

*Spellbound* Jeffrey Blitz, 2003

The Spelling Bee. A contest that would strike any non-American as odd, to say the least, and that consists in trying to spell difficult words correctly after having heard them pronounced.

But even if American viewers could be more prone to consider this forty-odd years old tradition as an institution, it seems that Jeffrey Blitz himself also takes an interest in the inner value of such a contest. *Spellbound* follows eight spellers and their parents on the road to the finals of the tournament, taking close looks at their training, expectations, and ordeals. And it is progressively, through numerous angles, interviews and situations, that this contest is dissected, for a purpose that may seem hard to grasp at first.

The most prominent clue about what Blitz is trying to do is perhaps in his very explicit will of looking at contestants from very different origins : from Orange County to housing projects of Washington D.C., from immigrants to typical "white" girls, every social category and class is inspected with equal care. Running with the idea that this contest is presented as the meeting point of families from all America, one can not but end up wondering whether the utility of the contest itself is important : for being a strange, not really fun activity, that doesn't really bring consistent benefits to its

top performers, perhaps spelling is an extremely pure, abstract competition, and in that regard, the most able to reveal something about the confrontation of ambition and concurrency.

And those elements are indeed there, too : from the nerve-racking stress of the parents, to the support and discipline they bring to their kids, from stoicism to pessimism of the children, there is another stunning variety of colors and shades at the heart of this movie : how to create, live and deal with pressure and a competitive spirit. It is in fact from this very simple basis of a seemingly pointless contest that Blitz also achieves the creation of a stupendous thriller, filled to the brim with emotions, tension and suspense.

In the end, the sheer range of expectations and reactions of parents and children makes it very hard to retain any particular insight or wisdom on the mechanics of such a contest. Since the most tension-ridden scenes are painfully hard to watch to some, like one of the contestants, they will probably be happy to be finally out of it, and able to have a life afterwards. But watching this Quichottesque quest towards a simple and plain goal, they will have maybe glimpsed at something universal that they can share and understand, shown with a perfect mastery of tension-building.