

Spellbound

No, this is not a revival of the 1945 Hitchcock psycho-thriller, but an utterly different animal: a documentary film about the 1999 National Spelling Bee. If this sounds both thin and cornball, don't give into that feeling, for the show is both touching and tense, a vibrant competition with smart, interesting kids, and--by the by--a paean to American diversity and spirit.

The set-up is traditional as eight regional bee champions are presented in eight vignettes, describing each contestant and their family. The kids portrayed--12 to 14 years old--provide a wonderful, heartening geographic and ethnic mix. They include: the calm Indian-American girl Nupur Lala from Tampa, toothy, bouncy Harry Altman from Glen Rock, New Jersey, taciturn Ted from small-town Missouri, cool, confident Emily Stagg from upscale New Haven. The childrens' parents are just as varied, with Mister Kadarnia, a recent Indian immigrant, driving his young son Neil by coaching him hours a day, Ubaldo Arenivar, a once-illegal Mexican farmer living in rural Texas and his Angela, bright with intelligence and braces, and the Digideos, an Ohio couple not unlike the Archie Bunkers (dad runs a saloon) and their shy, studious little April.

A special focus for local moviegoers is Ashley White, DC's regional spelling champion. Ashley is a chipper young African American 13-year old who lives with her single mom and a younger sister in Southeast ("two of her uncles are incarcerated" her mom says). She attends--at least the film intercuts scenes from--Hine Junior High School, right in our neighborhood. She is a smart, self-motivated striver, one of those miracle kids who--on their own--aims to achieve. Her teacher at school says calmly that "Ashley has no peers," by which she does not mean that she is just the smartest kid in the class, but, much more poignantly, that Ashley, in her intelligence and drive, has no one around like her. She is alone, yet dogged to succeed.

Director Jeff Blitz has made compelling narrative sense out of these several young lives, lives which reveal multiple layers even if the children that have lived them haven't experienced many years. He must have had to shoot tons of material (the film was shot in digital video) to get enough of the best spelling prospects for the national finals. Besides doing the shooting, his editing task--which took three years--must have been mind-bending.

With the stage set for our eight juvenile protagonists, the last third of the movie concentrates on the ultimate bee in the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown D.C., where 249 national finalists--out of nine million kids--compete. Here, clever editing gives us the built-in drama of the National Spelling Bee itself, contestant after contestant struggling with their (hellacious) words, their parents agonizing, the never-changing baritone drone of the word reader, as, one after another, the kids we have come to identify with drop off the podium and head to the "comfort room." The boys and girls triumph and stumble over "ecclesiastical," "lycanthropy," "paraclete," "banns," "hellebore," "terrene," and... But I won't tell you the winning word or winning child. For that, you have to become *Spellbound* yourself.

("Spellbound" is rated "PG" and is appropriate for almost any audience.)

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