people will be able to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for musical theatre.

" No child is fully educated or adequately prepared to live in an increasingly technological world without understanding the meaning and beauty transmitted by the arts."

J.P. Getty Trust

*Beyond Creating a Place for Art in America's School, 1985*



# SECTION TWO

## Musical Theatre 101



### What is Musical Theatre?

Musical theatre establishes as the only genre of theatre that fully encompasses acting, singing, and dancing all to further the development of the plot. This differs from traditional theatre because the plot is enhanced by the addition of singing and dancing not just supplemented like it is in 'straight' plays. To better understand musical theatre as a whole, and audience member must understand the importance of these three elements. A cast member in musical theatre, who is talented at acting, singing, and dancing, is called a triple threat because they have mastered those three areas. Watching musical theatre, one must be careful to try to appreciate everything occurring on stage so they can understand what the director tried to do with the show.

### History of Musical Theatre

Musical theatre's history stretches far beyond the limits one might assume. In fact, evidence suggest elements of this art form were used over 2500 years ago! During the 5th century B.C.E. most plays in Greece were set up with one to three actors and a chorus that responded to what the characters did. Both the actors and the chorus sang lyrics throughout the play. The actors incorporated not only the dialogue and song, but dance in their parts as well. Grecian theatre can be divided into three main genres that all employ music and dance. Tragedy required a slow and graceful dance called the emmeleia, comedy used a more fast paced danced known as the kordax, and satyr plays (used for poking fun at a belief of the time) used a dance called the sikinnis that mocked tragedy's dance. Although, this all probably seems far-fetched for most, Grecian humor transcends time and elements of it are used still today! For example, did you think the crude body jokes and off-color humor used in sit-coms developed in ancient Greece? If not, think again. Tons of the guttural humor we laugh at today has been used for thousands of years. Although humor has remained the same over the years, most everything else concerning musical theatre has changed.

After the Greeks were taken over by the Romans during the Peloponnesian War, the popularity of theatre declined. The Romans, known for their military genius and stoic nature, didn't care much for theatre. The Middle Ages were not a particularly bright time for theatre, either. Performers often went from city to city performing for whomever, wherever. However, they were not always well received. A good example of this is the misconception at one time that these performers brought the plague with them, and no one would allow them admittance into the city gates. Musical theatre still managed to advance in this time period through the church. Although the history between the Roman Catholic Church and theatre is touchy at best, the Church used theatre to transmit it's messages to the illiterate masses. Most people did not know Latin, the official language of the Church, so clever monks started adding music and art to spread their faith. This went even further when cycle plays developed. A cycle play is a biblical story that has been chopped up and divided between different groups. Each group would have a pageant wagon (a stage on wheels) and they would move about the city depicting biblical stories. Once one group was done the next part of the story would start. This caused religion not only to be widespread, but also entertaining. The cycle plays helped increase the popularity of theatre, which would soon skyrocket.

The Renaissance, which in French literally means "rebirth", reawakened the public to the arts. Throughout Europe technological, literary, and stylistic advances were occurring to appease the audience of the day. One of the most famous playwrights of all time, Moliere, shows this. King Louis XV demanded a further reaching entertainment, and called on Moliere to reformat his plays to do this. Moliere added music and dance to his shows making his farcical style, song, and dance appease the king's taste during the 1600s. This style grew and by the 1700s there were two main divisions of it: the ballad opera and comic opera. The ballad opera used popular songs of the day with new lyrics, while the comic operas had original scores and a more romantic plot development. Both these styles flourished, and the idea of incorporating music into plays grew and grew. The birth of the musical as we know it did not occur until 1866 in New York City. A theatre manager and producer, William Wheatley, was worried about his upcoming show, which he described as a boring melodrama. Looking for something to add excitement (and sell tickets) Wheatley jumped when he noticed the Academy of Music burnt down in a fire leaving their performers jobless. Wheatley and the collaborators at the Academy of Music joined together to mix the play Wheatley was producing and the ballet dancers that were scheduled to perform at the Academy. Combining the two together in a performance called The Black Crook, audiences were astounded at the integration of music, dance, and theatre making the popularity of this art form boom.

In the 1920's musical theatre faced its first big test. Film had just begun and was already starting to gain popularity. What was theatre going to do with this medium stealing their audience? They kept seats filled by retaliating with emphasizing theatre's stars, bigger dance routines, and adding in popular songs to all increasing the spectacle of the performances. This, however, caused the budget to increase and when the Great Depression hit in 1929 very few could afford the theatre.



## History of Musical Theatre? (cont.)

The theatre lived on, however, and in the 1940's the Golden Age of musical theatre began with Rodger and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* This is the first piece to really incorporate dance into the plot line of the musical- which happened almost by accident. The Theatre Guild, a controlling producing agency, went bankrupt so Rodgers and Hammerstein received full artistic control. The pair took many chances including hiring the modern dance choreography, Agnes DeMille. Since the characters were cowboys and farm girls, the idea of them expressing their emotions solely through words seemed awkward. Choreographer, Agnes DeMill, used everyday motions to express their ideas including butter churning- not traditional showgirl dancing. Opening night proved the musical a success and is now thought of as the quintessential musical theatre piece.

Musicals still continued to evolve. After the success of *Hair* (1968), the 1970's continued to use rock influence music in their production. One example *Grease* became so famous that it has turned into a classic movie. Also the 1970's started an increase in the appearance of African American issues and themes. Both *Dreamgirls* and *The Wiz* are known for their reflecting of the changing social climate where diversity became more and more accepted. The 1980's and 1990's brought along the rise of the "mega musicals". These incorporated larger casts, pop influenced scores, and an increase in the value upon special effects. Audiences were wowed with *Phantom of the Opera*'s falling chandelier in 1986. The increase in spectacle had many implications, however. Now it has become impossible for a single individuals to fund shows, so more and more corporations got involved. The increased cost also meant that ticket prices would be raised. The price increase changed the status of theatre to a more upper class activity. Jonathon Larson's *Rent* tried to change this when he added heavily stylized rock music and a young cast. The 21st century has brought on a combination of many revivals and new styles to musical theatre. The revivals of shows provide almost a guarantee to producers that people will support the show, but new shows stretch the limits of theatre. *Avenue Q* is a new production where adult themed material is performed with puppets. Overall, musical theatre has had an interesting past, but the future seems just as unique.

