The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee: A Costume Design Process

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The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee:
A Costume Design Process
The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee: A Costume Design Process

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Drama

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Kean University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater Design and Technology, 2008

August 2011
University of Arkansas
Abstract

This thesis will describe the costume design process for the production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee produced at the University of Arkansas University Theatre. In this thesis I will detail the process that I followed to create and produce costume designs for the production; from original idea to completed costumes. The design process will include an explanation of my design philosophy, initial reaction and analysis of the play, research, renderings, completed costumes and final thoughts on the overall process.
This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Acknowledgements

A special thanks is due to the University of Arkansas Drama Department faculty, staff and student body for guiding me through the past three years of my education. Without them I would not have survived to become the person I am today.
Dedication

I thank my family, friends and mentors for their kindness, thoughtfulness and prayers throughout my journey. I could have never traveled so far without those who have touched my life. The gift of their presence and acknowledgment is truly appreciated.

Special thanks to my Mother and Nana for supporting my dreams and giving me wings to fly.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was produced and performed at the University of Arkansas. In this thesis I will detail the process I followed to create and produce costume designs for the production. The design process includes my design philosophy, initial reaction and analysis of the play, research, renderings, completed costumes and final thoughts on the overall process.

The production team consisted of the following individuals: Amy Herzberg-Director, Michael Riha-Set Designer, Justin Ashley-Lighting Designer, and Will Eubanks-Sound Designer. Patricia J. Martin served as my costume design mentor for the production. The technical team for the production included Valerie Lane as the costume shop manager and Patrick Stone as the technical director.

The production opened on April 16th, 2010 at the University Theater and its final performance was April 25th, 2010. Designing costumes for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee provided me with the opportunity to explore the unspoken natures of the characters in order to create realized costume designs. As the designer for a realized production, I was able to create two dimensional costume renderings and then see my ideas come to life on the stage.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a musical that explores the world of competitive educational spelling bees and the people involved with them to include the contestants, parents and supervising adults. The six main characters, Olive, Barfee, Schwartzy, Chip, Marcy and Leaf, are children ranging in age from eight to ten years old competing to win the county spelling bee in order to advance to the national spelling bee.
The three adult characters, Vice Principal Panch, Rona, and Mitch, are in charge of monitoring and administrating the spelling bee. Parents of the six contestants help to advance the suspense and action of the play. Spellers are eliminated throughout the show until only two competitors are left, Olive and Barfee. When Olive misspells her word, Barfee is declared the winner. At the end of the show in a flash forward/epilogue, each spelling bee contestant transforms into an adult and shares with the audience who they are and what they have accomplished. We also learn what the future holds for the three adult characters, Panch, Rona and Mitch.

The process of designing costumes for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee consisted of many different parts. Like puzzle pieces, each part of my design process gave me information to complete a final product. My costume design process consisted of analyzing the script, research, creating the overall costume design of the show and the execution of the design into costumes the actors wore on stage. The first puzzle piece, analyzing the script consisted of reading the script, listening to the music multiple times and then creating a written script analysis (Appendix 1 Page 36). Next came research where I investigated past productions of the show and various other sources related to spelling bees and the people involved in them. Once the research was completed and meetings where the ideas about the production were established, I began designing the costumes for the show. This consisted of creating a portrait gallery, research and research boards, emotional response collage, and renderings of each costume for each character (Appendix 2-7, Pages 43-102). The last piece of the puzzle required the executing of the costume design which, depending on the costume, required finding or constructing each costume piece.
In this thesis, I will share my design journey, step by step, that led me to create the final costume design for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. In each chapter of this thesis I will describe each step or puzzle piece in my design process. I begin this thesis with my personal costume design philosophy. This first step in my design journey shaped how I approached the costume design for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.
Chapter Two: Personal Design Philosophy

In order to achieve a successful costume design, my philosophy entails discovering who the characters truly are, collaborating with all the members of the design team and ultimately, show through the costumes, information that will enhance the audience’s experience. My philosophy helped me create the costume design for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.

As human beings, we wake up every day and put on clothing, or in some cases do not. These clothing choices, though it may seem like a mundane chore, are all subconsciously based on many different social and personal influences. For example, people might put on causal business clothing because they have an interview and it is part of an office-mandated dress code or they are desperately trying to feel empowered by looking the part. In contrast, someone might put on an old pair of sweatpants because they feel depressed and want to be comfortable on a day off or it is the only piece of clothing they still own after a natural disaster. As a costume designer, it is my responsibility to dig deep into the characters and discover who they are, why they put on clothes and what those clothes might be. The interpretation of the characters is essential to my overall design process and philosophy.

Another important part of the process that is vital for a successful costume design is the collaboration process with the director and the production team. When the other members of the production team share their ideas and insights about the script, I gain a new perspective about the show and the characters that inhabit the world of the play. In my opinion, working with engaged and like-minded collaborators leads to a cohesive production and informs my design choices.
The relationship between the characters and the audience is another key element in my design philosophy. The overall design success of a show is based on how the audience is able to understand characters through the costumes they are wearing. With costumes, I create the visual history of a character, a reason for them to look the way they do, which allows the audience a better understanding of the character. By providing subtle clues about the characters, the audience is lead through the journey of the play.

Applying my personal design philosophy when designing a show allows me to interpret a play in a unique way. Discovering whom the characters truly are, collaborating with all the members of the design team, and ultimately, showing through the costumes information that will enhance the audience’s experience is crucial to my design philosophy. In the next chapter I will describe the second step on my journey in creating the costume design for this production, the analysis of the play, *The 25th Annual County Spelling Bee*. 
Chapter Three: Analysis

In order to create my costume design for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, I first needed to understand the play in which the characters reside and identify the major ideas of the play. When I begin the pre-production process of designing costumes for a play, my first step is to create a written script analysis. The first time I read the play and listen to the music I do it as if I am an audience member. The second time I read and listen to the music, I try to find clues about the characters to help me understand them. By the third and fourth read through of the script, I write down my personal thoughts and feelings about the characters. It is on the fifth reading of the script that I begin to write my formal written analysis.

Completing a thorough written analysis aids in my understanding of each character’s personality and provides me with information that will influence my costume decisions. I divided the script analysis into three sections. The first section outlines the basic action of the play. The second section focuses on the characters and their function in the play. I place particular emphasis on this section because it provides me with the majority of the information I need when making costume choices for each character. The third and last section of the analysis explores the themes and ideas of the show. For the purpose of this thesis, the following is a summary of my analysis (Appendix 1 Page 36).

Action of the Play

In *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, spelling bee contestants, Chip, Schwartzy, Leaf, Marcy, Olive and Barfee are all competing to win the Putnam County Spelling Bee in order to qualify for the national spelling bee competition. The spelling bee is hosted and
moderated by Rona Perretti, a former winner. Vice Principal Panch serves as the spelling bee prompter. One by one, contestants miss a word, either by mistake, distraction or by choice, which disqualifies them. The comfort counselor and ex-con, Mitch Maloney, attempts to comfort the losing children by offering words of encouragement and a juice box. By the end of the play, two children are left in the competition, Olive and Barfee. Ultimately Barfee wins the spelling bee and Olive happily comes in second. In the play’s onstage epilogue or flash-forward, all of the major characters reveal to the audience what happens to them in the future.

The Characters

Charlito “Chip” Tolentino comes with a highly competitive mindset to The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. He is a little league pitcher with a 22-mile an hour screwball, which we learn from Rona’s tidbits that she tells about each character as they approach the microphone. He is disqualified when he suffers an unfortunate erection after seeing Leaf Coneybear’s sister, Marigold, in the audience wearing a tight sweater (Finkle 32). He desperately tries to hide it which causes him to misspell the word, Tittup. Humiliated and defeated, he reappears at the play’s intermission to hand out refreshments and explains his predicament in the song, “My Unfortunate Erection”. In the play’s epilogue, we discover that Chip emerges through his adolescence to appreciate his erection along with countless others (Finkle 77).

Logainne Schwartzandgrubenniere, aka Schwartzy, is the youngest person to compete at the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. She is the adopted child of two gay men whom she loves dearly and desperately wants them to be proud of her. Schwartzy explains in the
song, “Woe is Me” that she is under constant pressure to win the spelling bee to please her two dads, Carl Dad and Dan Dad. Despite all her training and ability, Schwartzy feels unable to live up to her fathers’ expectations. Although she has a lisp, she is very outspoken and speaks her mind about her political views, which mostly revolve around gay rights. In the play’s epilogue, Schwartzy reveals that she wins, on the seventh try, the 31st Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee and as an adult became the Secretary of Education.

