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

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

A Thesis Presented
by
DENNIS R. BERFIELD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in Partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Theater

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

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DEDICATION

To my Mother, Gail.
To my Father, Dennis.
And to my Brother, Rodman.

Thank you for your love and support on this three-year journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to congratulate my peers whom I have had the honor to work and study alongside these three years while at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dawn Monique Williams, your creative directing spirit has not only made working with you a pleasure, but you always generate an incredible energy that captures the creative spark in your actors and your design team. Thank you.

Toby Bercovici, your imagination challenged my creativity to design a beautiful world that waits beyond this life in Night on The Galactic Railroad. Your interpretation and vision of the production served as a guiding light. Thank you.

Johnathan Hicks, Thad Kramer, and Jessica Greenburg, as three extremely talented lighting designers who have all come from different places, you all have clear distinct styles that define a production. What is most encouraging is that through our three years at UMASS I have had the pleasure to work with each of you. During those productions I cannot help but to smile at how far we have all come as artists. Thank you all.

To the Dramaturgy graduate students. I cannot express enough gratitude for all of your hard work during a production as well as the intense time it takes to select a season as diverse and as rich of life as the ones you have selected during our time together. Finally, I'd like to thank the UMASS Department of Theater faculty and staff for your professional guidance and support.

ABSTRACT

A PROCESS OF DESIGN:

THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE

MAY 2011

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Directed by: Professor Miguel Romero

A collaborative process, when implemented for a theatrical production, not only reinforces a design team's ability to tell a story, it supports a artistically unified design that can be communicated easily to all members of a production team regardless of their production role. The information within this thesis is documentation of a collaborative process between the Scenic Designer and the production team for the University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Theater's production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee by Rachel Sheinkin with music and lyrics by William Finn. Preliminary design images, model photographs, Autodesk AutoCAD design plates, and Google Sketchup renderings all serve as steps to communicate scenic design ideas to this collaborative process. The musical was performed on the Rand stage in the Fine Arts Center in December of 2010.

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CHAPTER 1

PRE-PRODUCTION

The Story

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a one-act musical written by Rachel Sheinkin with music and lyrics by William Finn . Starring in it are six distinctively unique middle school students, three equally unique “grown-up” adults and four audience volunteers that differ per-performance. The overall theme to the musical focuses on personal growth. Unlike most traditional stories where the audience is witness to a protagonist overcoming a conflict with the antagonist, the young contestants of the Spelling Bee each possess a certain naivety about life. During the production, the contestants as well as the adult figures discover, in their own way, that there is more to life than winning and that not winning does not necessarily make one a loser.

The first time I read and listened to the music for the production, I was curious as to how Dawn, the director, wanted to approach our production. As I read the play, I imagined sitting in an old auditorium. I specifically thought of tacky banners and cheap decorations that could be purchased out of any buy-in-bulk party magazine that may have been circulating in the teacher break room. But later, I had the realization that this Spelling Bee competition was an event for the characters involved. In the eyes of the children, this would be a memory they would remember for the rest of their lives regardless of the decorations purchased.

Research

My research began with a conversation with the design team, a conversation

guided by the action of the story, which sparked creative ideas. Different opinions were developed about the play, but collectively our ideas were to simply reinforce the storytelling. Our story was simple: create a world where middle school contestants could compete for the spelling bee championship trophy.

In order to begin developing ideas for the set, I began searching for images from Scripps' Spelling Bee competitions. I discovered several competitions that took place throughout the United States that were being held in every public space imaginable. Gymnasiums, auditoriums, multipurpose rooms, and even churches were some of the possible settings for our production. However, one of my main goals was to invoke a feeling of nostalgia through the design.

The production could be produced with eleven chairs, a microphone, and a desk, however for our production, we wanted to create a space that could incorporate the theater house into the spelling bee competition. Through this need, we decided to re-create a middle-school multipurpose room. A multipurpose room in our memories was a large room where students would have lunch, school assemblies, and gym class. The design team felt that once the audience members walked into the Rand Theater, they were literally walking into the official Putnam County Spelling Bee (of Massachusetts Amherst). I made this choice so the audience could relate to the awkwardness of each contestant and reminisce about their own experiences as a middle school student.

Design Concepts

The look of our multipurpose room consisted primarily of a false proscenium, a portal, and a back wall with two doorways (see Final SBM 1.jpg). The false proscenium would be attached to the house tormentors and secured via the most

downstage line set batten. The first portal would be flown and suspended also by a line set approximately mid-stage between the false proscenium and the back wall. Jacks would support the back wall, which had two sets of double doors, and perhaps a third line set would also be used to support it. The spacing between the false proscenium, first portal and the back wall would allow for entrances from the wings, side light access, and a sense that the multipurpose room extended further into the wing space of the Rand stage.