## How to make a Musical in 10 steps?

- 1) Pick the **PERFECT** musical! Some of the things to consider are: if audiences will like it, how much it costs, and if you can secure the rights to do the show. Sometimes you can't secure the rights to a musical if the licensing company thinks too many people are performing it in an area or if it is on Broadway.
- 2) Plan a **BUDGET!** Understanding how much you can spend on salaries, sets, costumes, musicians- while still paying bills to rent the theatre, pay the box office workers, and general upkeep is crucial to putting your musical up.
- 3) Secure the **CREATIVE** team! This goes beyond just the director (although they are important too), a musical needs a choreographer, music director, conductor, set designer, prop master... (the list goes on and on)!
- 4) Have a **PRODUCTION** meeting with the creative team! During these meetings the overall concept of the show should be discussed. This includes everything from the set design to the tiniest detail on a costume.
- 5) Actors **AUDITION!** This exciting process takes place in Houston, New York, and Los Angeles. After the initial auditions callbacks are scheduled to let the director see people audition again. At callbacks, actors usually prepare a song or scene from the show.
- 6) **CAST** the show! During this step discussions with actor's agents agree (or sometimes don't agree) on how much the performers will be paid.
- 7) Start **REHEARSALS!** Once everyone is situated in Houston, rehearsals start for the performance. This is when actors learn their blocking, songs, and dance. Rehearsals can sometimes last as short as 2 weeks before a show opens.
- 8) **PREPARE** all costumes, props, sets, and lights. This takes weeks of work on the production team's effort so that all the little details are taken care of.
- 9) Have a **TECH** rehearsal! During this step it is important to have patience because trying to get the lights, sound, and cues perfect is a very hard job. This usually happens during one of the last rehearsals.
- 10) Go on for a fabulous **OPENING** night! Your nerves might be high, however, all your work won't be lost because the cast and crew are so well prepared!



# Elements of Production

A musical is much more than the two and a half hour show the audience sees. The production process often takes many months, even years, to complete.

## Librettist

No musical would be possible without the imagination or inspiration of its authors. Over one third of the musicals on Broadway come from an existing book, play, article, or movie. Other times, authors write musicals from an original idea or concept. The **librettist** is the book writer- the person that writes the script for a musical. Just to show the importance of a strong script, most musicals with a strong score, but bad libretto will fail, while shows with an average score and strong script could succeed.

## Composer/ Lyricist

A musical isn't complete without music so a **composer** and **lyricist** will do this job. Composers and lyricists begin to write the songs that fit the overall tone of the musical, but also carry the plot along so the audience can better understand the show. The composer writes the music, while the lyricist writes words to go along. Sometimes the same person will do both tasks. There have also been a few people who have been successful as a composer, librettist, and lyricist. This select group includes George M. Cohan, Noel Coward, Meredith Wilson, and Jonathan Larson.

## Producer

**Producers** are a rather unknown field of theatre occupations. In the past, a show would only have one producer who had a tremendous impact on the creative direction of the show. Many shows started because a single producer had an idea for a musical and wanted to make it come to life. Now that musicals have become big business, however, it is often impossible for a single producer to put up a show. Now Broadway shows have a dozen or so producers making it hard for them to exercise creative control.

## INVESTOR

**Investors** traditionally would give a few thousand dollars in return for tickets and possibly money back from their investment if the show was a hit. This is no longer the case, however, because of the high price of producing a Broadway show. Now investors contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars with little chance that any of that money coming back. What is the point then? Most investors enjoy being in "show business" and they usually get great seats to see shows!

## Director

The **director** is the person who stages the show to make it come to life for the audience. In the past directors were merely puppets doing what the producer envisioned, but since the 1950s they have taken basically full control. A director has to work with the cast on singing, acting, and dancing to tell a cohesive story for the audience. The director will help each actor understand their motivation for the show, block the action, and oversee how everything comes together. The director is the "top dog" in most shows that everyone answers to. They are in control of the overall artistic vision of the show.

## Choreographer

A **choreographer** designs dance sequences for the performers to follow the director's vision. The dances are intricate movements that allow the performers to express the meaning of each song. Through the choreography, the audience should understand what the characters are feeling. The choreographer used to be called the dance director, but changed when ballet choreographers started working on musicals. This person usually spends a large amount of time rehearsing all the dances with the cast.

## Casting Director

A **casting director** has the hard of job of finding the perfect person to play each role of a production. They need to stay up to date on the ever-changing talent and be ready to set up an audition for major and minor roles at any moment. Casting directors usually work as free agents for a variety of producers, but in some cases top producers have their very own casting directors.

## Dance Captain

A **dance captain** has to be one of the most skilled dancers in the cast who can learn quickly and help teach. In big productions on Broadway, national tours, or major regional productions most choreographers are not going to be available to be on hand for every performance in case a cast member forgets a step. This is where a dance captain helps. They make sure everyone stays sharp on their dances and are there to teach any forgotten moves.

## Music Director

The **music director** is in control of basically all the music in the show. They help the cast learn the music, and then they are giving the task of helping the actors pace the music. The music director can sometimes conduct the orchestra as well, which comes in handy because they know the music of the show do well. They usually hire the orchestra members as well.



# Designer

Whatever you see onstage probably did not come off a store rack, so costuming is very important! A **costume designer** has to design how the costumes should look so that they are historically correct, and build them in a way that they can stand the rough day to day wears & washings

A **sound director** has the complex job of making everything heard! Since most of the characters onstage have a microphone on, the sound designer needs to watch how loud that each mic gets. This job used to not even be listed in the playbill, but with the rise of technology, it is now a crucial part of theatre.

