A Note from Artistic Director—Michael Unger

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a brilliantly conceived, hilarious, and heartfelt musical that has the delightful distinction of integrating four volunteer audience members into the action of each show. This unique combination of a wonderfully-crafted score and script, and inspired improvisation, offers Skylight audiences a one-of-a-kind experience.

Some people say that directing is 50% casting. Without casting any aspersions (see what I did there?) on directors anywhere; in my experience, I feel it can sometimes be a far higher percentage. I had the immense pleasure and honor of co-directing (alongside its gloriously zany creator, Rebecca Feldman) the world premiere production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee in The Berkshires in 2004. Spelling Bee is a prime example of how some shows have more elasticity than others in which a cast will custom fit a production to their theatre and their audience. The personalities of the original cast of this show informed the script, score, and all productions that followed on myriad levels. The exuberant and delightful cast you are about to meet is taking what is on the page and refreshing Skylight’s production with tons of personality, sublime silliness, and great heart. With Brian Cowing’s refreshing and witty direction and choreography, he and his team have created a Spelling Bee that is very much their own... and yours. I know this show, in this place, will tickle all of our funny bones, warm our hearts, and remind us of the quirky misfits we may remember from our pasts; or even, if we are willing to admit it, the endearing misfits we may find within a small part of ourselves.

Getting into Character—Brian Cowing, Director

Spelling Bee has been one of my favorites for a long time. I’ve gotten to experience it as an actor, choreographer, an audience member, and I’m so delighted to be directing it here at Skylight Music Theatre. What pulls me back to this show is the joy of creativity, invention, and fun that happens when you step into the rehearsal space. No two productions of Spelling Bee are alike - every director, choreographer, designer, and actor, bring something into the room, and are allowed to bring a part of themselves to the production.

Casting this show correctly is one of the hardest parts of the process. You need people that are open to improvisation, experimenting, and really bringing something new to the table every single day. This, along with singing a William Finn score, dancing, being able to spell, and understanding comedy with the range to play more emotional scenes, may seem impossible. I’m happy to report that this cast can do it all!

Early on in the rehearsal process, during a dinner break, one of the actors started ‘question of the day.’ They would present an icebreaker question for the cast and staff to answer. This turned into the whole cast learning about each other during their lunch hour every day — it’s a director’s dream! Through their answers to these questions and how they reacted to other cast members’ answers, I started to realize how similar they were to their Spelling Bee characters. So, I posed some questions for them: What words connect you and your character? What is the biggest similarity between you and your character? What is the greatest difference?

As you can see on the following page, there is a part of each of them in these roles. Bringing truth to these characters is what makes Spelling Bee successful. We’re not trying to play kids or play for the laughs; we live truthfully in what we bring to the Bee. The show is universal in so many ways – we all have lived through these moments of success, defeat, joy, and sorrow. I’m so lucky to get to work with these brave, boisterous, and beautiful people.
Olive Ostrovsky, played by Amanda Rodriguez

Passionate – Quirky – Tender-hearted
Similarity: The greatest similarity between me and Olive is that the thing we're passionate about helps bring us out of our shells! I was extremely shy as a child and getting into theatre really helped me become the bubbly, outgoing person I am today. Likewise, Olive's love for words and spelling help her get out there more and make connections!

Difference: Our level of competitiveness. It takes Olive some time to get into a competitive spirit; she's generally a passive kid unless it's something she's really passionate about. I, on the other hand, have a healthy competitive spirit; I'm not going to get super mad if someone else wins, buuuut I will cheer, dance, cartwheel, kazoo, etc. if I win!

Leaf Coneybear, played by Ryan Stajmiger

Adventurous – Dreamy – Absent-minded
Similarity: I think we're both just happy to be here and prove ourselves while having fun in the process. Neither of us like to take themselves or their surroundings too seriously.

Difference: I tend to think things out, often to the point of way over thinking them. Coneybear has a way of being surprised by everything, including himself, that took me a while to connect to.

Logainne SchwartzandGrubenierre, played by Kaylee Annable

Competitive – Compassionate – Energetic
Similarity: Our competitiveness. Logainne's dads push her to such an extent that she is extremely hard on herself, as am I. We both want to be the best at everything we do and if we fail, we take it out on ourselves.

