Written by Thom White
Monday, 18 June 2012 06:01

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Speaking with producer Dennis Hitchcock prior to Friday's Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse performance, my partner thanked him for staging *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. And while I understand that many of Circa '21's patrons love their *Church Basement Ladies*, I share my partner's gratitude for the opportunity to see a bona-fide Broadway hit gracing Circa's stage. Having seen the production, I also appreciate how well director Jim Hesselman handled the material, playing up the bubbly, colorful fun of this stage version of the Reese Witherspoon movie.

Adapted by book-writer Heather Hach and songwriters Laurence O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin, *Legally Blonde* kicks off with high spirits, as the girls of Delta Nu – among them sorority sisters played by Cara Chumbley, Kayla Pecchioni, Mia Allessandra Berardi, and Chandler Ford – celebrate Elle Woods' pending proposal of marriage. The song "Omigod You Guys" sets the tone for the show, with its tinge of air-headed, Valley Girl effervescence backed by Hesselman's energetic and bouncy (and sometimes suggestive) choreography. These Delta Nus then continue to add to the frenzied fun throughout the musical, whether seen as Elle's sorority sisters (whom costume designer Gregory Hiatt dresses in fashionable ensembles featuring electric versions of every color of the rainbow) or as her imagined Greek chorus (whom Hiatt appropriately dresses in white).

Samantha Pauly's Elle Woods, much to my delight, does not seem an homage to her Hollywood and Broadway predecessors in the role, and appears to be her own comic creation. Perky and

positive without being ditzy, and driven and focused despite being born with a silver spoon in her mouth, I absolutely adored Pauly's Elle, and rooted for her to get into Harvard. Personally, I thought this Elle was too good for Tucker Hammock's fairly one-note ex-boyfriend Warner – despite the actor's gorgeous singing voice – but because Pauly is so likable in the role, it's easy to hope for the best for her (even if Elle doesn't realize what's best for herself).

As Elle remains focused on getting back together with Warner by showing her serious side, she's helped along by teaching assistant Emmett, an average sort of guy whose success at Harvard is hard-fought and self-made. Tristan Layne Tapscott offers a welcome, relatively understated performance as the grounded figure to Pauly's peppy princess, while Sara King easily steals every scene she's in with her spunky Paulette, the beautician who becomes Elle's good friend. With her believable East Coast accent, King uses her exaggerated movements and adept comic timing to great effect, and portraying Paulette's love interest, Eddie Staver III shows off his best comic and physical assets as *Legally Blonde*'s hunk of a UPS man.

John Payonk avoids caricature as the stern Professor Callahan, fashioning a believably condescending lawyer and singing with a pleasingly rich baritone voice. Kristin Gilbert deserves every laugh she elicits as Elle's feminist-lesbian classmate, who possesses every stereotypical characteristic that comes with the label. While Lauren Cipoletti offers an impressive, though barely nuanced, performance as Warren's college girlfriend Vivienne, her brusque superiority melts admirably as the plot approaches its climax. And Andrea Moore deserves her own standing ovation for making it through her song "Whipped Into Shape" with no conceivable breathlessness, despite performing the number while jumping rope almost the entire time. While others, on Friday, struggled to get through without tripping on their jump ropes, Moore had only one minor mishap toward the end of her otherwise flawless handling of the piece. (I was exhausted just watching the choreography; Moore didn't seem to break a sweat.)

My only major complaint with the production was that, while I appreciate scene changes taking place while the action continues – rather than the show pausing for the positioning of designer Susan G. Holgersson's versatile set pieces – a few changes on Friday were noisy enough to almost drown out the CD accompaniment, creating bigger distractions than pauses would've been. In a rarity among the Circa performances I've seen, there were also a handful of microphone issues, from mics not being turned on to their rustling with an actor's movement.

And the über-adorable Claire Meincke is also underutilized as Elle's chihuahua, Bruiser. (Though considering my fondness for the breed, I wouldn't have minded seeing her on-stage throughout the entire show, whether called for or not.)

All in all, though, I had a blast watching the show's remarkable cast perform such a fun, smile-inducing musical. A day later, I'm still singing some of its songs, which is testament to the memorability of both *Legally Blonde: The Musical* and Circa '21's gratifyingly exuberant presentation.

Legally Blonde: The Musical *runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1828 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through July 28, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting Circa21.com .*