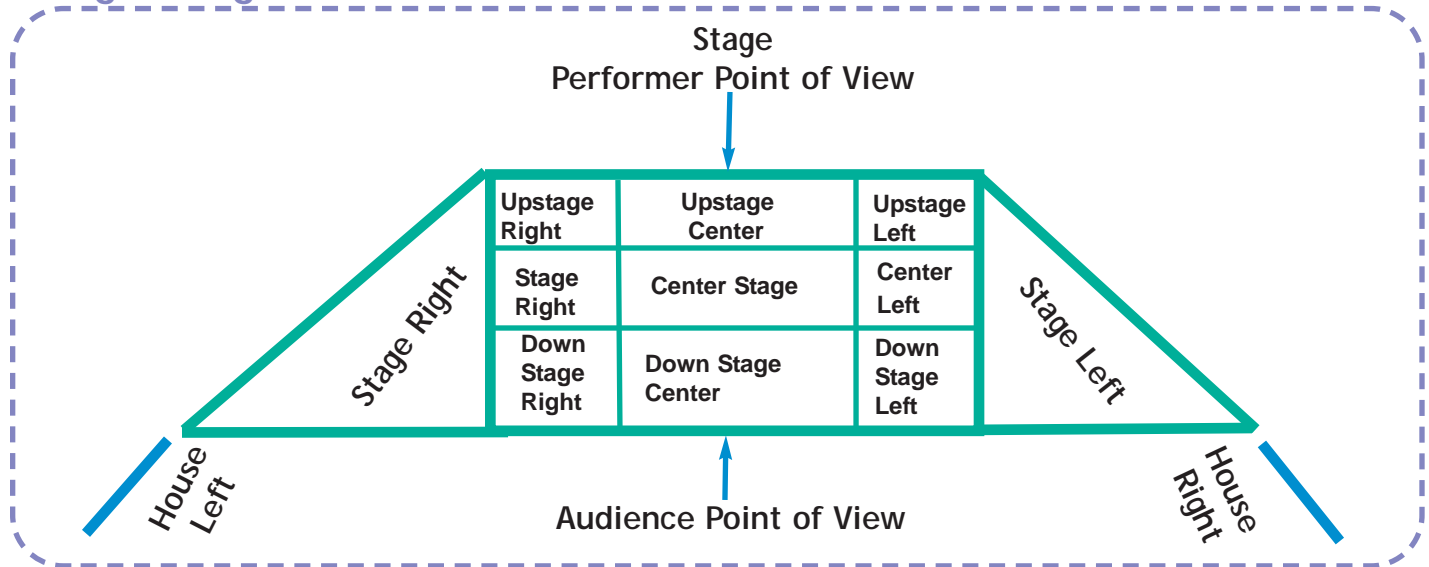
How would a show look if you couldn't see it? Probably not very good! A **lighting designer's** job is the task of making everything that needs to be shown visible to the audience, while also setting the tone and mood with the lighting design. A lighting designer also has to be aware of the actors movements so they don't step out of the light.

The **set designer** plays an important role in the audience being able to be taken to the place of the action during the play. They are responsible to design how the set should look, and what materials will be used to build it. Sometimes the set designer will double as the scenic painter, and paint the set pieces as well!

# Stage Manager

The **stage manager** is usually the unsung hero of a production. They are in control of making sure all the elements of a show come together during each and every performance. They are in control of "calling the show" meaning they cue all the technical actions of the show. The SM is in full command of the backstage area, and once the show opens receive full control from the director. The stage manager's script or "bible" has every single cue marked for the whole show, so that the action can continue onstage trouble-free. The stage manager usually has a team of assistants that can be anywhere doing whatever is needed.

# Stage Diagram

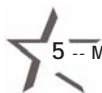


# Why is Musical Theatre Important?

Musical theatre is unlike any other medium of entertainment, which makes it important. Any live theatrical experience not only involves the actors on stage, it also involves the audience in ways that film and television do not. There is no barrier between the performers and the audience like in film or television. Each performance allows each of us to become our own editors because we can choose to watch whatever part of the stage we want to. The wonders of movies and television are remarkable, but often provide an isolated experience. Being part of the communal magic when performer and audience connect at the theater cannot be duplicated. How the audience reacts to the show deeply affects the actors. Something seemingly trivial like whispering or unwrapping a piece of candy can distract the actors and alter the mood and tone of their performance.

Musical theatre can help students grow academically, aesthetically and personally. Musical theatre writers, lyricists, and composers have long looked to literature for their inspiration and subject material. As a result, students have the opportunity to engage in literary analysis of both the story and its inspiration. Elementary students can begin to explore plot and characters, while junior high and high school students can delve into theme, symbolism, and historical context.

Students will also have the opportunity to discover how music, dance, lighting, backdrops, etc. contribute to the show. Musical theatre allows young people to explore the elements of production beyond television and film, and gain a greater appreciation for the arts.



# Glossary of Terms

**Author** - the writer of a musical script also called the book

**Audition** - to perform in order to get a role in the production; usually includes singing, dancing, and reading scenes from the show

**Ballad** - a slow, romantic song for actors to showcase vocal clarity

**Blocking** - the specific movements of actors on stage

**Box** - a separate compartment of seats usually elevated on the sides of the theater, for the accommodation of VIP's

**Box Office** - a booth inside the theater where tickets are sold  
**"Calling the Show"** - the process of calling out the lighting, sound, and scene-change cues during a performance usually done by the stage manager

**Casting**  - the process through which actors are chosen for roles in the production

**Casting Agent** - one who chooses actors for roles in the production

**Child Wrangler** - one who works with child performers

**Choreographer** - one who designs dance sequences

**Composer** - one who writes music

**Conductor** - one who directs the orchestra

**Dance Captain** - one who teaches and rehearses dance sequences with the performers

**Director** - one who supervises the creative aspects and guides the artistic vision of the production

**Dress Rehearsal** - rehearsal in which performers practice with costumes and props

**Dresser** - one who assists performers with their costumes during dress rehearsals and shows

**Electrician** - one who works with the lighting designer to adjust and operate lighting instruments

**Emmeleia** - a dance for the Grecian tragedies that was slow and graceful

**Ensemble / Chorus** - a group of singers, dancers, or actors who perform musical numbers

**Flyman** - one who pulls the curtain before and after performances and operates the flying system, if one is used

**Gallery** - the section of seats in a theater farthest away from the stage; separated into front gallery and rear gallery

