

It's Barfee vs. Conybear

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Fierce rivals among characters in 25th Putnam County Spelling Bee



Kyle Gillis stars as William Barfee, front, and Anders Balderston as Leaf Conybear in the Theatre Arts Guild's production of the 25th Putnam County Spelling Bee, which opens Thursday at the Pond Playhouse in Halifax. (TED PRITCHARD / Staff)

William Barfee, a nerd with a mucous membrane problem, and goofy, innocent Leaf Conybear, are part of a group who are all weird in their own way.

They are among the competitors in the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, a musical comedy by the Theatre Arts Guild opening tonight at Halifax's Pond Playhouse.

While William and Leaf are fierce rivals, the actors portraying them, Kyle Gillis and Anders Balderston, are good friends whose careers keep crossing paths.

Gillis, who grew up in Antigonish, and Balderston, a native of Stratford, P.E.I., first acted together in 2010 in *Anne and Gilbert* at the Harbourfront Jubilee Theatre in Summerside.

In April 2012, at the Cunard Centre in Halifax, they starred in *Titanic: A Fated Voyage*, a dinner theatre production commemorating the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Both bari-tenors, they made their Neptune Theatre debuts as members of the ensemble in *Sweeney Todd* in September.

Gillis, whose company TheatreSpeak was invited to be company-in-residence at the Nova Scotia High School Drama Festival in Halifax in May, recruited Balderston to be part of [title of show] where they performed for "300-something happy high school kids."

And even before *Spelling Bee* wraps on July 7, they'll begin rehearsals for *Forever Plaid* running at Chester Playhouse, July 17 to 27.

"Since Anders has been here (in Halifax), we've done every show together," says Gillis, who suggested Balderston audition for *Spelling Bee*.

"It's nice to work with friends."

Balderston settled in Halifax after the *Titanic* show last year. The Tony Award-winning 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, directed by Jolene Pattison, will be his guild debut.

The "kooky" Leaf is a role he played in Toronto during five years "trying to live the dream" after graduating from theatre school at Acadia in 2002.

He says he's happy to be reprising his role as Leaf, who doesn't have a lot of friends and is in the spelling competition because of pure luck, as he came in third in his division and the first two had to drop out.

"He's truly happy to be there, win or lose. William is in it to win it."

William, who can come off as abrupt, but is brash and soft on the inside, wants to see the good in people, says Gillis, who has been based in Halifax since 2005 after graduating from the Canadian College of Performing Arts in Victoria.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a two-time Tony Award-winning play, including best musical, that opened on Broadway in 2005.

"It has a cast of 12, including six spellers who are trying to qualify for the nationals. It also includes three volunteer spellers from the audience," says
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Gillis whose character has to spell words including lugubrious and crepuscule.

"It's a great show, fun and funny, the characters are diverse and the music is gorgeous and the harmonies great. It's quirky and the volunteer participation keeps us on our toes."

"It's a really smart show," adds Balderston, noting Leaf gets a lot of "rodent words" in the spelling bee of which capybara — a giant guinea pig — is the hardest.

This will be the third guild production for Gillis, who also starred as Curly in Oklahoma and in Norm Foster's Drinking Alone, both in 2009.

He and Balderston are looking forward to Forever Plaid, which begins a week of rehearsals July 2 in Halifax under director-choreographer Mary Lou Martin, before shifting to Chester.

"It's a show that's been on my performing bucket list since I saw it at the Charlottetown Festival in The '90s," says Balderston. "I'm a huge lover of harmonies and the show is entirely barbershop quartet a cappella. It's a dream come true."

In Forever Plaid, which also features Simon Gordon, Geordie Brown and musical director-piano player Andrea Dickinson, the group is on its way to perform a show when they die in an accident, explains Gillis.

"They come back to perform the show they never got to perform."

Gillis is Frankie, the leader of the pack. Balderston is Jinx, who he describes as "awkward and shy and prone to nosebleeds."

"The character I play is a true tenor, it's challenging and exciting. In Spelling Bee, it's a mid-level range and Jinx is up in the stratosphere. I'm nervous but excited at the same time," says Balderston.

"The harmonies are really tight and there are some really tricky lines," continues Gillis. "The music wasn't written specifically for the show, it's familiar music of the '50s and '60s."

And while staging for Forever Plaid hasn't been finalized, the stars have hints they may be sporting some Nova Scotia tartan when the show opens on July 17.

25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee

Presented by: Theatre Arts Guild

When: Tonight to July 7, Pond Playhouse, 6 Parkhill Rd., Halifax.

Performances Wednesdays to Saturdays at 8 p.m.; June 30 and July 7 at 2 p.m.

Music and lyrics: William Finn

Book: Rachel Sheinkin

Director: Jolene Pattison

Musical director: Scott Taylor

Starring: Margaret Champion, Ian Young, Andrew Chandler, Karen Myatt, Karla Bruce, Rebecca Guilderson, Kyle Gillis, Brian Hart, Anders Balderston, Rayna Smith Camp, Christine Chapman, Krystyna MacKay

Musicians: Scott Taylor, Craig Jennex

Tickets: \$16, \$13 students, seniors and TAG members. At www.ticketatlantic.com (<http://www.ticketatlantic.com/>), 451-1221, Atlantic Superstores and (cash) at the door.

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