

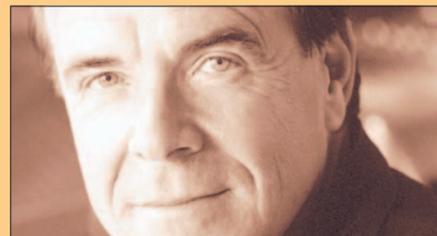
FUSION

A&E + STYLE + SOCIETY

► Misha's back

Return of pianist

Misha Dichter's career was in jeopardy until surgery saved the use of an ailing hand.
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THINGS TO DO ►► Pan-Asian Music Festival brings a world of melodies to Stanford. Page C3

Radio days: Cal Pops plans '30s style fun

BEST BET DEPT.: The first time I saw the California Pops Orchestra, about a year ago, I was sitting in the front row by myself, waiting for the music, when a classy chassis sashayed past.

OK, here is a reference to the phrase "classy chassis": In the 1940 film "They Drove By Night," Humphrey Bogart checks out Ann Sheridan, and says to George Raft, "Nice chassis, huh, Joe?" Raft responds, "Classy chassis." Well, That dialogue goes on a bit, more or less ending when she says "Who do you think you're kidding? You couldn't even pay for the headlights."

I had no idea what that meant when I was a kid and watched that scene on TV.

The phrase also showed up often in pulp fiction from about the 1930s on, which is kind of neat regarding why I mention it here, which is that the classy chassis who walked past me at that Cal Pops show was singer Ann Gibson, who was completely dolled up in some kind of fancy and beautiful gown that would have been right at home in the finest places in the 1930s.

Gibson is a show woman who likes to get dolled up and sing, which is what she is going to do on Feb. 21 with the California Pops, in "The Big Broadcast of 2010."

The fun part of this show — and let's face it, all the Cal Pops shows are fun — is that the concert is billed as "Comedy, Adventure and Great Music in a tribute to those great '30s live radio shows."

And yes, the esteemed Ms. Gibson is part of the show, as are the Cal Pops Radio Players, impressionist Matt Helm,

radio actor Alan Dale, The Bumblebee Buglers and The Zucchini Gulch Xylophone Trio. Music will be "from Gershwin to Glenn Miller."

The California Pops is a 60-piece orchestra, conducted by Kim Venaas, and sells out a lot of its shows. Which is why I mention it here. Get your tickets early or you may not get them at all. The show takes place at 3 p.m. Feb. 21 at Venture Christian Church Theater, 16845 Hicks Road, Los Gatos.

Cal Pops is largely a Palo Alto aggregation, and used to also *perform* in Palo Alto. Maybe it will again sometime. But this show is Los Gatos only. Tickets are \$10-\$30. Get them at www.californiapops.org or 650-856-8432.

ALACRITY ALSO ADVISED DEPT.: Another event very likely worthy of speedy ticket-buying is "An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein" at Palo Alto's teensy Dragon Theatre. This is a show I had been hoping to see, but events have conspired to keep me away. I urge you to go anyway, because it sounds like a lot of fun.

The show is 10 bits written by Silverstein, culled from some of his many works for theater. The show is directed by Kathleen Normington and features William J. Brown III, Caitlin Dissinger, Drew Jones, Norman Luce, Joey Sandin and Claire Slattery.

I believe the Dragon people when they say this show is for adults.

The last shows in the run are today and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.

Tickets are \$16-\$20. Credit cards online, or cash or check at the door. The Dragon seats 42 people, so get there early. 1-800-838-3006 or www.brownpapertickets.com/event/92329.

The Dragon is at 535 Alma St., Palo Alto, right across from the Caltrain parking lot.

SECOND RULE OF JOURNALISM DEPT.: I blush to mention it, but some candy arrived in the office for me this week, and what with Valentine's Day coming, my heart was briefly warmed. Then I remembered that I write this column, and that Anni Golding, owner and pastry chef of Gâteau et Ganache in Palo Alto, probably just wanted me to mention her goods in the paper.

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John Orr / Daily News

The 4-piece Anniversary Box from Gâteau et Ganache commemorates the company's fifth year. Rasperry and dark chocolate with little hearts for Valentine's Day.