**Head Carpenter** - one who builds the sets for the production

**Headshot** - a photograph of an actor from the shoulders up and lists his or her credits on the back

**House Left** - the left side of the theater, when facing the stage (audience's point of view)

**House Manager** - one who oversees all aspects of the audience; responsible for ushers and audience safety

**House Right** - the right side of the theater, when facing the stage (audience's point of view)

**Kordax** - a dance for Grecian comedies that was up beat

**Lighting Designer** - one who decides where the lighting instruments should go, how they should be colored, and which ones should be on at any particular time to affect mood, visibility, and to showcase costumes and sets

**Lyricist** - one who writes the words to a song

**Makeup Artist** - one who applies cosmetics to a performer's face and body

**Marquee** - a signboard projecting over the theater's entrance

**Mezzanine** - the middle section of seats in a theater between the orchestra and the gallery; separated into front mezzanine and rear mezzanine

**Music Director** - one who teaches and rehearses the music with the orchestra

**Orchestra** - the section of seats in a theater immediately behind where the orchestra sits

**Principal Performers** - the leading actors, those who portray the major roles

**Program** - a listing of the order of events, names of the cast and crew, and other relevant information for the production

**Property (Props) Master** - one who manages all items used on stage that cannot be classified as scenery, electrics or wardrobe

**Read-through** - the cast reads through the script without movement or music

**Rehearsal Pianist** - one who plays the piano for early-stage rehearsals

**Set Designer** - one who creates the scenery for the stage

**Sikinnis** - a dance for the Grecian satyr plays that mocked tragedy

**Sitzprobe** - the first rehearsal with both the performers and the orchestra, with no staging or dancing

**Sound Designer** - one who plans and executes the layout of all sound playback and equipment for the show

**Sound Operator** - one who handles the sound playback and mixing equipment for the show; works with the sound designer

**Sound Board** - a desk comprising a number of input channels where each sound source is provided with its own control channel through which sound signals are routed into two or more outputs; changes the quality of the sound

**Sound Effects Designer** - one who creates or enhances sounds that are not part of the music or dialogue

**Standby / Understudy** - one who studies a role and is prepared to substitute the principal performer when needed

**Stage Left** - the left side of the stage, when facing the audience (performer's point of view)

**Stage Manager** - one who is responsible for the quality of the show's production, assists the director and oversees the show at each performance

**Stage Right** - the right side of the stage, when facing the audience (performer's point of view)

**Swings** - one who is prepared to substitute for ensemble or chorus members who are unable to perform

**Tailor** - one who alters garments to fit a person's specific measurements

**Technical Rehearsal** - rehearsal incorporating the technical elements of a show, such as the scene and property shifts, lighting, sound, and special effects

**Uptempo Song** - a fast, upbeat song for actors to showcase dancing and acting ability

**Usher** - one who guides audience members to their seats

**Wanderprobe** - rehearsal in which the performers practice singing and dancing on stage while the orchestra plays

**Wig Master / Mistress** - one who obtains and customizes wigs for performers to wear



Use the following page about proper theatre etiquette during performances to copy and print out handouts for your students or cut along the dotted lines to make reminder cards for students to keep with them throughout the show.

## Going to the Theatre!

*Some basic theatre etiquette tips:*

1. Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum during the performance. Singing and swaying with the music or leaning forward in your seat blocks the view of those sitting behind you.
2. Do not eat and drink during the performance. It is distracting to both the performers and your neighbors.
3. Keep feet on the floor, not on the seat or balcony in front of you.
4. Clap after the songs to show the performers that you are enjoying the show. Also keep in mind that performers appreciate enthusiastic applause, but not whistling or shouting.
5. Appropriate laughter, tears, and applause are the best ways to express your feelings about the performance.
6. Stay until the end of the show and clap during the curtain call to say "thank you" to the performers.
7. No electronic devices should be brought into the theatre, and please silence all cell phones, pagers and watches.

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# How About Trivia?

Do you know Roman actors wore the first tap shoes?

They would attach pieces of metal called *scabillas*, to the bottoms of their shoes so audiences would be able to hear the performers feet!

Did you know it used to be okay to talk in theatres!

Before the introduction of electric lighting, the goal of theatre was to be seen, not necessarily to be heard. Audience members would talk through performances and sometimes even correct the actors if they messed up! Now it would be very rude to disrupt a performance by talking, so be warned!

Not until Duke of Saxe-Meiningen Georg wanted historical accuracy in plays did theatre start providing costumes. Take a look back at Shakespearean plays where the actors wore doublets and tunics (clothing of the time) during shows set in ancient Greece.

Did you know actors used to "buy the audience"?

Actors hired a *claque*, a group of people paid to applaud an actor, to gain fame. Although this isn't in theatre anymore, it is still rumored to exist in opera.

Do you know how old lip-syncing is?

In ancient Rome, popular actors like Livius Andronicus, would have someone speak their words while they did the movements if they were sick.

Did you know actors were supposed to supply their own costumes for hundreds of years?

Do you know what the proscenium arch (the picture frame archway built around the stage) is named after?

Do you know how ancient actors got into character?

Do you know how old the traditions of spotlights in theatre have been used for?

Back in medieval times, when electricity hadn't been invented, stage hands would polish basins to reflect sunlight back in a beam on lead actors. This helped focus the audience's attention on what the director wanted the focus to be.

A *skene* was a building in Greek theatre that provided the backdrop which the actors performed in front of. Add the prefix "pro" meaning before and the term literally means before the *skene* or in front of the backdrop.

Actors are known for trying to experience the character they are portraying. The Greek actor Polus, while playing the part of Electra, in Sophocles' *Electra*, carried an urn of his own dead son's ashes to represent the late brother his character was mourning.



## Review Questions

The following questions are intended to help students learn the basics of musical theatre. These may be used for class discussion or given as homework and written assignments.

### Checking for Understanding

1. What is the definition of musical theatre?
2. Where is humor from ancient Greece still found today?
3. How did the Roman Catholic Church help theatre?
4. Who formulated the musical as we know it today?
5. What was the problem facing musical theatre in the 1920's?
6. What was the first musical to incorporate story telling in dance?
7. How can you be your own editor in theatre?
8. What does a choreographer do?
9. Draw a diagram noting upstage, downstage, stage left, and stage right. Can you further divide it?
10. What are four major theatre etiquette tips?