Leaf Coneybear comes from a hippy/new age family and a large one at that. He has four brothers and sisters who are all extremely smart. In the song, “I’m Not that Smart”, Leaf explains that his siblings often mock him for his lack of intelligence. What he lacks in intelligence he makes up in imagination. While singing, “I’m Not that Smart”, he stops in the middle of the song to have a mock battle with himself. He is super excited to be at the spelling bee and the entire experience is one big adventure to him. After losing the spelling bee, he walks off stage pleased because for the first time he is proud of his accomplishments, regardless of his family’s opinion. In the play’s epilogue, we only learn that in the future Leaf Coneybear has cats (Finkle 77).

Marcy Park is an extreme perfectionist. She attends Our Lady of Intermittent Sorrows and is on track to become the youngest high school freshman in parochial school history. Marcy’s family demands her to be perfect in all her endeavors. She keeps all her problems, fears and uncertainties to herself in order to appear to have a calm demeanor. However, when Rona announces to the audience that Marcy can speak five languages, Marcy loses her carefully controlled composure and blurts out how she hides all her emotions and only succeeds in life to please her family. In the song, “I Speak Six Languages”, she explains that, “Winning is a job and I get no real enjoyment” (Finkle 57). In the last verses of the song Marcy admits that
she is, “…sick and tired of always being the best and the brightest…” (Finkle 58). She mockingly prays to Jesus for a harder word and he appears to her. Jesus admits that he wouldn’t care if she won or lost the spelling bee. Feeling empowered by this revelation, she purposely misspells the word and loses the competition. Leaping off the stage, she is extremely happy about losing and being freed from all the pressure in her life. In the play’s epilogue, Marcy tells the audience she has written a book titled “Not Living Up To Expectations” and is happy that the book doesn’t live up to expectations (Finkle 77).

William Morris Barfee, aka Barfee, is plagued with a number of health and social problems. Barfee is overweight, suffers from a rare mucus membrane problem and his allergy to peanuts forced him out of last year’s spelling bee. Socially, he is abrupt and brash, which alienates him from other people. Barfee sings in the song, “Second” that “people are scared of me and no one really likes me”. When Olive or any of the other contestants try to interact with him, he insults or belittles them. For example, when Olive tries to comfort Barfee after his fight with Chip he tells her, “…Look, I do not need pity from a person named after a vegetable” (Finkle 44). Barfee takes the spelling bee very seriously and considers winning a way to prove to the world that he isn’t a failure. He is famous in the spelling bee world for his foot technique that he calls the “Magic Foot”.

Barfee’s personality changes as he interacts with Olive. He realizes for the first time in his life he has made a real friend. In the play’s epilogue, it is explained that Barfee and Olive study for the national spelling bee together and he places 42nd. Through studying for the national spelling bee they strengthen their friendship and have remained friends. He becomes extremely handsome and gains fame by combining the scientific fields of psychiatry and podiatry coined pochietry.
Olive Ostrovsky truly loves words and spelling them. She seeks comfort in her dictionary as it reminds her of the world’s vastness. She developed this love by reading her oversized dictionary on the toilet while alone in her house. Because her dad is a workaholic and her mother has left on a nine-month trip to India, she is often alone. Olive is a shy girl and admits in the song, “My Friend the Dictionary”, “the words in the dictionary are the friends that I’ll have forever more than the friends I have made in school” (Finkle 15). Her spelling technique involves talking into her hand in order to spell the word before she speaks into the microphone. As the play move forward, Olive tries to befriend Barfee. Her multiple attempts to cut through his icy demeanor pay off and a budding friendship emerges. When she is faced by her final opponent, Barfee, she realizes that she doesn’t have to win to be happy. Coming in second place will be fine as long as she has gained a friend.

Rona Lisa Perretti has been hosting the Putnam County Spelling Bee for nine consecutive years. She grew up in the county and became a local realtor. When Rona was a child, she won the 3rd Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. It was the highlight of her life and she hosts the spelling bee every year to bring joy to other spellers. In the play she acts like a color commentator for a competitive sporting event providing interesting facts about each of the competitors as they approach the microphone to spell. Throughout the play, Rona tries to make the children feel better about winning or losing the bee by adding that, “each of them is already a winner” (Finkle 77). Rona sympathizes with the spellers and tries to explain to the audience how a spelling competition is hard on the losers since they put so much pressure on themselves to win. In the play’s epilogue, it is revealed that Rona leaves Putnam County and travels the world. Her mission involves bringing competitive spelling bees to the unfortunate in places such as Latvia, Sweden and Republic of Guinea-Bissau.
Vice Principal Douglas Panch is a frustrated Vice Principal at Lake Hemingway Dos Passos Junior High School. He is the default spelling prompter for the spelling bee filling in at the last minute. He agrees to serve in this role, not because he loves spelling bees. He does so to impress Rona, whom he has known since childhood. It is revealed at the end of the play that Panch found his passion in life at the spelling bee, Rona Lisa Perretti. His stalker-like behavior results in Rona taking out a restraining order against him. He admits he was just happy to have, ”the opportunity to experience love” (Finkle 76). Unlike the spellers, he has never found anything that he is passionate about. When Panch has a breakdown, he throws a tantrum yelling about how he will never achieve what he wants in life and how stupid the contestants are in the play. Throughout the show, Panch provides tasteless definitions and word uses in sentences such as “Billy, put down that phylactery-we’re Episcopalian” (Finkle 19). Despite his hard and somewhat cruel demeanor, at the end of the play he is touched by Olive’s sacrifice and loss. Panch makes up a story that the second place winner gets a twenty-five dollar award and gives Olive money out of his own pocket.

Mitch Mahoney, as part of a community service assignment, is the comfort counselor for the spelling bee. He feels clueless about how to provide comfort to the children who lose in the spelling bee. He wants to provide the contestants with a wider perspective. As an ex-convict, Mitch has learned through experience that words can get people hurt or killed and losing this competition is the least of their worries. He wants to, “beat them up a little so they understand that pain has degrees and this means nothing” (Finkle 38). Mitch becomes more connected to his role as comfort counselor as the play progresses and he encourages the constants that lose to be full of pride and proud of their accomplishments. In the play’s epilogue it is revealed that Mitch decides to permanently volunteer as a comfort counselor for
bees across the nation and he still keeps in contact with many of the contestants he has comforted throughout the years.

In the play we are introduced to Olive’s Mother and Father in a song based on Olive’s fantasy, “The I Love You Song”. Her mother is on a nine-month spiritual quest in an ashram in India. In Olive’s imaginative vision within the song, Olive’s mom tells Olive how much she loves her and explains that her depression runs in the family so she blames herself for Olive’s sadness. Olive’s Dad is a workaholic and is rarely home. In fact he is absent from the spelling bee and arrives after it is over. In her fantasy vision in “The I Love You Song”, Olive imagines that her dad tells her of his love and support.

Schwartzy has two fathers. Carl Grubennierre, aka Carl Dad, is the more intense, aggressive and competitive father. He acts like a prize fighting coach when he is training Schwartzy. He doesn’t want to take breaks while they are training in order to build up her endurance. Carl Dad is constantly reminding Schwartzy throughout the spelling bee that America and God hate losers.

Dan Schwarz, aka Dan Dad, is Schwartzy’s other father. He is more laid back about Schwartzy’s training and more nurturing. He provides snacks and tries to build her confidence by telling her that she is a winner and he has faith in her abilities. When Schwartzy loses the spelling bee, Dan Dad is the one who comforts her. Dan’s personality is one of a beta male so I perceived him as a classic stay at home mom.

The Coneybear family consists of the characters of Leaf’s Mom, Leaf’s Dad, Leaf’s older sister Marigold and three other siblings. The family has a hippy/new age philosophy about how they live and interact with the world. They do not believe that Leaf will do well in the
spelling bee because he is not as smart as they are. However, the family still attends the spelling bee in support of Leaf.

Audience members also play characters within the play. In the beginning of the play, four people are selected from the audience to play spelling bee contestants. One of these “contestants” also doubles as an extra Coneybear sibling in the song, “I’m Not That Smart” They are all eliminated from the spelling bee as the play progresses.