Now that the design team had decided on a specific environment for *Spelling Bee*, we needed to concentrate on the specifics. The stage space would be divided into four distinct areas. For the student contestants, we decided that they would be sitting on gymnasium bleachers located stage right. The adults would be sitting at a judges table placed stage left. Down stage center is reserved for the microphone stand and center stage was reserved for dance space for musical numbers. With these clearly placed areas, our characters could have their “moment in the light.” During each “moment” (see Image: I’m not that Smart2.jpg), the rest of the cast could engage in the scene either as their main character or as a double without taking the focus away from whichever character was at the microphone. Having these distinct areas also allowed lighting to create isolated pockets of light for the characters. Also, we wanted a clear separation between the adults and children to easily establish the simple hierarchy of the characters (see Top of Show 3.jpg).

The designs of the properties for the production were clearly described in the text. A list was compiled and discussed with the director, and procurement began immediately. Only a few props on the list were altered according to the needs of our production. The only prop that elicited any concern with the design team was the fact

that the script called for a character to pour soda onto the stage deck in order to sabotage one of the contestants. This moment called to question a few needs of the set. The first would be for the floor paint treatment not to smudge, fade, or peel up off the deck. The next need was whatever liquid we used to emulate soda was not to run off the stage, stain the Rand Theater carpeting, splash onto the costumes, or damage any foot lights.

After a few tests with different products and actual soda, we decided to use a diet-soda product that was cut one-third with water. The diet soda, which did not contain sugar, would not damage the floor paint treatment, and the costume designer was not as worried about stains if any splashing happened. Lastly, in order to keep the soda from running off stage, the pouring would happen further upstage away from the apron edge, and another actor would clean up the excess only a few minutes after the soda was poured.

Finally we had to choose colors. Although the majority of my research on middle school interiors brought up newly-built school buildings, I did not want to present a “brand new” feel for the design, nor did I want the multipurpose room to appear old or dilapidated. I simply wanted the space to appear to be in use. For the paint treatment, I decided that the school would have two kinds of paint treatments. The first being the original institutional colors of the building (see image Spelling Bee paint Texture Sample.jpg) and the second would be a treatment of the school's district colors (see image Spelling Bee Set Banner.jpg).

My instinct for the institutional colors of the school consisted of an off-white for the upper walls and a light, olive green for the cinder block lower sections. Although these colors would work in a real school, they were not ideal for the lighting

designer or costume designer, mainly the upper off-white wall, because the color was too light. The lighting designer would not be able to isolate the characters as well as he would like to due to the light bouncing off of the set and illuminating parts that he was consciously trying to remove from specific moments. After discussing with the design team, I decided to shift the off-white color to a darker hue. The challenge now was the darker I went with the color, the more the multipurpose room looked less like a middle school and more militaristic. However, after a few color tests and adding a rough texture to the paint, the design team came to an agreement.

CHAPTER 2
PRODUCTION
The Final Design

As the design progressed, the needs of the director changed, but the setting of the overall design did not. The false proscenium, the first portal, and the back gym wall all remained a part of the design. In addition, the spelling bee contestants' bleachers needed to spin 360 degrees during the musical number "*Life is Pandemonium!*" (see image Pandemonium). Also, a rope swing was needed for an actor to swing from the bleachers stage right, to the judge's table stage left. The decision to add these two technical elements enhanced the storytelling and provided a chaotic element to the multipurpose room. Another technical element that was added to support the storytelling was a door located in the center of the upstage gymnasium wall (see image Jesus Entrance). This allowed for the sudden and unexpected entrance of Jesus Christ, who visits Marcy when she contemplates excelling at yet another skill and winning the spelling bee competition.

The majority of the actor's potential interactions with the technical elements were discussed with the design team outside of rehearsal and then were tested as soon as each element was integrated into rehearsal. However, Jesus Christ's entrance caused the most difficulty when lighting was introduced during technical integration. This moment was supported by a smoke machine and an upstage light that was intended to cast a silhouette of the actor as he stood upstage of the hidden doors. Unfortunately, the fog dissipated too quickly, and the audience would be able to see the actor's face clearly. To correct this issue, the director decided she wanted the actor

to walk through the hidden doorway, interact with a character down stage center near the microphone, and then exit back through the hidden doorway. The lighting designer approached the moment differently. Instead of casting a direct silhouette of the actor while he was standing in the hidden doorway, he illuminated the back cyclorama to suggest a softer, more shadow-like silhouette. Lastly, the costume designer made alterations to the actor's costume to support a more clear Jesus Christ silhouette.