### Critical Thinking

1. Do you think theatre from another time period would interest us today? Why or why not? Give an example.
2. What about musical theatre seems the most interesting? If you could choose one job to be in musical theatre, what would it be and why?
3. Do you think since spectacle is so important in musicals now it will stay that way forever? What technology might have encouraged this?
4. What step do you think is the most important in making a musical? The most challenging? The most fun?
5. What do you hope to gain from experiencing musical theatre?
6. What theatre element seems the most important? Do you think your neighbor would feel the same?
7. How can audiences influence performers since there is a new audience every night?
8. If you were to teach a child how to behave at the theater, what would you tell them?

#### I N S P I R A T I O N

**OBJECTIVE:** To learn how historical context has affected and inspired musical theatre, and develop research and public speaking skills

**ACTIVITY:** Have students choose a musical to research and then create a presentation of how the show reflects the times in which it was created, including historical figures and relevant social or political issues. Encourage students to watch videos of the show, study song lyrics, and research the time period in which the musical was written. *Suggested Shows: Oklahoma, West Side Story, Bye Bye Birdie, Sound of Music, Annie, Peter Pan, Ragtime*

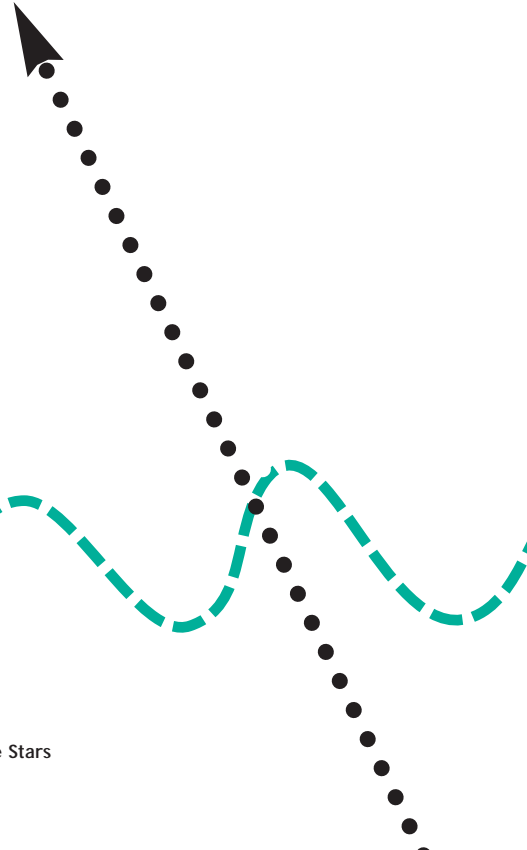
#### D E B A T E

**OBJECTIVE:** To learn the differences between various media, develop public speaking and verbal expression skills, and encourage self-expression

**ACTIVITY:** Divide the class into three groups and have each group choose a form of media (ex. television, newspapers, or theatre). Then have the groups debate on which medium is the best. Make sure students support their claims with specific benefits and limitations of each medium. Have opening remarks be done as a skit showing the same story done in each medium. Students should leave understanding the differences in each storytelling medium.



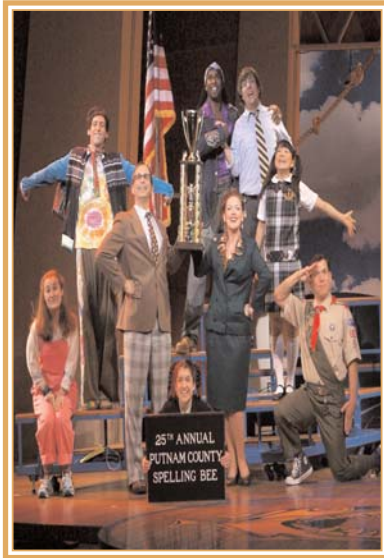
# Synopsis



# Section Three

## About the Show

### Show Background



*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* explores six over-achieving spellers as they battle for the championship of the local spelling competition. This Tony Award-winning show is structured as an actual spelling bee in real time, where four volunteer spellers from the audience are invited to interact with the characters on stage as participants in the bee - incorporating a fundamental element of improvisation throughout the show. No two performances are ever exactly alike. So as not to reveal who actually wins the championship, we are including an abbreviated full show synopsis here. Enjoy the suspense as the competition unfolds...root for your favorite character...brush up on your spelling...and see for yourself how six endearing "spelling geeks" make use of their individuality, talents and strengths to each become winners of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.

### The Creative Team

#### William Finn

##### COMPOSER/LYRICIST

WILLIAM FINN (Composer/Lyricist) is the writer/composer of *Falsettos* (two Tony Awards: Best Book of a Musical [with James Lapine] and Best Original Score). He has written/composed *In Trousers* (L.A. Drama Critics Award), *March of the Falsettos* (Outer Critics Circle Award for outstanding Musical, L.A. Drama Critics Award), *Falsettoland* (two Drama Desk Awards and Lucille Lortel Award for Best Musical), *Romance in Hard Times* (Public Theater), *A New Brain* (Lincoln Center/Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical) and *Elegies: A Song Cycle* (Lincoln Center). He graduated from Williams College, where he was awarded the Hutchinson Fellowship in Musical Composition, and currently teaches a weekly master class at NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program.

#### Rachel Sheinkin

##### BOOK WRITER

Recent productions include *Striking 12*, a hybrid concert/play written in collaboration with the rock band GrooveLily and director Ted Sperling (Prince Music Theater, Philadelphia; Old Globe, San Diego; TheatreWorks, Palo Alto); book and lyrics for *Blood Drive* (music by Joel Derfner, Eugene O'Neill NMT Conference; Bridewell Theatre, London); and book and lyrics for *Serenade* (music by Nils Olaf Dolven). She is an adjunct faculty member at NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program.

#### James Lapine

##### DIRECTOR

JAMES LAPINE has worked in one capacity or another with William Finn on *March of the Falsettos*, *Falsettoland*, *A New Brain*, *A Winter's Tale* and the yet-to-be-produced but beloved *Muscle and The Royal Family of Broadway*. Other Broadway credits: *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, *Passion*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Golden Child*, *Dirty Blonde*, and *Amour*. Off-Broadway: *Table Settings*, *Twelve Dreams*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Luck*, *Pluck and Virtue*, and *Modern Orthodox*. Film: *Impromptu*, *Life with Mikey*, and *Earthly Possessions*.