Themes

The play, The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, deals with the extreme pressure we place on our youth to win and succeed. Mitch is the voice of reason throughout the play for the audience. He desperately wants to explain to the children that this is just a stepping-stone in life and that this much pressure on children, and people, is not healthy. Through the experience of the spelling bee each of the contestants and some of the adults learn what they are capable of achieving and who they are in the world. As each of the characters move towards self-awareness and understanding, the audience will hopefully go on that journey as well. The resolution of the play results in the children realizing that they are part of a greater whole of unique individuals and can gain friendship.

My script analysis serves as an important tool that leads me to understand the action, characters and themes of the play. Ultimately it provides me with the information I need in order to make informed choices when designing the characters. The next step in my design process is research. My research process for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is elucidated in the next chapter.
Chapter Four: Research

Conducting research for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was the third step in my design process. I conducted three different types of research, which for the purposes of this thesis I have divided into three categories. The first area of my research focused on discovering the production history of the play and observing the character and costume choices made in previous productions. The next area was related research in the form of viewing the film documentary, “Spellbound”. The final category, that I call field research, involved observing children noting what they were wearing and visiting stores where they shopped.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was originally conceived as a non-musical play called C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E (Group 1). It was born from an idea by an improvisational group called “The Farm” (Group 1). In the winter of 2004, the show had a workshop at Barrington Stage Company in Sheffield, Massachusetts. By that summer, a full-length full production of the show opened (Group 1). Elyse Sommer, a reviewer from CurtainUp.com, commented that Jen Caprio, the costume designer, underscored each person’s individual quirks (Summer 1). The idea of expressing each character’s quirkiness through clothing choices resonated with me and ultimately guided my design choices. It is interesting to note that when the show moved from Barrington Stage Company to Second Stage, the show’s characters changed in addition to songs being removed. The character of Tripp became Chip and Lisa, eventually called Rona, went from being a guidance counselor to a real estate agent. David Finkle, a reviewer from TheaterMania.com, remarked that the show’s success was based on how the audience was able to relate to the characters. According to Mr. Finkle, the spelling bee competition is only a catalyst in which the students are forced to analyze
themselves (Finkle 1). The audiences, like the characters, realize what is truly important in their lives. Both the audience and the characters in the show learn that the friendship they earn, not winning the competition, is what truly matters (Finkle 1). He further explains, “Although it has urgent things to say about the American obsession with being number one, it connects primarily because Feldman, Sheinkin and Finn (the playwrights) have hit on a milieu to which to have a good deal of fun with music and words—many of those words literally spelled out” (Finke 2). Based upon these insights it became important to me that the audience must relate to the experience and emotions of the characters in the play.

When the play moved to Broadway rave reviews and further changes to the set and the characters were in order. The lobby became a location for humor as well as creativity as mock awards were hung. For example, James Lapine, the show’s second director, had the Dewey Decimal Award from the Putnam Librarians Association proudly displayed in the lobby (Usherwood 2). Banners stating, “Bully Free Zone” were hung around the theater and on set along with banners promoting the school’s various teams (Finkle 2). This was an idea that our director Amy Herzberg wanted to implement in University of Arkansas’ production. She wanted the audience to interact with the characters unknowingly before and during the show and for the audience to experience the feeling of going to a real spelling bee.

Another addition to the Broadway production was dramatically flying in the character of Jesus during the show (Finkle 2). Since our university production was unable to recreate this effect, an alternative way of making the moment work was devised by the creative production team. In spite of this theatrical effect created for the Broadway production, Charles Usherwood, reporter for The New York Times states, “Spelling Bee is not extravagant
in its aims, but it lives up to its goals in a way that the season’s bigger, glitzier, and more ambitious musicals mostly don’t” (Usherwood 2).

The show won two Tony Awards for Best Book of a Musical and Best Featured Actor in 2005 (Group 2). When the show closed on January 20, 2008, it had played 1,136 performances and 21 previews on Broadway (Lipton 1). The rights have since been released regionally for production in both educational and professional settings.

As in the original production, it was important to the director, Amy Herzberg, that the characters in The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee to be rooted in reality. With this in mind I watched the film, “Spellbound”, a documentary based on the 1999 Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee. My intention was to gain inspiration and insight into the world of competitive spelling bees. The film follows eight children between the ages of ten and fourteen as they progress from their respective hometown spelling bees to Washington, DC for the national competition.

While watching the documentary, I began to see connections between the characters in the film and the characters in the musical. For example, Angela Arenivar was from Texas and wore clothing that was more functional than stylish. She became my inspiration for Olive, who is more focused on spelling than fashion. Nupur Lala became my inspiration for Marcy because of her strict attitude towards the bee and her personal rigidness. Neil Kadakia’s personality is similar to both the characters of Chip and Schwartzy. Neil and Chip share a passion for athletics whereas the character of Schwartzy and Neil share a fierce competitive mentality. Finally Harry Altman reminded me of Leaf Coneybear because he covers his nervousness by making everything into joke. What shocked me while watching the film was
that the characters in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* are actually a perfect amalgamation of the essence of the real spelling bee students in the film. The children’s personal spelling ticks and the overall pressure that the children and parents put on themselves to win is so daunting that it drives the action in the film the same way it does in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. By the end of the film, the children learn that they are not alone and they are part of a whole subculture that will embrace and befriend them. This revelation in the film is the overall theme of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. After viewing the film and the seeing the real contestants my goal became the enhancement of each character’s personality traits through clothing choices. Not only did I want to create individual, quirky characters, I wanted to highlight their individuality, while at the same time, identifying them as part of the whole.

The musical is set in present day with characters ranging in age from eight to fifty. In order to research current fashion trends and to acquaint myself with children’s clothing, I did reconnaissance work at the Northwest Arkansas mall and various stores in the Fayetteville area. My goal was to identify stores that the characters of the play would actually shop in order to root them in reality. The stores that yielded the best research options for the show were: Kohl’s, Old Navy, Wal-Mart, Target and Sears. These companies target middle class and blue-collar families, which was perfect for almost all the characters in the show. For example, Olive and Barfee’s clothes would come from stores such as Old Navy, Kohls, Wal-Mart or Target since these are stores their parents would frequent. These stores offer fashion at a discounted price and convenience, which is perfect for Olive and Barfee’s busy families. Rona might shop for her business causal attire at Dillard’s, Talbots or Ann Taylor because these stores offer specific attire that is socially acceptable for a businesswoman. My biggest
challenge was finding a specialty store where the Coneybear family would shop. The Coneybear family characters have a hippy/new age lifestyle that is revealed in their clothing choices. Fortunately I found a local store called Romancing the Stone at the Northwest Arkansas Mall. This store specialized in new age/hippy wear, including tie-dyed ponchos, wrap around skirts and pants and band t-shirts. For Marcy, who wears a catholic school uniform, I researched school uniforms at French Toast, which is an online store as well as a Children’s Place. Both of these stores allowed me to choose from a wide variety of the patterns, colors and shapes available in school uniform garments.

I followed three different but related avenues of research for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. By learning about the history of the production and by watching a documentary on actual children competing in a spelling bee coupled with field observations, I was able to gain invaluable information that I shared with the director and ultimately informed my design choices. My design process and choices for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is described in the next chapter of my thesis.
Chapter Five: Statement of Production Concept and Design Approach and Process

My goal for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was to provide the characters with costumes, which embodied not only their individual personalities but also their hidden histories. Before the first production meeting, it was important to create visual tools that communicated my ideas about the play and the characters to the director. Using my personal design philosophy, script analysis and research for inspiration, I was able to start preparing the pre-production communication tools which included the emotional response collage, portrait gallery and research boards.

Pre-Production Work

The emotional response collage and portrait gallery became the first visual aid that I created to express my point of view of the play to the design team. The emotional response collage for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee can be found in Appendix 2 Page 43. To create the collage, I collected images and colors that illustrated the emotions expressed within the show. The images and colors I chose are simple images of emotions and ideas such as happiness, embarrassment, alienation and working together on a child-like scale of understanding. After creating the collage, I found that the color palette that naturally emerged through the images really inspired me. The twelve colors on the color wheel, consisting of primary, secondary and tertiary colors, became the basis for the emerging costume design and informed my color choices. For me these colors represented colors associated with youth and the overall feeling of adolescence within the show.

