

Review:

'Legally Blonde' at the Paramount is pink, silly and plenty of fun



Casey Shuler plays Elle Woods in "Legally Blonde" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora. (Liz Lauren photo)

Kerry Reid, Chicago Tribune

Omigod you guys! Sisterhood is awesome!

If you want a show that celebrates female friendship with flying colors (mostly on the pink end of the spectrum), then have no fear — Elle Woods is here. And while a rich white girl from Malibu may not be most people's idea of an underdog, [Paramount](#) Theatre's sparkling and big-hearted production of "Legally Blonde" makes the case for this film-to-stage musical as more than another cynical, money-grabbing vehicle based on a popular movie.

As in the 2001 Reese Witherspoon film, the 2007 musical shows us that there's more to the pretty woman of Delta Nu than her fashion sense. She also has a warmhearted sensibility that grows stronger under the heat of romantic disappointment and academic pressure. Spoiled? For sure. Malicious? No way. Ultimately, it's Elle's faith in other people that helps her find faith in herself.

And with Casey Shuler's sharp performance at the Paramount, Elle is in good (and perfectly manicured) hands. Shuler is terrific vocally, but her ability to raise the roof doesn't disguise the blend of ebullience and vulnerability at Elle's center. Director/co-choreographer Trent Stork knows how to balance the ridiculous and the near-sublime throughout most of the show.

Yes, the story of a girl following her ex to Harvard Law School doesn't start from a place of empowering feminism. (For that matter, neither did the 1990s Keri Russell vehicle, "Felicity," where the title character moved from California to New York because of a high school crush. At least Elle had a real relationship with the callow Warner Huntington III.)

But stick with it and the show grows on you, without getting too bubble-gum sticky. Stork and his cast know that this is a silly show about some serious stuff — including sexual harassment from a law professor (James Rank) who favors interns with a certain look. (Fiction, right?) It makes its feminist points with sparkle and flash.

In fact, one could argue that Elle is the spiritual descendant of Billie Dawn in "Born Yesterday" — another woman prized mostly for her pulchritude who learns (admittedly with the tutoring of another man who is attracted to her) to prize her brain and challenge corruption and injustice.

But what makes "Legally Blonde" really sing (other than the efficient, if not wholly memorable, pop-rock score by Laurence O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin) is its focus on the feminine relationships. Heather Hach's book mostly follows

the original, but there are some key changes that enhance the message of trusting other women to lift you up.

Yes, the polished female professor played by Holland Taylor in the film is gone. But Vivienne Kensington (Jacquelyne Jones) evolves from being the Mean Prep Girl who takes Elle's place in Warner's future plans when he decides he needs a Jackie, not a Marilyn. She believes Elle at a crucial moment — something that sends a particularly strong message today. And the musical treats Tyler Lain's Warner a bit more kindly than the film does. He's clueless — but probably as much out of his element as Elle is at Harvard.

There's also the "Greek chorus" — a trio of Elle's sorority sisters who pop into her head to deliver atta-girls when she needs them. As embodied by Lucy Godinez, Sara Reinecke and Kyrie Courter, they're a cheering section with dance chops and the perfect antidote to self-doubt.

Above all, there's lovelorn beauty salon operator Paulette, played by Sophie Grimm with goofy but poignant affection and a fantasy about finding an Irish step-dancing Adonis. (Spoiler alert: he shows up in the form of James Doherty's Kyle B. O'Boyle, aka "the UPS guy," who also gets a chance to flirt shamelessly with women in the front row.)

The easy joyous relationship between Shuler's Elle and Grimm's Paulette — two women who both need to pick themselves up from heartbreak — makes us wish we could see them spun off into their own buddy film. Accompanied, of course, by their adorable dogs, Bruiser and Rufus (played here with maximum scene-stealing effect by Frankie and Romeo, respectively.)

But Hach also fleshes out the connection between Elle and sympathetic Harvard alum and teaching assistant Emmett Forrest (Gerald Caesar). In the film, he's mostly mayonnaise. Here, he's a working-class kid who had to fight for the things Elle takes for granted. In "Chip on My Shoulder," he sings about

anger as an empowering force — surely something a lot of people (especially women) are connecting with in the current social and political climate.

Stork and Megan E. Farley’s choreography fills the large Paramount stage with impressive athleticism, particularly from Jenna Coker-Jones’ Brooke Wyndham, the fitness entrepreneur whose trial provides Elle the chance to prove her chops. The 2001 setting gets an update thanks to Mike Tutaj’s smartphone projections on Jeffrey D. Kmiec’s eye-catching set — itself a fine backdrop for Theresa Ham’s eye-candy costumes.

“Legally Blonde” isn’t a seminal feminist classic. Nor is it trying to be. This is a smart-but-silly show that knows its strengths and doesn’t apologize for its limitations. Like Elle, it finds a way to empower without losing its sense of fun.

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Review: “Legally Blonde” (3 stars)

When: Through Oct. 21

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$36-\$69 at 630-896-6666 or www.paramountaurora.com