Difference: Her love of government. I am a democrat and liberal at heart, but I don't follow politics or involve myself with government policies hardly at all. Logainne is so opinionated and driven to make a difference (which is something I admire).

Chip Tolentino, played by Yando Lopez

Nerdy – Distracted – Competitive
Similarity: Wanting to be the best at something and taking pride in being the best at something. Also being soooo competitive.

Difference: I'm not a sore loser and Chip still hasn't outgrown that.

Marcy Park, played by Kendyl Ito

Tired – Focused – Strong
Similarity: That feeling of being misperceived is probably the greatest similarity I share with Marcy. I can relate to Marcy's aspiration to be seen for more than what others have determined for her.

Difference: Marcy is excellent at spelling, and I am NOT. While Marcy also has natural ease and expertise in everything, I DO NOT.

William Barfée, played by James Carrington

Sensitive – Loud – Passionate
Similarity: We both have deep insecurities, we hide them differently, but they are definitely there. We are both guarded and touchy, yet we are both passionate about the things we love and live in our own worlds of imagination and creativity. We are dedicated and ambitious about achieving our goals and most of the time that gets us far but sometimes it comes back to bite us in the butt.

Difference: Barfée has no sense of social cues. He's not aware of other people's feelings and emotions, unlike me, where I'm a bit of a mama bear.

Douglas Panch, played by Robby McGhee

Lonely – Sarcastic – Curmudgeon
Similarity: Panch and I are not fans of toxic masculinity. We don't like it when someone questions our authority or wastes our time. We are NOT very good at dancing.

Difference: Doug Panch has spent his whole life building walls, never falling in love, assuming everyone is against him. I love everyone, and immediately assume the best in most people.

Rona Lisa Peretti, played by Samantha Sostarich

Confident – Dependable – Quick-witted
Similarity: I love Rona's passion for her love of spelling and wanting to share that with others. I also love sharing the joy I find in my hobbies and passions.

Difference: I have never been a "good" or confident speller. Though use of computers with built in spellcheck has finally drummed certain mistakes out of my head.

Mitch Mahoney, played by Shawn Holmes

Comforting – Loyal – Empathetic
Similarity: Mitch seems to be intimidating at first. But once you get to know him, or he warms up to you, Mitch is very kind and comforting. I've been told that about myself.

Difference: Well I'm not an ex-convict. Nor do I wear blinged-out jewelry. And I'm not too big on wearing Timberland shoes.
IT’S BEEN A LONG SPELL

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee started as an original, non-musical play, C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E, created by Rebecca Feldman and was first performed by The Farm, a New-York-based improvisational comedy troupe. The show held its first full production in a cafeteria-turned-theater (a cafetorium).

Feldman transformed the play into a full-length musical with music and lyrics by William Finn, and book by Rachel Sheinkin, with additional material by Jay Reiss. In February 2004, the show as workshopped and then given a full, world premiere production in July 2004 at Barrington Stage Company in the Berkshires, co-directed by Feldman and Michael Unger, now Skylight’s artistic director.

When the show moved to Off-Broadway’s Second Stage Theatre, in 2005, it quickly sold out its original stay and was extended due to glowing reviews and powerful word of mouth. This production won several awards, among them the 2005 Lucille Lortel Awards, Outstanding Musical and 2005 Drama Desk Awards, Outstanding Ensemble Performance.

Spelling Bee premiered on Broadway at the Circle in the Square Theatre on April 15, 2005 earning excellent reviews and box office success. It closed on January 20, 2008 after 1,136 performances and 21 previews. The show was nominated for six Tony Awards, winning two, including Best Book (Rachel Sheinkin) and Best Featured Actor (Dan Fogler).

The Broadway cast album was released on May 31, 2005 and nominated for a Grammy Award.

The show continues to thrive and has spawned numerous productions in the United States, and many other countries.