The portrait gallery was the next tool I created to help me communicate with the director for the first production meeting. The portrait gallery for The 25th Annual Putnam County
Spelling Bee can be found in Appendix 3 Page 44. I created the portrait gallery by choosing images of individual’s faces that closely resembled the physical and personality qualities I saw in each character. The portrait gallery serves as a tool in which the director and I can discuss specifics about each character like their ages, status in society and overall health. It was important because it helped me understand the age group and individual look for each character. For example, Mary Park is an extreme perfectionist so her portrait picture was that of a stoic adolescent girl while Olive loves books and seeks acceptance so her portrait was that of a girl who radiates a warm personality.

Research boards became the next visual tool I used to combine my research on modern clothing and the ideas that I wanted to visually communicate to the audience about the characters. The research boards for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee can be found in Appendix 4 Page 46. I created a research board for each character. Each board presented a number of clothing items that might be found in the character’s closet. The director and I were able to focus on the clothing items that we found to be the most appropriate and talk specifically about each character.

First Production Meeting

During the first production meeting I was able to present my visual communication tools, the emotional response collage, portrait gallery and research boards. Director Amy Herzberg’s production concept for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was for the audiences to understand and identify with the characters and experience a journey with them through an all inclusive production environment. From the moment the audience exited their cars, to the moment the play began, the audience would be immersed in the environment of the spelling
bee. I wanted to approach this production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* with a new and fresh interpretation of the costume design; one that would have a different overall look than the Broadway or national tour productions.

The director and I agreed on many of the same ideas for the characters and the clothing research that I had chose; however, we did have differing opinions on Leaf’s clothing research and costume idea. My original idea for Leaf’s costume was generic fantasy based medieval inspired clothing like a brown tunic shirt, sweats pants and a cape. Amy Herzberg suggested that Leaf’s clothing could be even more exaggerated and fun. She suggested that Leif would make his own play clothing and the construction would match the creative daydreams he has throughout the show. With this in mind, I adjusted my idea about Leaf’s costume so that it was bright, childlike, creative and functional. It was able to fit within his pretend world that was rooted around the knights of the medieval era. After my discussion with the director, I realized my overall design concept for each character needed to be realistic and true to each character’s personality but cohesive with the overall design of the show.

**Designing the Show**

After completing all the pre-production work and meeting with the director, I began the process of designing each character, by creating rough pencil sketches and final color renderings. The rough pencil renderings for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* can be found in Appendix 6 Page 63 and the final color renderings can be found in Appendix 7 Page 83. I was able, with input from the director, to make strong design choices for each character. When I started my rough pencil renderings, I consulted my research boards, script
analysis and production meeting notes for inspiration. To further aid me in the drawing process, I took photographs of each of actors and asked them to stand or pose like the character they would be portraying on stage. I used the photographs to create proportional figures that represented the actual body types of the actors. With the specific body type drawn for each actor, I was able to create a costume created and proportioned for him or her. This was important because it allowed me to show the director how I used slight exaggeration of proportion in the costumes to help make adults look like children. By using color I visually created a connection between the characters or to show the differences between them. Branching out from the main characters, the supporting characters, such as parents and siblings, would be connected through color to their child. For example, the Coneybear family costumes’ color palette consisted of cool colors while Leaf’s costume was composed of warm colors. This color difference between Leaf Coneybear and his family showed their disconnection to one another. In the case of Olive and Barfee, their color palettes, consisting of reds, pinks, blues and browns, were similar to each other. Their colors linked them together on stage. For Schwartzy, her colors were similar to her dads’, shades of blues and browns.

Charlito “Chip” Tolentino is a little league pitcher with a 22-mile an hour screwball. For Chip, his athleticism and competitiveness became a strong character point that influenced his costume choices. His awards become a shield against disappointment and feeling of inadequacy, which I wanted to be reflected in his costume. In my original sketch for Chip I envisioned his costume showing every extra curricular activity he was involved in. His original costume consisted of soccer cleats; baseball pants and socks, a basketball jersey and a Boy Scout sash with medals. However, the director thought that it was too visually
confusing and wanted Chip to only be involved in one sport – baseball. His costume design was changed to incorporate a baseball uniform with a letterman jacket covered in medals and patches. The colors for his uniform are bold and contrasting, gold and purple, which embraces his character’s duality. The final rendering for Chip can be found in Appendix 7 Page 83.

Logainne Schwartzandgrubenniere, aka Schwartzy, is the youngest person to compete at the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. Although she has a lisp, she is very outspoken and speaks her mind about her political views, mostly revolving around gay rights. Schwartzy’s costume choices revolve around her political agenda as well as the professionalism she desperately wants to portray. Her overall professional look is undermined by her stress level, which makes her look frazzled. Schwartzy’s original sketch had her in colors of red, white and blue in a classic business suit silhouette with a pleated skirt and tights. The director thought that the color choice would read as French instead of American and so I incorporated colorful polka dot tights, multi-colored political buttons and tan into her costume. These changes were realized in the new final costume renderings for the show. I also styled her hair so that it was teased up in spots like she was frequently grabbing at her hair in frustration and hair bows that were lopsided. The color choices in her costume were similar to her fathers’ costumes but also had sparks of colors, i.e. polka-dot tights and bright buttons that showed her personality. The final rendering for Schwartzy can be found in Appendix 7 Page 84.

Leaf Coneybear comes from a hippy/new age family. What he lacks in intelligence he makes up for in imagination. For Leaf, I made the creative nature of his personality the emphases of his costume. Since he makes his own clothing, I focused on creating a costume that would fit in an imaginary world he would like to live in. I decided that his imaginary world was based
on the knights of the medieval era. After speaking to the director during the first production meeting, I had the idea that he would make his costume out of simple material and found items. His final costume consisted of bright colors, simple shapes and playful prop items. His base clothing pieces were a pair of light brown dyed sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt. His orange tunic was made out of felt and glitter felt/foam leaves were applied to the front. The tunic also had an attached green cape. Attached to the costume is leather belt that hold a foam sword, a pouch for a bottle of bubble solution and a dragon hand puppet. The puppet was modified from an original shark puppet in order to fit with the overall theme of the costume. He also wore yellow pleather gauntlets and boot covers. For a helmet, I used a metal colander and attached a foam faceguard to the front. The colors in his costume provided a contrast to the cool colors in his family’s costumes, however, it also had hints of the family color, i.e. the green cape, neutral colored base costume. This allowed Leaf to connect him with the family through color. The overall look of the costume expressed the silhouette of a knight with the whimsy of a child’s interpretation. The final rendering for Leaf can be found in Appendix 7 Page 85.

Marcy Park is an extreme perfectionist. She attends Our Lady of Intermittent Sorrows Catholic School. Marcy’s family demands her to be perfect in all her endeavors. She keeps all her problems, fears and uncertainties to herself in order to appear to have a calm demeanor. The catholic school uniform Marcy would wear was the main influence for her costume. I chose a plaid that had cool colors in it to reflect her icy demeanor. I paired the uniform with tightly braided hair that emphasized her tense personality and focus on controlled perfection. The final renderings for Marcy can be found in Appendix 7 Page 86.
William Morris Barfee, aka Barfee, is plagued with a number of health and social problems. Barfee is overweight, suffers from a rare mucus membrane problem and his allergy to peanuts forced him out of last year’s spelling bee. Socially, he is abrupt and brash which alienates him from other people. I based Barfee’s costume choices on the importance of this spelling bee in his life. His costume reflected his attempt to look professional but unfortunately not being able to do so successfully. His costume consisted of a tight red argyle sweater, blue button down shirt, suspenders, tan shorts and black glasses. Since his special technique involved his feet, I gave him grey colored Conversees. The tennis shoes both conveyed the idea that he was trying to look professional through the muted color yet still childlike because they are sneakers. The colors in his costume linked him to Olive, who would become his close friend later in the show. Barfee’s costume captures the idea of a child trying desperately to be regarded as an adult and failing miserably. The final rendering for Barfee can be found in Appendix 7 Page 87.