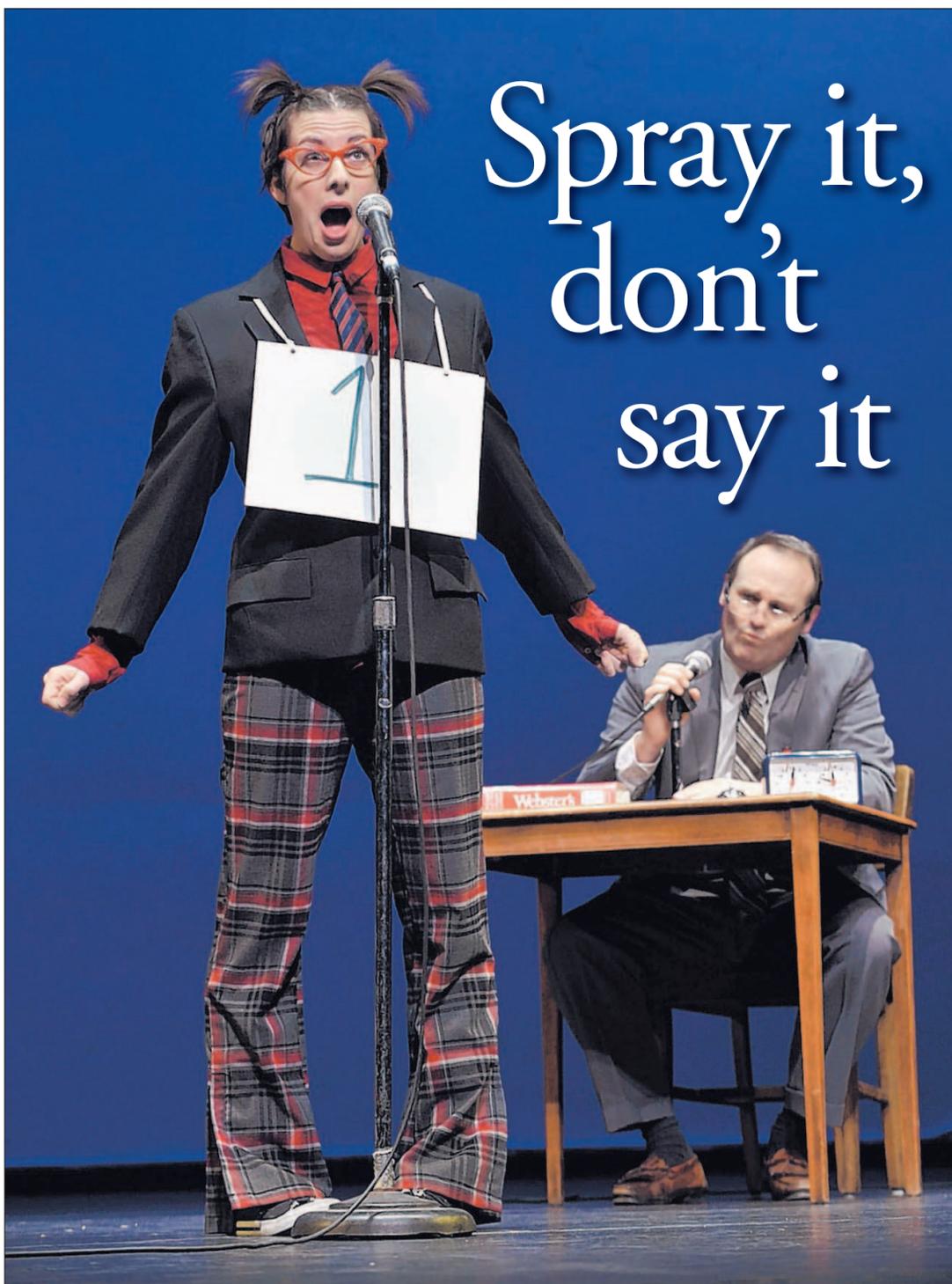


Photo by David Allen

Kateri McRae, left, as Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre, and Scott White as Vice Principal Douglas Panch, in Foothill Music Theatre's production of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

Kateri McRae takes on the lispiest kid in show biz

BY JOHN ORR
Daily News Arts and Entertainment Editor

Kateri McRae has all the crispness in her voice that one would expect from a post-doctoral student at Stanford who is soon to leave for an assistant professorship at the University of Denver, where she is director of the Automaticity, Affect, Control and Thought Lab.