For the orchestra pit, we decided that it would be placed in sight of the audience located offstage in the house separated from the audience by a knee-high partition. This choice added to the spectacle of the musical and opened up backstage space. It also eliminated the need for a monitor in the orchestra pit in order for the conductor to give and receive visual cues to the actors.

The Scenic Breakdown

The scenic breakdown serves as a guide to the director and design team to clearly communicate the action of the play scene by scene. In its most basic form, the scenic breakdown consists of four necessary columns of information: the act and scene number, the characters involved in the scene, a brief synopsis of the scene action, and the environment of the scene. A scenic breakdown does not need to be limited to four columns, however, it must contain the four previously mentioned.

For The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee the design team added a “song” column to incorporate any specific actions that might involve scenery. For our production we had three technical elements that were particularly worth noting. The table below is my scenic breakdown that the design team used during our initial design meetings early on in the process (see table 1).

Table 1 The Scenic Breakdown

Act # Scene #	Characters ' Name	Synopsis	Environment	Song
Pre- Show	NONE	NONE	Middle school Aud. Prepped for a Spelling Bee. Banners hanging from the walls from school related awards. Portable bleachers set up for spellers and a table for the judges. Center stage, a microphone on a stand.	NONE
1,1	All	Rona enters US through gymnasium doors. Making last min preparations for the bee. When she suddenly flashes back to when she won the spelling bee. We are introduced to all the	Students and Judges are excited with the start of the Spelling Bee competition. Returning competitors enter the space with immediate confidence, while newer	“At the Spelling Bee”

		contestants as they check into the bee. 4 Aud Vol. Are brought up onto the stage.	contestants hesitates and are not sure where to go.	
1,2	All	Panch explains the official rules of the spelling bee. We meet Schwarzy who writes on her arm before she spells a word. Leaf was actually 3 rd place runner up for his bee. Also we learn that Leaf snaps into a trans when we spells.		“Spelling Rules”
1,3	All + 4 Aud. members	We learn that Olive is waiting for her dad to come from work, not only to watch his daughter in the bee but to pay the \$25 entrance fee.	Now is when one of the 4 Aud. Members are eliminated.	“Saved a Chair for My Dad”, “Goodbye #1”
1,4	All (-1) Aud. member	Panch and William show signs of tension between each other as Panch miss-pronounces Williams last name. And Williams arrogant seems arrogantly confident that he will win the bee.		
1,5	All (-1st) Aud. member	The spellers scream and shout about how unfair the spelling be can be. Simply because some spellers get easier words than others.	World becomes chaotic, Bleachers spin, gym rope swing flies in. Spellers dance and jump all over the bleachers, and the judges table. Spellers pull Aud. Vol. Into musical dance.	“Life is Pandemonium”
1,6	All (-1st) Aud. member	Leaf divulges into his own fantasy revealing that he doesn't think he is that smart. By the end of the song his confidence is boosted and has confidence him himself		“I'm not that Smart”

		rather that at the expense of his peers opinions.		
1,7	All -2 Aud. Vol.	Williams best chance at winning the spelling bee is his magic foot.	2 nd Aud. Member is eliminated.	“Magic Foot”, “Goodbye #2”
1,8	All -3 Aud. Vol.	Chip is distracted by Leaf's sister Marigold. And is eliminated		“Pandemonium Reprise”, “Goodbye #3”, “My Friend the Dictionary”
2,1	Chip, William, Olive	Chip returns revealing that once you are eliminated from the spelling bee you help sell PTA snacks.	Chip enters through the house and interacts with some Aud. members. Also he is giving candy out for “free”.	“Unfortunate erection”
2,2	Spellers, Mitch, Rona, Panch, Carl, Daniel	Schwarzy's dad's come up on stage and interact with the spellers. With Schwarzy's intense training her family has taught her that losing is no an option.		“We Hate Losers”
2,3	Rona, Panch, Leaf, William, Olive, Schwarzy, Marcy	After what seems to be hours and hours of spelling, Leaf is eliminated from the spelling bee		“I'm Not That Smart” Reprise, “Goodbye #4”
2,4	Rona, Mitch, Panch, William, Olive, Schwarzy, Marcy, Jesus	Marcy is the type of student who is good at everything. Until she speaks to Jesus. Then she is eliminated.	The back center wall opens up to reveal Jesus. He enters through it and exits through it.	“I speak six Languages .”
2,5	Rona, Mitch, Panch, William, Olive,	Panch mentally and physically loses it and attempts to attack William. Carl dad comes	Diet coke is spilled around where the microphone is.	