Olive Ostrovsky truly loves words and spelling them. Olive is a shy girl and admits in the song, “My Friend the Dictionary”, “the words in the dictionary are the friends that I’ll have forever more than the friends I have made in school” (Finkle 15). In Olive’s costume I wanted to capture the innocence of her character while making her clothing appropriate to her age. In order for Olive’s character to relate well to the audience, I wanted her costume to have a spirit of fun yet embody the classic girl next-door feeling. Olive’s costume included a pink spaghetti strap dress, brown shrug, blue jeans, pink headband, and pink flats. The colors in her costumes not only coordinated with her parent’s costumes but also with Barfee’s as well. Her final costume was a blend between a feminine girl and a tomboy, the classic girl next-door look. The final rendering for Olive can be found in Appendix 7 Page 88.
Rona Lisa Perretti has been hosting the Putnam County Spelling Bee for nine consecutive years. She grew up in the county and became a local realtor. Winning the bee when she was a child was the highlight of her life and she hosts the spelling bee every year to bring joy to other spellers. In the play she acts like a color commentator for a competitive sporting event providing interesting facts about each of the competitors as they approach the microphone to spell.

Since the spelling bee was Rona’s life, I wanted her costume to be influenced by actual bees but also be in balance with realtor job attire. By incorporating classic bee colors, yellow and black, into a sophisticated yet simple silhouette, I could embody both her love for the spelling bee and her day job as a realtor in a subtle manner. Her costume consisted of a butter yellow A-line dress, a yellow, white and black plaid jacket, grey pearls, and high heels. The finished look of her costume embraced both her love for the spelling bee and her typical job attire. The final rendering for Rona can be found in Appendix 7 Page 89.

Vice Principal Douglas Panch is a frustrated Vice principal at Lake Hemingway Dos Passos Junior High School (Finkle 19). Panch’s costume reflects someone who tried to look professional yet casual but was a bit behind on current fashion. His costume included brown corduroy pants, green-stripped shirt and bow tie. His costume bordered on the line of professional and outdated. The final rendering for Panch can be found in Appendix 7 Page 90.

Mitch Mahoney, as part of a community service assignment, is the comfort counselor for the spelling bee. For Mitch’s character to relate to the audience he would have to be physically intimidating and what they would expect an ex-convict to look like. It was decided in casting
that a woman would play Mitch. Since the director wanted the female Mitch to be very masculine in nature, very few adjustments were made to the original costume idea. Mitch’s costume consisted of sagging and baggy distressed blue jeans, a white T-shirt, gold chains, a leather jacket, basketball shoes and a red handkerchief for the hair. I also included temporary tattoos on her neck and fingers to add to the toughness of the character. The final rendering for Mitch can be found in Appendix 7 Page 91.

In the play we are introduced to Olive’s Mother and Father in a song based on Olive’s fantasy, “The I Love You Song”. Her mother is on a nine-month spiritual quest in an ashram in India. Olive’s Dad is a workaholic and is rarely home. In the song she imagines the ideal images of her mom and dad giving her love and support. Since the vision of Olive’s mom is what Olive imagines her ideal mom to look like, I decided to explore a beautiful traditional Indian look that would be in a similar color palette as Olive and Olive’s dad. Olive’s mom costume was a traditional sari with traditional gold jewelry. Her hair was not covered and made the overall look of the character a blend of both Indian and American in appearance. Olive’s Dad comes in at the end of the play and it was important the audience identify him easily. I decided that he would still be wearing what Olive saw her father wearing before she left for the spelling bee, his work clothes. Olive’s Dad costume consisted of a tan argyle sweater, light pink button down shirt, khaki pants and brown shoes. His business casual look was paired with the pink/cream color palette of both Olive and her mom. The final renderings for Olive’s Mom and Dad can be found in Appendix 7 Page 92-93.

Schwartzy has two fathers. Carl Grubennierre, aka Carl Dad, is the more intense, aggressive and competitive father. He acts like a prize fighting coach when he is training Schartzzy. I explored the idea of Carl being not only being the alpha male of the couple but also the main
provider of the family. With this direction and his personality traits, I decided that Carl’s work environment is highly competitive, structured and demanding. This would influence his work attire, which he would more than likely wear to the spelling bee. Carl Dad’s costume included a grey three-piece suit, a green tie and white shirt. His costume conveyed the feeling that he was a steel machine always pushing till he achieved perfection. The final rendering for Carl Dad can be found in Appendix 7 Page 94.

Dan Schwartz, aka Dan Dad, is Schwartzy’s other father. He is more laid back about Schwartzy’s training and more nurturing. He provides snacks and tries to build her confidence by telling her that she is winner and that he has faith in her abilities. Dan Dad’s clothing represented the male version of a stay at home mom stereotype, which I translated into a country club style silhouette. Dan Dad’s costume included khaki pants, blue polo shirt, tan sweater tied around the shoulders and boat shoe loafers. The final rendering for Dan Dad can be found in Appendix 7 Page 95.

The Coneybear family consists of Leaf’s Mom, Leaf’s Dad, Leaf’s older sister Marigold along with three other siblings. The family has a hippy/new age philosophy about how they live and interact with the world. In order to capture the correct look for the Coneybear family I explored the idea of what a modern day hippie would look like in today’s society. For me this translated into a New Age/retro look. I also incorporated the idea that the Coneybear family was separate yet connected to Leaf either by their costumes’ silhouette or by its dominant color. This was important to integrate into the costume choices since there was a defined separation between the characters of the Coneybear family and Leaf. I decided that the Coneybear family costume colors are cool colored with earthy color undertones. All the costumes had a loose, flowing quality to them. In slight contrast, Leaf’s costume was warm
colored but had hints of earthy undertones. The Coneybear Dad and male siblings wore loose neutral colored cotton pants and dashiki tops. The Coneybear Mom’s costume consisted of green patterned silk wrap around pants and a tan tunic top. Marigold Coneybear, the girl that Chip looked at when he got his erection, had to be sexy but also fit into the silhouette of the family. Her costume included a short silk patterned tiered wrap around skirt, teal tank top and short cardigan shrug. The youngest Coneybear female sibling wore a green jumper with large buttons on the front, gaucho-like pants and hair bows. The middle female Coneybear child’s costume consisted of a long white and blue printed peasant dress and Native American fridge boots. The final renderings the Coneybear family can be found in Appendix 8 Page 96-101.

Jesus Christ appears to Marcy Parks in her time of need during the play. My original idea for the character’s costume was that of an average janitorial worker at a school. This costume could be justified because Jesus in modern times would be but an average worker among the people. But unlike a real janitor, his costume would have a glowing fish on the back and glowing nametag and patch on the front that would illuminate on cue. Both his hair and facial hair would be indicative of the traditional look for Jesus. This idea along with many others was discussed with the director and design team. Ultimately for this production, the director decided that Jesus would be portrayed as the classic depiction of Christ from the Catholic perspective. His costume reflected images from Catholicism-the sacred heart. His costume included a long white tunic, brown cloth shoulder wrap, crown of thorns and sandals. A large glowing heart with thorns around it was hung from his neck to finish the Catholic Jesus attire. The original rendering of Jesus Christ can be found in Appendix 7 Page 102.
Purchasing and Building of Costumes

The costumes for this show were primarily purchased, with the exception of Leaf Coneybear’s costume, on a budget of $2,000 dollars. My main goal was to match the actual costume as closely as possible to the rendered costume for each character. The University of Arkansas’ costume storage also yielded some costume pieces and accessories, such as the Coneybear families’ glasses and Jesus’ costume. Some costume pieces that were bought had to be dyed and altered to achieve the desired look. In particular, those of the Coneybear family were dyed and appliquéd to achieve the final look. Leaf Coneybear’s costume base items, sweatpants and long sleeve shirt, were purchased and dyed while his tunic, boot covers, gauntlets, helmet and puppet were all built in the costume shop.

Costume fittings led to more alterations and exchanges of costume pieces to achieve the desired look and fit. In these fittings I learned about proportions and how they could drastically change the look of the costume. For example, Leaf’s tunic’s proportions allowed him to either look like a little boy or an adult depending on the length and fit of the costume. In order to make him look like a child, I had to make sure I kept the same proportions from the renderings and translate it into the three dimensional costume on the actor. I took pictures of the actors in their costumes and created a PowerPoint presentation of the costumes to show to the director. The costume fitting pictures example is located in Appendix 8 Page 103. The costume fitting pictures were then used to create dressing lists for each character. The costume dressing lists example is located in Appendix 9 Page 104. After meeting with Amy Herzberg and learning her opinions and reactions to the choices, I was able to make any required alterations and adjustments to the costumes. This process was continued until the
final costumes were completed. The final costumes can be seen on stage in the production photos located Appendix 11 Page 106.

