

Bee-lieving in Robe

Posted on July 29, 2026

The 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee final week whittled nearly 250 genius spellers from across the USA and around the world down to 10 super spellers who spelled off a thrilling live televised finale to the famous contest. The event was staged for the first time in a new venue, the DAR Constitution Hall in Washington DC.

Lighting 'Bee Week' – also for the first time – was John Viesta, invited by executive producer Michael Davies, who wanted to ramp up the intellectualism and intensity of the event, transforming it from a spelling competition to prime time TV edutainment, complete with more tension, suspense, and theatrical drama.



Photos by E. M. Pio Roda for Scripps National Spelling Bee.

John has recently become a fan of Robe products, especially iFORTES for key lighting. Having used them on last year's *BravoCon Live with Andy Cohen* show in Las Vegas, delighted with the results, he again specified iFORTES, adding 90 to the lighting plot for this show, together with 75 x Robe iSpiiders, plus some other fixtures, all delivered by rental vendor Main Light.

This more gameshow style of Bee Week presentation was directed by Michael Dempsey and inspired by bringing a *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* vibe to the grand finale. The event and production have been getting increasingly sophisticated and refined in recent years, and in 2025, it celebrated its centenary.



Photos by E. M. Pio Roda for Scripps National Spelling Bee.

John worked closely with the creative team, including set designer Bruce Ryan, and the scenic fabrication crew from Legacy Scenic, as the production staging was installed in the venue's presentation hall space.

John's two favorite key phrases for this project were 'prime time vibe' and 'specificity' and all his lighting concepts were based around these.

The iFORTES and iSpiiders were used to light the contestants, set and audience, with the iFORTES delivering all the key lighting and specials.

“After using iFORTES in Las Vegas, I really felt that we had unlocked a new formula for TV – they are simply GREAT lights,” he enthused, adding that throughout the whole Bee Week, the iFORTES functioned faultlessly.

It was a very large room and once the lights were rigged on the overhead trusses, they were not easy to access, so reliability was an asset.

John had not used iSpiiders before, but for this show, he needed quantities of good-quality wash lights, and Main Light had these available.

Their primary job was to light the audience, which contained lots of parents, relatives and friends of the contestants, all of whom were very invested in the action unfolding onstage as the young spellers demonstrated their impressive brainpower.

“I was pleasantly surprised at the power of the iSpiiders,” admitted John, adding that he only had to run them at 20% to get the required nice even audience and set washes in different shades.

He also appreciated that the iSpiiders can be pixel mapped, and are “great for commercial bumpers” as well as for some slow, very subtle undulating texturing and movement.

An absolute key to finding the right aesthetic for Bee Week was unleashing that bit of prime-time razzamatazz, but without making it distracting – effectively a perfect balance, so the viewers got excited, but the spellers also remained fully focused on their task in hand.

The constant interaction between the spellers and the judges also needed to be captured for TV, and here John explained that the high CRI and the shutters of the iFORTE were ideal for repeatability, enabling the framing of people with attractive soft pools of controlled light.



Photos by E. M. Pio Roda for Scripps National Spelling Bee.

John hugely enjoyed being part of the process of transforming the Spelling Bee final into this more dynamic and invigorating environment, commenting that he, Michael Davies and Michael Dempsey were all very much aligned in the vision and storytelling of the project.

"I absolutely loved the experience," John declared, "In fact it's become my favorite show of the year to light so far!" Furthermore, he appreciated the educational aspect, learning some cool words that he didn't realize existed!

John worked alongside lighting director Tyler M. Perry, lighting programmer Bob Going,

supervising gaffer John Salzmann, gaffers Tom Thayer, Eric Kasprisin and Nkosi Mason, head production rigger Shawn Robinson and production rigger Nick Fedeli.

The 2026 Scripps National Spelling Bee was won by 14-year-old Shrey Parikh from San Bernardino, California, following the third Spell-off in Bee history. He correctly spelled 32 words, a new record for the Spell-off. His winning word was “bromocriptine,” a polypeptidealkaloid derivative of ergot that mimics the activity of dopamine!