	Schwarzy	up onto stage attempting to sabotage the magic foot.		
2,6	Rona, Mitch, Panch, William, Olive, Schwarzy	Olive day dreams that she is back home with her mother and father who both love her deeply.	Moment is very isolated on Rona, Mitch, and Olive.	“I Love you song.”
2,7	Rona, Mitch, Panch, William, Olive, Schwarzy	After William realizes he no longer needs the magic foot. Schwarzy, feeling guilty about what her dad did claims she can win the spelling bee on her own, only to misspell her next word.		“Goodbye to Schwarzy”
2,8	Rona, Mitch, Panch, William, Olive	Olive, and William go head to head. Olive is excited to meet a new friend, So is William. When Olive miss-spells her word winning the bee is in Williams reach. Although he isn't sure if he should throw the bee in order to stay friends with Olive. He hesitates and Olive tells him its okay.	Panch presents William a giant check and Spelling bee trophy. Confetti cannons fire on “champion”	“Will I come in Second?”, “Champion!”
2,9	All -4 Aud. Vol.	Everyone returns to the stage for epilogue and bows.		“Finale”, “Final Goodbye”, “Bow Music.”

Properties List

A properties list is compiled of all the essential props of a production and design by the scenic designer. The list may consist of hand props; small props, used by the actors, and consumable props, such as food, liquids, confetti, etc. A typical props list consists of four columns (see table 2). The four columns are a prop number, what the specific prop is, what page it is first used in the script, and what actor uses it. A more informative props packet is discussed with the props master, scenic designer and the director, which includes research images, necessary function of the prop, and any other needs that may be required of the prop.

With a list compiled and distributed to the production team, everyone is aware of what props need to be added or removed depending on the actions of the play or the needs of the director.

Table 2 The Props List

Prop #	Prop	Page	Actor
1	Microphone & Stand (x2)	1	Company
2	Trophy	1	Rona
3	Contestant Placards x6 (plus Aud. Vol.) (Costumes)	1	Rona & company
4	Entry Form and contestant paper work	3	Marcy
5	Clipboard of Aud. Volunteers	5	Rona
6	Large Savings Bond Check	7 & 69	Rona/Barféé
7	Bell	9	PanchGailden85
8	Offical Looking	10	Panch

	Spelling Ledger		
9	Phone on Desk (SFX)?	11	Marcy
10	Candy (assorted)	41	Chip
11	Peanut M&M's thrown at Barféé	41	Chip
12	Camera (working flash?)	44-45	Carl
13	Cell Phone	52	Marcy
14	Coke or Pepsi (diet in normal bottle)	57	Carl
15	Wallet	70	Panch
16	Cash (\$25)	70	Panch
17	American Flag	Set	Company
18	MA State Flag Flag	Set	Company
19	Judges Desk	Set	Teachers

APPENDIX A
PHOTOGRAPH MATERIAL

Contents:

PHOTOS

_5431504814.JPG.....	ONLINE
Champion Banner1.jpg.....	ONLINE
Champion Banner2.jpg.....	ONLINE
Champion.jpg	ONLINE
Final SBM 1.jpg.....	ONLINE
Final SBM 2.jpg.....	ONLINE
Final SBM 3.jpg.....	ONLINE
Final SBM 4.jpg.....	ONLINE
I'm Not That Smart 2.jpg.....	ONLINE
I'm Not That Smart.jpg.....	ONLINE
Jesus Entrance.jpg.....	ONLINE
Judges Table.jpg.....	ONLINE
Magic Foot.jpg.....	ONLINE
Pandemonium 2.jpg.....	ONLINE
Pandemonium 3.jpg.....	ONLINE
Pandemonium .jpg.....	ONLINE
Prelim SBM 1.jpg.....	ONLINE
Prelim SBM 2.jpg.....	ONLINE
Final SBM 5. jpg.....	ONLINE
Final SBM 6. jpg.....	ONLINE
SBR1 .jpg.....	ONLINE
SBR2 .jpg.....	ONLINE
SBR3 .jpg.....	ONLINE
SBR4.jpg.....	ONLINE
SBR5.jpg.....	ONLINE
Spelling Bee Banner.jpg.....	ONLINE
Spelling Bee Check.jpg.....	ONLINE
Spelling Bee Paint Texture Sample.jpg.....	ONLINE
Spelling Bee Set Banner.jpg.....	ONLINE
Top of Show2.jpg.....	ONLINE
Top of Show3.jpg.....	ONLINE
Top of Show4.jpg.....	ONLINE
Top of Show.jpg.....	ONLINE

APPENDIX B

DOCUMENTS

Contents:

DRAFTING

CLSection.pdf	ONLINE
Ground Plan.pdf	ONLINE
Designer Plate 3.pdf (D3)	ONLINE
Designer Plate 4.pdf (D4)	ONLINE
Designer Plate 5.pdf (D5)	ONLINE
Designer Plate 6.pdf (D6)	ONLINE
Designer Plate 7.pdf (D7)	ONLINE
Designer Plate 8.pdf (D8)	ONLINE