My costume design process officially ended when the curtain rose for the opening night of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. The process of design and creation of the costumes started with the emotional response collages, portrait galleries and research boards. The design process continued with the creation of the rough renderings, final color renderings, purchasing of costume pieces and fittings. After watching the show on opening night, I was able to see the final production image and absorb my reaction to it. The evaluation of the final design and product is explored in the next chapter.
Chapter Six: Assessment and evaluation of the design process and final product

After the show closed, I was able to look back at the final product of my costume design for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. In my opinion the final product served its purpose successfully. The costumes were realized into three-dimensional clothing that looked like the approved renderings. From the shocked sounds audience members made when they realized the Carl and Dan Dad were part of the play, to roaring laughter when Leaf Coneybear ran up on stage, the audience actively responded to and interpreted the play through the characters’ costumes. However, I know I can learn valuable information by evaluating the design process and the final product that will aid me in future designs.

Assessment and evaluation of design process

The actual process of the design went surprisingly smooth with very few moments of distress. The most challenging aspects of creating the costume designs for the play were developing a color palette, designing modern clothes and creating a unique design that didn’t rely on choices made in past productions. By facing these challenges, I learned more about myself and gained tools that will allow me to be a successful costume designer in future endeavors.

Proper color selection has always been a huge wall for me to break through with each costume design and especially with this production. Audiences respond strongly to color in costuming, especially with musical theater. I utilized color theory skills I learned while working with dance costumes to help me simplify my palette while making it complex enough not to bore the audience. It was important to me for the show be lively in color but also live in the realistic world. Using youthful colors from the primary, secondary and
tertiary wheel I was able to develop a color palette that represented a youthful feel for the younger characters in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* while adding saturated hues for the adult palette for the adult characters. By having the color palette radiate out from the main characters it allowed the focus to be easily followed and clear.

As a designer, creating modern costumes is the most difficult type to design for me. Because we live in a society that taps into many different past fashion trends and is currently creating new ones, the research can be daunting. There is an infinite amount of choices to be made yet the items you can buy and find can be limiting. Since the design of the show was rendered before I started my shopping exploration, I was extremely nervous about being able to find items that would be true to my original design ideas and satisfy the look the director and I wanted. I was fortunate to find and alter costume pieces to fulfill the look of the final renderings, but it took a great deal of time and re-evaluation of some of my designs for it to work. For example, Barfee’s sweater was changed from the originally rendered striped piece to an argyle pattern.

When I started looking at images from different productions, I realized that strong costuming stereotypes were implemented in most productions. Since I wanted to approach this production with a new and fresh interpretation of the costume design, I had to force myself not to fall into the trap of reproducing looks from the original production. For me this was the hardest aspect because I knew that the audience members who had seen a tour of the show from two years prior or had done any research might be expecting similar costumes. To counter this urge, I tried to create the costumes out of the knowledge I acquired through research, analysis and director input. Though some costume pieces mimicked other productions, (Marcy in a school uniform and Barfee in shorts) I was able to make the designs
my own by reinterpreting the colors and accessories. I broke other stereotypes most notably with the designs for Leaf and Chip. Leaf is usually costumed in patch-worked clothing and a cape whereas Chip is normally clothed in a Boy Scout uniform. These changes help make the overall costume design unique and appropriate for this production.

Assessment and evaluation of final product

I think the final costume design for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee was successful. Amy Herzberg, the director, was extremely pleased with the overall look and feel of the show. She was happy and surprised that the final costumes resembled the original renderings so closely since I bought most of the clothes after the rendering process.

Yet, like any designer, there are things that I wish I had done differently. Although the director was happy with the outcome of the design and the audience enjoyed the show, there were small details that I wish I had explored further. The costume for Chip always bothered me and I felt that I never quite got it right. I personally felt that he looked a little too mature but I was unable to figure out a solution that would solve that problem. I also felt that the character of Jesus could have been better interpreted through his costume and wig. However, I was unable to decide what exactly bothered me about the costume and the director was pleased so it resulted in an unrealized solution.

The production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee at the University of Arkansas proved to be a truly educational experience, which helped me cultivate skills that will allow me to be a successful costume designer in the future. My personal design philosophy, research, analysis and the design process allowed me to create a final design
product that was seen on stage. I was able to interpret and gain knowledge from my challenges and further sharpen my design tools by learning from my mistake.
Appendix 1: Script Analysis

Alexis Foster
25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee Script Analysis
November 14, 2009

I Where are they

1. Exact Geographical Location

The play is set in a high school gym in Putnam County (Finkle 1).

2. Note Textural reference and description.

Schwartzzy makes a comment about the school gym that coincides with the actual set used i.e. “Have you ever been in an underground gymnasium before?” (Finkle 6).

II. When are they?

1. Day, month, year

The play takes place in present time with the play spanning the actual time it takes for the spelling bee to end.

2. Note special significance of date or season

It is assumed that the spelling bee is around the end of the school year as the contestants have all competed in their respected schools to earn the right to compete at the county bee.

III. Who are they?

Charlito “Chip” Tolentino

Chip won the spelling bee last year and has come back after not doing well at the National Spelling Bee (Finkle 1). He thinks he has everything under control and is the ultimate role model as he tells Marcy, “....”Don’t be nervous. Just watch what I do.” He is a little league pitcher with a 22-mile an hour screwball (Finkle 20). He admits, as do the other children, that life is pandemonium and unfair (Finkle 23). His downfall comes from his changing body and his reaction at seeing Coneybear’s sister, Marigold, in the audience with her tight sweater (Finkle 32). His erection causes him to miss his word, Tittup, causing him to lose. He is made to come back out and hand out refreshments but he gets angry and begins to throw out candy to the audience (Finkle 43). He sings about how his “unfortunate
erection” has caused him to lose the spelling bee he should have won (Finkle 44). At the end, we discover that Chip gets through adolescence successfully (Finkle 77). He learns to “appreciate his erection along with countless others” (Finkle 77).

Logainne Schwartzandgrubenniere

The youngest person to compete at the spelling bee, Schwartzy is under a lot of pressure to win for her two dad’s who are constantly drilling words into her (Finkle V). She has an unfortunate lisp, is concerned with her body image and “has some tics” (Finkle V). Despite all this, she manages to emit a strong presence in regards to her political awareness (Finkle V). She has proposed a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to ten (Finkle 25). She is the head of the Gay-Straight Alliance at her elementary school, Magna Magnet Grammar School (Finkle 11, 48). We see how hard Schwartzy dad’s drill her in her training, not allowing her to take a break even though Dan’s Dad demands she has one (Finkle 26). Her Dad’s continue to push her towards being a winner as they fix her clothing on stage while reminding her, “Gods hate losers” (Finkle 47). She sings about how she is under so much pressure to win in order to please her dads that she has no time to do what would make her happy (Finkle 47). On top of all this, the kids at her school make fun of her dads and she is tired of their pettiness (Finkle 47). Her birth mother lives in Kansas, Mo in a trailer park, and writes to her about how hard life and men are (Finkle 48). Schwartzy’s dads keep coming on stage in order to keep her going and at one point they tell her that she needs to disable Barfee’s foot in order to win the bee. Unfortunately the sabotage the dad’s try doesn’t work and Schwartzy cleans up the coke remarking, “I’d just like to say, Carl Dad-I can do this on my own” (Finkle 67). She, however, loses to a simple word (Finkle 68). She leaves singing that she hopes America still loves her even though she is a loser and everyone hates loser (Finkle 68). It is revealed that she wins, on the seventh try, the 31 Annual spelling bee and becomes the Secretary of Education under (insert president here) (Finkle 77).