#### Rebecca Feldman

##### CONCEIVER

REBECCA FELDMAN conceived, directed and performed in *C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E*, the play upon which *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* is based, with her company The Farm. She worked on the development of *...Spelling Bee* and directed the original production at Barrington Stage Company in the summer of 2004. She has directed and performed in New York and regionally for the past ten years including New York Fringe Festival (Best of Fringe '98), Soho Rep, HERE, Atlantic Theater Studios, Adobe Theatre, New Dramatists, Mabou Mines, Present Company Theatorium and other downtown venues.



## Production History

No one can predict where a musical comes from. Classic novels and popular movies have been sources, and real life experiences have found themselves musicalized - but a Spelling Bee? Well, why not?

For Bill Finn, it began with a phone call from his friend, playwright Wendy Wasserstein, whose weekend nanny had been appearing in a comedy troupe called The Farm on the Lower East Side. An improvised piece that the group performed, entitled *C-R-E-P-U-S-C-UL-E*, seemed to her to be the perfect germ for a musical comedy. After watching a videotape of it, Finn agreed. With the enlistment of Rachel Sheinkin, they set about developing the piece, originally conceived by Rebecca Feldman, into a full-length fully developed show.

In February of 2004, Finn arranged for a workshop production at the Barrington Stage Company. The success of that workshop - and the new involvement of Broadway producer David Stone - put the show on the company's summer schedule with a new title: *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. The show, directed by Ms. Feldman and Michael Unger, was embraced by audiences and critics alike.

It was decided that long-time Finn collaborator, director James Lapine, join the creative team for the show which was to begin previews in New York at off-Broadway's Second Stage on January 11, 2005.

Once previews started, positive word of mouth began spreading and the limited run was soon sold out. The show opened officially on February 7, and when the reviews appeared, a transfer to Broadway was inevitable.

For the Tony Award-winning Finn, *Spelling Bee* is a radical departure from his usual brand of offbeat and tuneful musical. In the past, his shows, such as *Falsettos* and *A New Brain*, have all been "sung thru" but with *Spelling Bee*, we find him in the seemingly more conventional mode of endearing and playful songs that burst out of Rachel Sheinkin's laugh-filled book. These tunes somehow manage to delve deep into the childhood psyche while simultaneously appearing to be spontaneous extensions of adolescent frustration. All of this accomplished with the funniest lyrics Broadway has heard in a long time.

Following its run at Second Stage, the show took a few weeks off and began previews on April 15 at the intimate Circle in the Square Theatre where it opened officially on May 2nd, 2005 and went on to win two Tony Awards.

With its enormously appealing cast of lovable misfits, nerds, neurotics (and no jocks), *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* hilariously, tunefully - and perfectly - captures the angst, exhilaration, and heartache that makes growing up so painful and so wonderful.

- Bill Rosenfield

## Character List

### The Spellers

**William Barfee-** A finalist in last year's Bee, he was disqualified for a health-related incident, an event he is all too familiar with.

**Olive Ostrovsky-** Her mom's in an ashram in India. Her dad promises that, this time, he'll try to make it. Her best friend is the dictionary.

**Leaf Coneybear-** As just the second runner-up in his district's Bee, he really shouldn't be here. He makes his own clothes.

**Marcy Park-**She made it all the way to ninth place in Nationals last year. She sleeps three hours a night.

**Loggaine Schwartzandgrubenierre-** The youngest of the competitors, her stage fathers would make Mama Rose blush.

**Chip Tolentino-**Last year's Putnam County champ is beginning to learn the ups and downs of puberty.

**4 Volunteer Spellers from the audience**

### The Administrators

**Mitch Mahoney-** Fulfilling his community service, this former felon is now the Bee's Comfort Counselor, handing out juice boxes and a dose of reality to the losers.

**Vice principal Douglas Panch-** The "incident" of five years ago almost forgotten, this Lake Hemingway-Dos Passos Junior High Vice Principal is now in a better place, thanks to a high-fiber diet and Jungian analysis.

**Rona Lisa Peretti-**This former Spelling Bee champ is not only the county's top realtor, she also runs a highly lucrative e-Bay business, selling sensible pumps at sensible prices.

# SECTION FIVE middle/ high school

## Curriculum

The following questions are intended to encourage students to go beyond the surface of the play by engaging in literary analysis and outside research. These may be used to prompt class discussions or be given as written assignments.

### Pre-Theatre Activities

1. Ask if anyone in the class has ever participated in a spelling bee - what was it like for them?
2. Do you have any preconceived ideas about spelling bees and its participants? What do you think is most compelling about these competitions?
3. Discuss the recent interest in spelling bees. What is it that seems to inspire not only this musical production, but also films such as *Bee Season*, *Spellbound* and the recent *Akeelah and the Bee*. What is it about spelling bees that seem to engage both participants and audiences?
4. In pairs, talk about what you have heard about the show, and what your expectations are of the performance.

What do you expect?