But that crispness is overwhelmed by the charm and laughter that often and easily bubble out of her in conversation, especially when she talks about playing Logainne Schwartzandgrubenierre, youngest and lispiest of the main contestants in "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

That immensely delightful show opens Feb. 19 at Foothill Music Theatre, directed by the great Jay Manley. McRae, who in her day job sticks people in magnetic resonance imaging machines and watches their brains as she tells them to control their emotions, loves getting to be a kid again, as Logainne.

"It's amazingly fun," she said, during a phone call in late January. "It's almost ironic to say this, because the contestants in the play are so tightly wound. But it's fun to go back to a time in life where you could just have only one focus, one thing that mattered. As I get older, I find that less and less the case. Whatever I am doing, I always have three or four other things competing for my attention."

McRae was, in fact, on the eve of a birthday during the interview with The Daily News, and said playing Logainne, who is the adopted daughter of two overbearing gay men, "definitely takes a little bit of the edge off turning 30. Four hours every night in rehearsal I get to pretend to be a child. It's a fun way to ease that transition."

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" is a delightful one-act musical about a regional spelling bee held in the gym of a middle school. The six main

THEATER PREVIEW

WHAT: "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

PRESENTED BY: Foothill Music Theatre
Where: Lohman Theatre, Foothill College, 12345 El Monte Road, Los Altos Hills.
(Note: The Lohman is at the bottom of the hill.)

WHEN: Opens Feb. 19. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; 2 p.m. Feb. 27 and March 6. Closes March 7

TICKETS: \$10-\$26; 650-949-7360 or www.foothill.edu/fa/bee/

contestants each have their own quirks, as do the three adults who oversee the bee. The show opened on Broadway in 2005, running for 1,136 performances and picking up two Tony awards, then began a successful road tour, and now is seen in lots of regional productions, such as this Foothill show.

No two performances are ever the same, which is true of all live theater, but more so in "Putnam County" because each show adds four volunteers from the audience to serve as spelling contestants, and because whoever plays Vice Principal Douglas Panch, who reads the words to the contestants, is given lots of freedom in the script, and in fact is often played by improvisational comics.

McRae has seen the show five times, including the Broadway show and last year's excellent production at San Jose Rep Theatre, but this is her first time performing in it.

Molly Bell, who played Logainne in the San Jose Rep show, is McRae's voice teacher.

"I really enjoy the vocal training," McRae said. "I never had decided to pursue theater as a career — but it is a very serious hobby. I am naturally a singer, but it's been really interesting to find out the ways I can use my natural strengths to

produce a wider variety of sounds. I used to have one vocal quality. Not I can use my voice more ways. My voice is more versatile, more professional sounding."

Part of the fun of "Putnam County" is the glossary of words asked of each contestant. For instance, Leaf Coneybear, the child of former hippies who makes his own clothing, usually is given the names of South American rodents to spell. South American rodents with really funny names.

Logainne, who has a massive lisp, is given such words as strabismus, sluice and cystitis.

The microphone, says McRae, bears the brunt of all her lisping.

The show is certainly funny, but it is also very touching. The "tightly wound" contestants, as McRae calls them, all have difficult emotional forces driving them, and as the play develops the audience gets to reflect on what kind of things we do to our children when we push them too hard to be competitive.

Marcy Park, for instance, the "poster child for over-achieving Asian." She speaks six languages, is a champion of hockey and rugby, plays Chopin and Mozart on multiple instruments, sleeps three hours a night and hides in a bathroom cabinet. She is not allowed to cry.

Logainne, McRae's character, is very intelligent and politically aware, but her story becomes increasingly sad as we realize the emotional pressure brought to her by her two gay fathers.

Leaf, who enters a trance to spell, insists in one song that "he's not that smart." His family is on hand to enforce that idea.

In this production, Leaf is played by David Cates, who is McRae's beau in real life.

"He and I were cast opposite each other in 'Bat Boy' last year," McRae said. "We were sort of one of the couples. We both thought it was a great casting choice, and decided to get together."

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