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Gables mayor spells it 'a-c-t-o-r'

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Coral Gables Mayor Donald Slesnick gets an easy word -- at first -- in the "25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" production at Actors' Playhouse

There were some familiar faces amid the bunch of brainiacs on stage at Actors' Playhouse's opening night performance of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.

Last Friday, sitting on the bleachers of a middle school gym during a spelling competition among the screwball kids, were four guest spellers you might have seen around town in their regular roles. Among them, Coral Gables Mayor Donald Slesnick and WFOR-CBS 4 meteorologist Lissette Gonzalez.

OK, maybe they were a bit (ahem) older than the scripted adolescents in the play, but they were no less game. And no less responsible for spelling words correctly lest they be bounced from the spelling bee — l-o-s-e-r — by one of two actors who play comical judges.

It was "all in good fun," explains Actors' Playhouse Artistic Director Barbara Stein. During the show's three-week run, which ends Feb. 13, a representative from the theater scans the audience in the lobby as patrons arrive for each performance and looks for four potential participants. Those who agree to take a part in the production get a "role" and sit on the bleachers with the actors.

“It’s not preplanned at all,” Stein said.

As in a real spelling bee, the chosen members of the audience are told beforehand that they can ask the “judges” to use the given word in a sentence or define the word. That’s about all the script they get. A tiny bit of stage direction at first. No real prep. Whether they ad-lib or not, well, that’s up to the, uh, actor.

Gonzalez was a musical theater major at the University of Miami so a little give and take came naturally.

Slesnick? His only repertoire comes from the political stage. “But he’s a generally fun guy,” Stein said.

Slesnick sailed through the first few rounds, did a little soft shoe dance with the character of Logainne Schwartzandgrubenniere the lovely, lisping lass with two daddies, and delighted the audience with his constant grin.

“I wasn’t sure if it was a square dance or what,” Slesnick said, laughing after the play. “It was a lot of fun. My wife and I hold season tickets so they knew we were coming and Barbara called that afternoon and asked would I like to do that. I try to be a good sport,” Slesnick said. “Until I got to the theater that’s all I knew and I had not seen the play before.”

The experience opened his eyes to what real actors go through. “It teaches you that it’s not just fun and games to be an actor. I would go berserk if I had to repeat those lines every night. Those people work hard and have to put the same energy into the 20th night.”

Slesnick was finally stumped and sent packing. We can’t give away the word that threw him — lest we give an edge to the next person who gets his part — but here’s a hint: It means “the dung of dogs or hyenas, which becomes white by exposure to air.”

Is that any kind of word to give to the mayor of The City Beautiful?

“I did complain after that. I would like a singing part next time,” Slesnick teased.