### Post- Show Reflections

1. What did you think about the volunteer spellers? Did you know any of them? Who were your favorite volunteers? What did you think about their improvised introductions? Would you have chosen different ones for them? Explain your choices. Would you have wanted to be a volunteer? Why, or why not? Imagine if you had been selected as one of the volunteer spellers, and write an introduction for yourself.
2. Improvisation is incorporated throughout the musical. What purpose does it serve? In your opinion, would the show have been as successful without it?
3. Did you know how to spell any of the words the spellers were given?
4. It is interesting to note that three of the original members of the creative team stayed involved with the show throughout its evolution from a small improvisational piece to a full-scale Broadway musical. Read about the show's Production History on page 12. Discuss the creative development of this show. What do you think makes this musical unique and so popular?
5. Discuss how the following concepts/themes are explored in the story:
  - Self-respect
  - Peer pressure
  - Competition
  - Perseverance
  - Aptitude
  - Expectations
  - Empathy
  - Acceptance
  - Family
  - Pressure to succeed
  - Pride / Empowerment
  - Creativity / Expression
- Think about and compare other stories that you have read or seen portrayed in film or theatre that address similar themes and concepts – what makes this story unique?
6. Explore the concept of competitiveness in spelling bees and how it relates to sport. What are the unique characteristics of spelling bees, and how do they compare with other sporting events? This year ABC aired the National Spelling Bee (taking over the rights from ESPN) – why do you think ABC wanted to include the National Spelling Bee in its programming?
7. How has your perception of spelling bees changed after seeing this show? How does it differ from a “real” spelling bee? Do you think spelling bees are too competitive?
8. Watch the film *Spellbound* – how do the medium of film and theatre provide different opportunities to explore the drama and unpredictability of spelling bees?
- Compare the real kids from *Spellbound* to the characters in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. How are they alike and how are they different?
9. If you had an opportunity to meet someone from the creative team, what would you ask them and why? How do you think they chose the words to be used in the spelling bee? What do you think is their significance?
10. How did the costumes help define each character?
11. Look at the cast and imagine what it would be like to be an actor in this production. Why do you think these actors were chosen for their specific roles?
12. Describe how this style of music differs from other musicals that you may have seen.
13. Are you satisfied with the way the show ended? What would you change about the ending if you could? Do you think the best speller won the bee? At the beginning of the show, who did you think would win?



## Spelling Bee Words

### The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee rules:

"A speller may ask questions about the word's pronunciation or definition, use in a sentence, and language of origin. If you start to spell a word you may start over, but the sequences of letters already spoken may not be changed." (Panch)

"If you misspell a word we will ring the bell and the comfort counselor Mitch Mahoney will escort you off stage!" (Rona Peretti)

|              |               |                |                |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| syzygy       | strabismus    | capybara       | boanthropy     |
| lugubrious   | phylactery    | omphaloskepsis | staphylococcus |
| antediluvian | halitosis     | schematic      | cystitis       |
| acouchi      | flagellate    | hasenpfeffer   | qaimaqam       |
| tittup       | vulpine       | weevil         | peregrine      |
| chinchilla   | chimerical    | crepuscule     | vug            |
| coryza       | fabaceae      | chromatophore  | astrobleme     |
|              | elanguescence | weltanschauung |                |

The Words!

## Spelling Bee Activities

Now what do you do with these words?

1. a) Get creative and make up your own definitions for these obscure words, then write sentences to use them in.  
b) Look up the real definitions of the words, and put them each in a sentence.  
c) In small groups, test each other on the spelling of these words.  
d) Using at least four of the above words write a poem.  
e) Create a visual collage with some of these words, adding corresponding images (drawings, magazine clippings) that you think reflect specific themes from the show.
2. Search through the newspaper for 10 words that seem difficult to spell. In pairs test each other using these words. How did it feel to be tested in front of your peers?
3. Conduct some on-line research on the movement for simplified spelling. Write a paragraph about the show phonetically (forgoing al inglish speling ruelz, aand speling werdz egzactly az thae sownd). Does it work? Why or why not?
4. How have computers changed learning how to spell? With various spell check/correction software options, why is it still important for students to learn how to spell words correctly? How is text messaging and email having an impact on spelling?
5. Memory and visualization plays an important role in spelling. Each speller in *Spelling Bee* had his/her own trick to help them remember the correct spelling of the words given. Consider how spelling bee contestants learn all of those words. Which tactics work best for you when you have to memorize to learn? Write out some guidelines for students who may be practicing for an upcoming spelling bee. What types of study aids and activities would you recommend and why?



## Exploring Character

- Throughout the past 1,000 years the English language has continuously changed and adapted; the irregularity of its spelling rules have many exceptions and cannot be completely standardized. Yet the characters in *Spelling Bee* have a talent for finding the structure in spelling -- an interesting dynamic for characters who are all experiencing a life filled with "pandemonium."
  - Discuss how spelling serves as the perfect backdrop for these characters to demonstrate their unique characteristics.
  - What do you think each of the characters gain from their experiences competing in the spelling bee?
  - Each character is inspired by the challenge of the spelling bee. In small groups discuss what inspires and challenges you and why?
  - How does their experience/talent for spelling define who they are? How do you define yourself?
- "Though in school we seem strange, at the bee we seem better...we like spelling."  
(*Why We Like Spelling*) Why do you think that these characters feel like outsiders? In small groups discuss personal experiences when you felt like an outsider. How did you relate to the people around you? How did the experience make you feel? Why do people tend to exclude those who are "different"? What do you think is the underlying motive? What can be done to change this type of negative response to others?
- These characters have the courage not only to compete in the spelling bee, but also the courage to be themselves. How do you think they were able to retain their individualism and not succumb to peer pressure to be like everyone else? How important is that for one's character? In what ways have you demonstrated courage of character? Why does it require courage?
- Describe the relationships that you imagine each of the characters have with their families and peers – how are they different from one another?
- Do these characters remind you of people that you know? Which character would you want as a friend, why?
- What is the significance of academic achievement in the show? Which character best exemplifies perseverance and why?
- Why do you think these characters are so determined to win the spelling bee, and affirm their academic aptitude?
- Some songs help to move along the storyline, while others give the audience an introspective glimpse into the characters. Select a particular song that connected you most with one character – why do you think it did? What did you learn about him/her?
- Olive finds it very difficult to assert herself. Recount with a partner, a time when you had to assert yourself. Discuss the experience. Why was it important for you to assert yourself, how did you go about it, and what did you learn about yourself through the experience?
- "Kids are mean, kids'll talk. I see all my 'friends' roll their eyes, so incredibly petty. Because my dads are my dads, and alright enough already." (Schwarzy) Schwarzy is made fun of at school because she has two dads. In today's world there is tremendous diversity in family structures, including same-sex-parent families, single-parent families, foster families, and extended families, to name just a few. In small groups, discuss what family means to you.
- In small groups, discuss points in the musical where the characters describe their aspirations.
  - What qualities help these characters reach their goals?
  - What are your dreams, personal goals and objectives?
  - Have they changed from when you were younger?
  - How do they influence your life choices?
  - How do external pressures (peer pressure and family pressure) play a role in your successes and failures?
  - Discuss your own aspirations and how they differ from each other, and from the characters in *Spelling Bee*.
- What can you learn from these characters? Did watching the play offer any insight into your own life?
- How did each of these characters become "winners" even though only one of them won the bee? How is it possible to succeed without actually "winning"?
- Think about whether Rona Lisa Peretti attributes her success to her winning the spelling bee. What was it about that experience that you think gave her the confidence to succeed in her career? Is there something in your life that you are proudest of and that you think will continue to positively impact your life?