A LETTER TO THE CAST FROM REBECCA FELDMAN
(Original Show Creator)

Dear Skylight Spelling Bee cast,
What a thrill to learn that you will be performing Spelling Bee at Skylight Music Theatre.
This show means a lot to me because it came from the desire to create something fun and alive with some very dear, very unemployed friends in New York back in 2002. I never dreamed it would touch as many people as it has. I consider it one of the great gifts of my life. Know that every single one of these characters contains within it the inner child of the people who originated the role. This is your chance to give that awkward freakshow who lives inside you a chance to shine. Thank you for pouring your heart into these roles.
I always came in second when I was a kid. Now I have a husband and two kids so I come in fourth but that’s another story. Every time the show is performed somewhere, I feel like a winner.
Enjoy!
Break a leg.
Warmly,
Rebecca

(Rebecca Feldman during rehearsals of the world premiere production.)

HE HAS THE LAST SAY
When it comes to spelling, the final decision what’s correct always seems to be “according to Webster”.

Noah Webster Jr. (October 16, 1758 – May 28, 1843) was an American lexicographer, textbook pioneer, English-language spelling reformer, political writer, editor, and prolific author. He has been called the “Father of American Scholarship and Education”. His Blue-backed Speller books taught five generations of American children how to spell and read. Webster’s name has become synonymous with “dictionary” in the United States, especially the modern Merriam-Webster dictionary that was first published in 1828 as An American Dictionary of the English Language.

Born in West Hartford, Connecticut, Webster graduated from Yale College in 1778. He passed the bar examination but was unable to find work as a lawyer. However, he did find some financial success by opening a private school and writing a series of educational books, including the Blue-backed Speller. He was a strong supporter of the American Revolution and the ratification of the United States Constitution. In 1793, Alexander Hamilton recruited him to move to New York City and he became an editor for a Federalist Party newspaper. A prolific author, he began publishing newspaper articles, political essays, and textbooks. He served in the Connecticut House of Representatives and founded the Connecticut Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1791.

In 1806, Webster published
HOW A BEE GOT INTO SPELLING

The word *bee* probably came from the Middle English *bene* (meaning "prayer", "boon" an "extra service by a tenant to his lord"). As it traveled down through various dialects it eventually became "bee". We now have quilting bees and sewing bees and all kinds of bees where folks gather for a specific task.

A spelling bee is a competition in which contestants are asked to spell a broad selection of words, usually with a varying degree of difficulty. Spelling bee students usually start competition in elementary school or middle school. Classes compete against other classes in the same grade, or level. On an individual level, school spelling bees determine which child will represent his or her school at district, state and national competition.

The spelling bee concept is thought to have originated in the United States, although spelling bee events are now also held in other countries around the world. The earliest evidence of the phrase *spelling bee* dates back to 1850, although an earlier name, *spelling match*, can be traced back to 1808. An impetus for the contests was Noah Webster’s spelling books. First published in 1786 and known as *The Blue-backed Speller*. Webster’s spelling books were an essential part of the curriculum of all elementary school children in the United States for five generations.

Spelling bees became widespread across the United States during the 1800s, as a way to motivate students to learn standardized spelling. These spelling bees were usually held within individual schools and towns, and were not nationally organized. In 1905, the National Education Association (NEA) held what it called the "first national spelling bee" at its convention in Cleveland. Marie Bolden, a young, African-African girl from Cleveland, was named champion. The first truly National United States Spelling Bee was started in 1925 by a Louisville, Kentucky newspaper, *The Courier-Journal*. The winner, eleven-year Frank Newhouse, also won the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C that same year.

In 1941, the Scripps Howard News Service acquired sponsorship of the program; the name of the contests was eventually hanged to the *Scripps National Spelling Bee*. Besides competitors from the U.S, several competitors have come from Canada, the Bahamas, and New Zealand and European countries.

In the United States, spelling bees are annually held at local levels up to the level of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which awards a cash prize to the winner. It is now sponsored by English-language newspapers and educational foundations. Since 2006, the National Spelling Bee’s championship rounds have been broadcast live on network TV. The contest’s final authority for words is the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*.

You don’t have to be a kid to show off your spelling skill. In 1996, a national Senior Spelling Bee started in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Sponsored by the Wyoming AARP, it is open to contestants 50 and older.