

Press from:

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Subject: Behind the Scenes of the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

The New Providence High School Drama Department is not your average drama department. Versatile students switch from cast to pit, crew to cast, and pit to cast and every other iteration every year, and this year was no exception for the production of ***The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee***, the 2021 Spring Musical.

In addition to the talented cast, there are two additional indispensable groups of students without which the show could not go on - the Crew and the Pit. Everything behind the scenes happens because of the Crew - Production Crew, Lighting and Sound, and Show Crew. The 2021 production might have a smaller cast, an uncomplicated set and a few, minor costume changes, (along with a wildly hysterical set of quirky characters and storyline), but the crew's work is no less voluminous. Sound and sound cues abound and lighting remains indispensable to setting the mood of any production.

Senior Matthew Melhuish articulated perhaps what everyone is thinking, "Social distancing is definitely a difficult aspect because there won't be as many personal scenes within the show. In terms of sound, we aren't able to adjust anything on one's (person), so we will have to teach everyone how to properly put on a mic pack and much more."

Regardless of the parameters surrounding Covid restrictions, many of the crew could not wait to participate in an in-person musical production in any way, shape or form. These four freshmen are thrilled to be able to participate in crew for ***The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee***. Brianna Wycko, first year crew member, wanted to participate because so many of her friends recommended Crew. Also a first year member, Patrick Fanning, has been looking forward to working on Crew for "a long time". He will be working the spotlight for this production, and is eager to learn all he can.

Dylan Ohnsorg and John Pitarresi both started their crew journey last year with the Fall production of ***Clue*** then the spring musical, ***Little Shop of Horrors***. Ohnsorg "... wanted to participate in this production because I love to build stuff and work with my hands. ... Crew is the highlight of my week most weeks." Pitarresi, who finds the allure of building sets a huge draw to Crew, adds "(Crew is) family because they need to work together seamlessly."

John Russo and Craig Duke are the masterminds behind the Scenic Design and Construction, creating set features that work seamlessly into the performance while simultaneously enhancing the performance. Leslie Ditta (Choreographer) observes "Every show offers new choreography experiences.." Staging and choreography use the entire stage and makes this unique production all the more dynamic!

Challenges for Van Lawler, sophomore, in this performance “include taking over a higher roll in the booth. (He) finds being around the people that are there and the work we have to do quite fun. And it’s always cool to see how everything is worked up to make a performance.” Freshman Dylan Mangel started on construction in 7th grade, but now “runs the soundboard as well as the sound engineering.” Every programmed sound (for example, a telephone ringing) is pre-programmed through the soundboard prior to the performance. Sophomore Alex Robson is the lighting design side in the booth. He reveals he has, “grown in this role ever since I was in 7th grade starting off in crew with people like Alex M and Alex P teaching me the basics that start me on my journey in crew.”

NPHS Crew members are assisted and mentored by Alumni Technical Advisors Will Zagorski (2016), Pat Lamanna (2018) and Alex Periera (2019). These alumni work tirelessly to help students continually grow and evolve, able to take on new responsibilities and challenges in every aspect of Crew.

Craig Duke, Director, has commented, “It’s a nice tradition and really helps the current crop of students to feel they are a part of something important, long-lasting, and worthy of their time and hard work.” And work hard, they inevitably do on EVERY level.

NPHS’s production of ***The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*** consists of possibly the smallest Pit in school history, with just five (5) NPHS students performing plus Mr. Hess on the piano. However, it is also the longest run of a production in years, with six performance opportunities over two weekends. Pit is not only an extremely satisfying experience, but is a family in itself, that integrates into the larger musical theater family almost at the end of the process. No musical is complete without - well - music! And a LIVE musical experience, versus pre-recorded tracks, transports the audience into another level of overall musical theater enjoyment altogether.

Sophomore Alex Robson, a longtime crew member, performs double duty as a Pit member playing drums this year. Senior Daniel Aranda, current cast member, could be called ‘the artist formerly of the Pit’, but he is thrilled with his new role. “After being in the pit orchestra for two years, it’s interesting to go through the process of choreography and staging, and I love being able to have experienced both worlds. And while the musical is a large commitment outside of school, the end result is absolutely worth it.”

Four year pit veteran and student leader, Caitlyn DeMarco, echoes this fact in her sentiment, “Comparing this year to previous years of pit orchestra, we have a much smaller group and still manage to pull off a show worthy performance.” Caitlyn, despite being an accomplished percussionist and exceedingly conversant in person, does not humor this writer by providing lengthy remarks. Her twin sister, flutist Alyssa DeMarco, tends to be a tad more generous with her keyboard. Even with the current restrictions, Alyssa expunges, “The experience was always about the people you worked with, so I was still looking forward to the musical even with the restrictions.”

Pit is often overlooked. During rehearsals, the cast members are all over the place - in the chorus room, in the auditorium, learning lines, music, staging, and choreography. Crew is busy in every nook and cranny of the auditorium - in the booth with the technical aspects, on the stage, behind the stage, building, moving, buzzing. But pit - - - pit is in the band room rehearsing once a week. Additionally, each member is memorizing and perfecting individual instruments on their own. Tech week brings it all together, and the show comes to life.

Mr. Huy Ho, now in his eighth year as the pit orchestra director for NPHS's spring musicals, cannot hide the fact that this is one of his passions. Junior Molly McPoland reflects, "He's a really good conductor and a great musician, but he's also just a lot of fun to work with. The musical is really intense and demanding and the music can be pretty difficult, but Mr. Ho helps us keep our sanity." Alyssa DeMarco adds, "Mr. Ho always holds us to a high standard. It can make the beginning of the season really daunting, but it really pays off when we perform."

Performing in the pit is no small accomplishment. Sophomore Cameron Silver, first year alto sax player, adds "Pit is certainly a very different experience than other musical programs. In regular bands, you play with a fairly sizable group, but in the pit, the group is a lot smaller. This year especially, there are less people than ever. Pit also introduces the unique need to play along with a performance, whereas a regular band only has to coordinate amongst itself." Molly adds, "It's a lot more demanding than most ensembles, in a way somewhat similar to marching band. One is extensive months of work while the other is compressed into a few weeks, but both demand devotion that makes the end result so rewarding."

But perhaps Caitlin Alongi (Music Director) sums it up completely. "High school theater is **important**. To the people on stage, behind the scenes, and to the community. ...The situation in which we currently find ourselves reminds us how important high school theater is, and how resilient and passionate the people who create it are. Broadway may not be back, but in the little world (and big hearts) of the NPHS music wing, music and theater is alive and well. It has, as it always does, brought us back to life."

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a [musical comedy](#) with music and lyrics by [William Finn](#), a book by Rachel Sheinkin, conceived by Rebecca Feldman with additional material by Jay Reiss. The New Providence High School production is directed by Craig Duke, Leslie Ditta (Choreographer), and Caitlin Alongi (Music Director).

Tickets are available for the final three performances this weekend.

April 30th at 7:30 pm

May 1st at 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm

General Admission: \$12.00

Only 150 seats available per performance!

Please arrive 20-30 minutes before your show to check in, get a temperature check and be seated. Please note that the audience will be seated in groups of 2 socially distanced. Once seated please stay seated and maintain distancing. Masks will be required of the audience and staff at all times.

Please visit the [New Providence School District website](#) to purchase tickets.