Leaf Coneybear

Leaf is the second alterative and didn’t even think that he could even attend the bee (Finkle V). He was the second runner up in the Putnam Basin District (Finkle 11). He is home schooled and has many siblings, all of which think that he is stupid. (Finkle V, 12/13) He is super excited to be at the bee and the entire experience is one big adventure (Finkle V). His mom has made him wear protective head gear to the show (Finkle V). His family laughed at him when they found out he was going to be able to attend the bee even though he didn’t win in the district (Finkle 13). Leaf goes into a type of trance when he spells the words, losing his ADD focus problems (Finkle 13). He also makes his own clothing, which he wears to the bee (Finkle V, 27). He sings about not being smart, how his family knows this and it hurts him deeply (Finkle 29). However, he has a great personality even though his family is so aggressive (Finkle 29). Leaf likes his hair a great deal and likes to play with it when he gets nervous (Finkle 30). He is amazed when he gets something right and admits he is just happy to finally be a part of something (Finkle 30). He doesn’t care if he wins but just like, no loves, to spell (Finkle 30). When he loses, he does so still thinking he is smart and walks off stage proudly asking for an apple juice (Finkle 53). In the end, we find out that Leaf Coneybear has cats (Finkle 77).
Marcy Park

If it is even possible, Marcy is the ultimate overachiever, whether she wants it or not (Finkle VI). It has been imbedded into her by her family, passed down through the genes (Finkle VI). On top of all this, not only does she think that her family expects her to but she also feels that God himself expects it also (Finkle VI). She keeps all her problems to herself in order to keep such a calm demeanor (Finkle VI). Marcy has moved many times with her family and is confident she can win this bee too (Finkle VI, 19). She now attends Our Lady of Intermittent Sorrows and is slated to become the youngest high school freshman in parochial school history after skipping the fourth and fifth grade (Finkle 48, 35). She has many talents, which include; piano, dance and martial arts among others (Finkle VI). She placed ninth in nationals as a representative of Virginia (Finkle 19). Her icy exterior comes out when she tells Chip when he asks if she remembers him and she responds, “I only remember the top ten” (Finkle 20). Marcy has won her schools handwriting contests according to one of Rona’s blurbs (Finkle 54). She admits she despites the game (Finkle 22). Marcy finally breaks down when Rona misquotes and says she knows five languages instead of six. She tells Rona that it should say instead that “she only sleep three hours a night, hides in the bathroom closet cabinet and is not allowed to cry” (Finkle 55). She sings about how easy it is for her to win contests and excel at sports but none of it brings her any joy (Finkle 57). Marcy prays to Jesus for a harder word and he appears to tell her he wouldn’t care if she won or lose (Finkle 57). Taking some power for herself, she purposely misspells the word and loses the competition (Finkle 58). She is extremely happy for losing and leaps off the stage (Finkle 59). Later in life Marcy embraces not living up to expectations, writes book about it and is happy that it doesn’t live up to expectations (Finkle 77).

William Morris Barfee

Plagued with a great deal of health problems, including an allergic attack that knocked him out of winning the spelling bee a year before, Barfee also has to deal with being the fat kid (Finkle V). He also has a rare mucus membrane disorder (Finkle 17). Instead of getting picked on, he becomes the bully, although it doesn’t always work (Finkle V). His parents are divorced and his father married a woman that is much younger, Shelia that thinks his hobbies are weird (Finkle v, 53). His mother, however, supports him and tells him that his interest in science will one day pay off and he will grow up handsome (Finkle 53). He is famous for his foot technique he uses in order to spell out his words (Finkle V, 18). Barfee isn’t used to interacting with people who are nice to him and barks at Olive when she asks him a question about signing in (Finkle 3). He depends greatly on his magic foot in order to win and begs his foot when singing to spell the word (Finkle 36). He freaks out when Chip throws peanut M &M at him which contain peanuts, which is allergic too (Finkle 44). Chip calls Barfee the biggest loser at the spelling bee and he replies, “Well that is a common misperception” (Finkle 44). When Olive tries to speak to him afterwards he tells her, “I don’t need pity from a person named after a vegetable” (Finkle 44). He connects with her slightly but goes back to his safety zone of insulting others muttering, “Olive, I love-That’s so retarded”. When he loses the ability to use his foot, he still pushes through and spells the word correctly (Finkle 67). Barfee melts and starts to interact with Olive, asking questions about the words he is given and how they can be rearranged, which she likes (Finkle 69). He becomes concerned for the first time about Olive and her feeling about losing
as he starts to spell the word she missed (Finkle 74). He realizes he has made a real friend and she tells him it is ok to win the bee (Finkle 74). We learn that Barfee and Olive study for the Nationals together and he came in 42nd (Finkle 77). He becomes extremely handsome and gains fame by combining the scientific fields of psychiatry and podiatry aka pochietry (Finkle 77).

**Olive Ostrovsky**

Olive truly loves words and has developed that love because she was often left alone by her parents (Finkle VI). She seeks comfort in her dictionary as it reminds her of the vastness of the world around her (Finkle vi). She developed this love by reading the oversized dictionary on the toilet while alone in her house (Finkle 14). She is shy but comes out of her shell as the show progresses (Finkle vi). She doesn’t have her entrance fee as she rode the bus to the competition and her dad didn’t give her the money (Finkle 5). She came in second at her school Halloween contest as road kill (Finkle 14). Olive has saved a seat for her father who is coming to the bee late and one for her mother who is in an ashram in India (Finkle 14). She explains that the dictionary contains the words that are her friends, more so than the student at school (Finkle 15). She talks into her hand in order to spell the word before she speaks into the microphone (Finkle 15). Swartzy remarks that she’s pro choice even though she is still a virgin (Finkle 15). Rona adjusts the shy Olive as she approaches the microphone telling her that she needs to stand like a champion (Finkle 31). She speaks about being invisible while talking about rearranging letter in words to make a silent “what” (Finkle 33). Olive tries to connect with Barfee, telling him that by rearranging the vowels in her name it creates different words, like I love and will aim, and he starts to think of her as a potential friend (Finkle 44). Olive’s dad calls her in the middle of the bee and Rona answers for her and relays the message that he will be late (Finkle 58-63). After getting the word, Chimerical, meaning unreal, Olive begins singing about her ideal parent and the support they would give her (Finkle 62). For Olive realizes that if she wins her parents could be her chaperone (Finkle 62). In her vision they tell her how proud they are of her, how they always knew she was a winner and how much they love her (Finkle 62-65). She also tells her mom that she wishes that she had responded to her letters and that she feels her dad is taking out his anger on her instead of on her, the mom (Finkle 62-63). When it is down to her and Barfee for the win, she realizes that she truly love the competition (Finkle 70). However, she realizes that she has made a friend and that means more than winning first place (Finkle 73). She sings that she is fine with second and tells Barfee that it is ok to spell the word correctly (Finkle 75-78). Olive spirits are picked up when Panch makes up the story that second place gets twenty five dollar prize, which she uses to pay her entrance fee (Finkle 75). Olive and Barfee hug and seal their friendship (Finkle 76). It is revealed that Olive went home that day and re enacted the entire bee for her father on the way home (Finkle 78). Olive grew up to be an attentive parent and interviews the runner up to the bee every year on her radio show (Finkle 78).

**Rona Lisa Perretti**

Rona has been hosting the spelling bee for years and is also a local realtor (Finkle VI, 8). She won the spelling bee at the 3rd annual and has been reliving that high for years as the host (Finkle VI). However, she is an embarrassed that this one event was the highlight of her life, and suppresses its importance (Finkle VI). She treats the bee as a complex sporting
event, providing tidbits of information and moves the bee along. Rona’s goal is to make the day a complete success for the contestants and for it to move to move along smoothly (Finkle VI). At the beginning of the show, Rona relives her winning spelling bee moment on stage and is broken from the memory when contestants arrive (Finkle 1). Rona tries to make the children feel better about winning or losing the bee by adding that, “each of them is already a winner” (Finkle 7). She sings about how a person’s life changes once are handed the trophy, like she was, and how they have many stories to tell but one shouldn’t brag (Finkle 3). Even though Rona knows that Olive hasn’t paid her entrance fee, she bends the rules in which she strictly adhered to (Finkle 7). She seems to sympathize with Olive as she helps her, “learn how to stand like a champion” (Finkle 31). She also bends the rules when she answers the phone for Olive when her dad calls. She adds that it is a hard age for both the girls and the boys. The girls are not suppose to admit they really want to win and the boys are suppose to say they want to win but really wonder if they are good enough (Finkle 31-32). Rona admits that one of her favorite moments of the bees is when the unexpected happens and the one person you think is going to win doesn’t leaves lots of possibilities (Finkle 39). We learn that Rona leaves Putnam County and travels the world bringing the spelling bee to the unfortunate in places such as Latvia, Sweden and Republic of Guinea-Bissau (Finkle 77).

She falls in love a cashew farmer and becomes one of the top realtors in the Republic of Guinea-Bissau.