## Exploring Character (cont.)

15. How does Olive's fondness for the dictionary and connection to spelling relate to the fact that both her mother and father are absent from her everyday life?
16. Think about William Barfee's relationship with the other spellers, especially with Olive, at the beginning of the spelling bee. How did it change? What was it about her that made him trust her enough to let himself begin to like her?
17. Explain why Marcy affected the bee in the way that she did – what were her motivations and reasons for her actions?
18. What are the similarities and differences between the spellers? Do you think they could all be friends outside the competition? Why or why not? What kind of friend do you think each of the characters would make?
19. What do you think about the Epilogue at the end of the show? How do you think each characters' participation in the spelling bee impacted their futures?

## Writing Activities

1. Write about a time when you achieved something while overcoming odds against you – what pushed you to continue and persevere?
2. Watch the documentary *Spellbound* – how are the characters similar to those in *Spelling Bee*? Write an essay that compares the similarities and differences.
3. Choose a character from *Spelling Bee* and write three fictional journal entries – one which details events leading up to the spelling bee, one that details his/her experience during the spelling bee, and one that outlines his/her perspective after it ends. In small groups, share your journal entries. Discuss how writing in your chosen character's voice provided you with greater insight into that character, and a deeper understanding of their experiences.
4. Choose a character from *Spelling Bee* that you most identified with. Why did you identify with that character? Write a fictional letter to that character describing what it is that you identified with and why.
5. Think about how the music is used to illustrate specific traits of each character. Choose two characters and write about how a particular song effectively or ineffectively illustrated that character.
6. Think about someone that you admire who made his/her dreams come true. What personality traits do you think they have which helped them to succeed? Write a story about that person.
7. Imagine what would happen if these characters would have participated in next year's bee. Write a scene that depicts their exchanges - how do you think they would interact?
8. Write an article about a fictional spelling bee, (its participants and the outcome of the competition), that could appear in the sports section of a newspaper. Write the same story as a feature article in a newspaper's Life section. How do they differ?
9. Imagine that you are a reporter in Putnam County, assigned to interview a speller of your choice. Write the interview questions and fictional responses.
10. Read through the many articles and reviews written about *Spelling Bee*, (see those posted on, <http://www.spellingbeethemusical.com/press.htm>)
  - a) How do the reviews differ from one another? How might they influence your decision of whether or not to see the show?
  - b) Select a few of the articles and reviews to summarize, and explain how your

## Connections Through Drama & Improvisation

1. Tableau is a theatrical technique that requires participants to freeze their bodies in poses that capture a moment in time. This creative drama experience can help students explore their knowledge and strengthen their characterizations and understanding across the curriculum.  
Divide into groups of at least 4 students. Allocate a theme from *Spelling Bee*, (such as self-respect, peer pressure, competition, perseverance), to each group. Ask each group to create a tableau that articulates the theme. After each group presents their tableau, encourage discussion about the experience from the rest of the class.
2. Think about an incident where you witnessed a friend or fellow student being bullied. In groups of four, improvise a situation where one is the bully and the other are those being bullied. How did it feel to be the bully character? How did it feel to be the one who is bullied? What were the consequences of the behavior? Have you ever stood up for someone who was being mistreated? What did you learn from the experience?
3. In small groups create a list of characters from literature, film or theatre who are outcasts – why are they looked upon as different? Take turns role-playing these characters, and then talk about what the experience was like and any new insights gained.
4. What was the most memorable part of the show for you? What did you connect with the most? Why? Create a tableau in a small group depicting that moment.
5. Divide into small groups. Improvise a scene from the show, changing its outcome. Discuss how this exercise may have changed your perspective with respect to the characters and their role in the spelling bee.
6. Research an article in the newspaper that highlights an achievement by a young person. In small groups create a tableau of the emotions that this person may have experienced preparing for the achievement, during and after. Perform this series of tableau in front of the class. Remaining in role, invite classmates to ask any of the characters questions about the situation. Prepare a monologue to read to the class that describes what this person must have experienced. Talk to classmates about their impressions of the character.
7. In small groups, one person assumes the role of an athlete who recently missed an important opportunity to score the winning point in an important game. The others in the group are the other teammates. Improvise the conversation in the locker room – some are sympathetic and some are critical. In the improvisation address how this makes each character feel – how does this effect the team dynamic?
8. In pairs role-play an interview with a finalist in a fictional spelling bee. Improvise a scene where the finalist explains to either friends or family what happened and why he/she did or did not win. Discuss who was supportive in the situation and who was not. Improvise the reactions of friends and family.

## Further Research

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- Bryson, Bill. *Made in America*. Harper Collins Canada, 1996.
- Bryson, Bill. *The Mother Tongue*. Harper Collins Canada, 1991.
- Crystal, David. *Words Words Words*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Podhaizer, Mary Elizabeth. *Painless Spelling*. Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1998.
- Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. Gotham Books, 2003.



## Online Resources

<http://www.spellingbeethemusical.com/press.htm>

**great selection of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* press**

<http://www.akeelahandthebee.com/splash.html>

**interesting on-line games, contests and educational guides for parents and teachers**

<http://www.cnn.com/US/9805/28/spelling.bee/>

**Simplified Spelling Society**

<http://www.spellingsociety.org>

**WETA Reading Rockets**

[www.readingrockets.org](http://www.readingrockets.org)

**National Center for Family Literacy**

[www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org)

**Center for the Book**

[www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/](http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/)

**Read Across America**

[www.nea.org/readacross/index.html](http://www.nea.org/readacross/index.html)

**The Literacy Web at the University of Connecticut**

[www.literacy.uconn.edu](http://www.literacy.uconn.edu)

**National Institute for Literacy**

[www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov)

**US Department of Education**

[www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)