**Vice Principal Douglas Panch**

Panch works at the Lake Hemingway Dos Passos Junior High where he is frustrated because he cannot get a promotion (Finkle VI). Unlike the spellers, he has never found anything that he was ever that passionate about (Finkle VI). He unhappily gets a call about filling in for the bee that morning but becomes excited once he know he might be able to impress Rona, the hostess, who he has known for years (Finkle VI). Rona announces that Panch is returning after a five-year hiatus because the usual announcer is unable to attend (Finkle 7). Panch admits that he is in a much better place after the incident five years ago and a change of diet has helped him imminently (Finkle 7). Panch adds that Rona won the spelling bee herself and even remembers the word she won with, Syzygy (Finkle 7). He provides definitions and word uses in sentences is very odd, such as “Billy, put down that phylactery—we’re Episcopalian” (Finkle 19). Panch has a breakdown when he is giving the word Sluice to Schwartzy who keeps stalling (Finkle 60). He finally breaks down and yells, “Why don’t you quit stalling and spell the damn word!” (Finkle 60). Rona berates him and Panch breaks down further admitting that he will never become principle and storms off the stage (Finkle 70). He returns a moment later, stating that he apologizes for the incident but he in his defense he is lactose intolerant. Panch has a soft moment at the end as he sees Olive upset after losing the bee and makes up a story that the second place winner gets a twenty-five dollar award, which pays for her entrance fee (Finkle 75). We learn that Panch found his passion in life, which resulted in Rona Lisa taking out a restraining order after his tireless “courting” of her (Finkle 76). He admits he was just happy to have, “the opportunity to experience love” (Finkle 76).
Mitch Mahoney

As part of a community service assignment, the tough built Mitch Mahoney has become the comfort counselor for the spelling bee (Finkle vii, 8). He feels clueless about how to provide comfort to these children and provide a wider perspective about how losing isn’t that big of a deal (Finkle vii, 38). Mitch admits that, “life is unfair, life is pandemonium” (Finkle 24). He talks about how he wants to tell the children that, “disappointment doesn’t last—but from what I’ve seen disappointment lasts like hell” (Finkle 38). He wants to, “beat them up a little so they understand that pain has degrees and this means nothing,” (Finkle 38). He understands that words don’t matter but he has witness that words can kill (Finkle 38). He sings comfort to the children who lose the bee, telling them that they are extremely smart and that they should leave with pride (Finkle 40). Mitch later decides to permanently volunteer as a comfort counselor for bees across the nation (Finkle 77). He keeps in contact with many of the contestants (Finkle 77).

Olive’s Mom

She is on a 9-month spiritual quest in an Ashram in India (Finkle 14, 31). She sings in Olive’s vision that she has depression and if Olive starts to feel sad she should blame it on her (Finkle 62). Olive counters that her mother never responded to the letters she sent to her (Pg 63). Olive had secretly packed to join her mom in India but she never responded (Finkle 63). Olive’s mom sings to her that she loves her very much and is very proud to of her (Finkle 62-63).

Olive’s Dad

He never actually appears at the spelling bee but calls at one point in which Rona talks to him (Finkle 58-63). He is working late and unable to attend the event (Finkle 5). In her fantasy, Olive imagines that her dad sings to her his love and support (Finkle 62-63).

Carl Grubennierre

Carl is the more intense trainer of Schwartzzy and extremely competitive. He doesn’t want her take a break while they are training, explaining that she has to build up her endurance (Finkle 26-27). Carl reminds her that they and God hate losers when he comes up on stage to fix her clothing (Finkle 46). He calls her birth mother her BM, which upsets Schwartzzy (Finkle 47). Carl Dad is extremely aggressive about winning, spilling coke on the floor in order to sabotage Barfee (Finkle 61).

Dan Schwarz

Dan is the more laid back about Schwartzzy’s training, asking Carl to take a break in training so that she can have a snack (Finkle 26-27). He tells Schwartzzy that no one likes a loser but that she is winner and he has faith in her (Finkle 46). Dan defends Schwartzzy when Carl calls her mom her BM saying that it upsets her (Finkle 47).
Leaf’s Mom, Leaf’s Dad and Leaf’s sister

They are all more academically gifted than him and scoff that he has the intelligence to be in the bee (Finkle 11, 27).

Jesus Christ

A deity called down by Marcy as she asks for a harder word and then as council in her time of moral need (Finkle 57). He explains to her that she can make her own decisions and he doesn’t care what decision she makes (Finkle 57).

IV What happened before the play began

Each contestant has competed at their school bee and has won, or has now been bumped up to compete. Panch has been called in to be the prompter and Mitch has been assigned as a comfort councilor. Chip won the bee the year before, beating out Barfee, who had an allergic reaction. Chip did not place well at nationals but Marcy was in the top ten. Coneybear came in third place at his school’s bee but because the first and second place winners could not attend, he was called in.

V what is the function of each character in the play

Each competitor becomes each other’s protagonist or antagonist as they all compete to win the bee. The parents pressure the kids as their own antagonist either with their constant pressure to win, taunting or by their inability to be they’re for their child. Rona and Panch push the show along providing stability and Mitch provides the audience with a voice upon the stage as he questions why these children are pushed too hard.

VI. What happens in the play?

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling bee is presented on the stage. Contestants are brought up upon the stage and compete to be the winner of the bee. One by one they are disqualified by missing a word, either by mistake, distraction or by choice. Two children are left, Olive and Barfee and ultimately Barfee wins the Bee. In the epilogue, we find out what happens to each contestant in the future.

VII What is the play’s themes

The play deals with the either the extreme pressure we place on our youth to win and succeed or the lack of there of. Mitch is the voice of reason throughout the play, wanting desperately to explain to the children that this is just a stepping-stone in life and that this much pressure on children, and people, is not healthy. He doesn’t know how to comfort or allow the children some relief and watches the events on stage with shock and awe. This play shows us what these young people are really thinking and feeling under the disguise of their normal faces. They learn things about their limits and themselves through the show and so does the audience.
Appendix 2: Emotional Response Collage
Appendix 3: Portrait Gallery

25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee Portrait Gallery

The Contestants

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Olive Ostrovsky</th>
<th>Leaf Coneybear</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcy Park</td>
<td>Loganne Swartzlind/Gruenenere</td>
<td>William Barfee</td>
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25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee Portrait Gallery

The Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roma Lisa Perretti</th>
<th>Vice Principal Douglas Pennch</th>
<th>Mitch Whhoney</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Olive’s Mom</td>
<td>Olive’s Dad</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Swartzy

MEAN PEOPLE WEAR FUR

FREEDOM TO WRITE

Miss Do-Goods fights INTOLERANCE

47
Barfee

(penny for scale)
3/4" wide
metal triangle
crosspiece

Tres Chic!
Olive’s Mom
Leaf's Family-Males
Leaf’s Family-Females
Catholic Versions of Jesus
# Appendix 5: Costume Buy/Pull List Example

## 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

**Actor Name:** Gabe Templin  
**Character Name:** Leaf Coneybear  
**Date:** 2/2/10  
**Sketch #:**

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Appendix 6: Costume Rough Renderings

Charlito "Chip" Tolentino
25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre
25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

William Morris
Barfee
Olive's Dad
Marigold Coneybear
25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Leaf's Dad
25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Coneybear
Sibling
Jesus Christ
Appendix 7: Final Color Renderings

26th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Charlito "Chip" Tolentino
Appendix 8: Costume Fitting Pictures Example

Leaf Coneybear: Gabe Templin

Individual Slides: Leaf Coneybear

The Contestants

Group Slide: The Spelling Bee Contestants
Appendix 9: Costume Dressing Lists Example

Leaf Coneybear: Gabe Templin

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<td>Colander hat</td>
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## Appendix 10: Costume Wardrobe Check Lists Example

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Appendix 11: Production Photos

Entire cast of 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

From L to R: Leaf Coneybear, Chip Tolentino Marcy Park, William Barfee, Olive Ostrovsky, Logainne Schwartandgrubenniere “Schwartzy” and Rona Perretti
From L to R: Mitch Mahoney, Vice Principle Panch, Rona Perretti

From L to R: Coneybear sibling (youngest female), Coneybear sibling (male), Coneybear sibling (female), Audience member as a Coneybear sibling, Coneybear Dad, Marigold Coneybear, Coneybear Mom, Leaf Coneybear
Work Cited


