

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 14 July 2014 06:02

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Legally Blonde: The Musical is, of course, based on the 2001 hit starring Reese Witherspoon, a movie that led to a rather woebegone sequel in 2003's *Legally Blonde: Red, White, & Blonde*

. Yet while watching the original film's stage version on Thursday, I felt that *Red, White, & Blonde*

also would've been a fitting title for Quad City Music Guild's terrifically peppy new presentation, considering that this solo-star-driven show came off, instead, as pretty wonderfully democratic.

I actually had high expectations for Music Guild's latest from the start, given the promise of its gifted cast, and the fact that I personally think the *Legally Blonde* material works better as a musical comedy than it does as a screen comedy. (As the movie's stock comic conceits, thoroughly improbable plotting, and candy-shelled adorability don't suggest any kind of "real" world, it almost seems strange when characters choose *not*

to burst into song.) But what I didn't expect from director Tristan Tapscott's production, although I most certainly should have, was that lead Lauren VanSpeybroeck would be so beautifully self-effacing in it; this is a capitalized Star Performance, to be sure, but it's one that allows numerous other luminaries to shine nearly as brightly.

Playing Elle Woods, the chipper Delta Nu sorority president who becomes a Harvard-trained

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legal whiz in just under two-and-a-half hours of stage time, VanSpeybroeck, when it's required of her, absolutely delivers the traditional musical-comedy goods. With her beaming smile and combustible energy – plus those fabulous long legs that somehow don't seem incongruous with her petite frame – you know from the performer's first seconds in the "Ohmigod You Guys" opener that you're in safe, exquisitely manicured hands. Whether enacting a singing and dancing Statue of Liberty for Elle's Harvard application or lending gorgeous, tender vocals to the downbeat title tune, or even just commanding attention during the climax's densely-populated courtroom scenes, VanSpeybroeck is everything you could want from this central figure. At times, she even manages to out-funny Reese. (*Legally Blonde's* star, here, doesn't sell punchlines so much as slip them in your back pocket when you're not looking. On Thursday, she was especially riotous when former beau Warren told Elle he was now dating the sour apple Vivienne, and VanSpeybroeck took a perfect micro-pause before offering a glazed "I'm sorry I just hallucinated what did you say?")

Yet what's particularly lovely about VanSpeybroeck is her no-biggie refusal to dominate the proceedings, even given a role, and a show, that grant her every right to. You get an early sense of this Elle's understated charms when, during the opening number, she matter-of-factly berates a female sales clerk for offering her "last year's dress at this year's price." (The multi-cast Wayne Hess plays this growly drag role, an homage, of sorts, to the actor's cross-dresser in Music Guild's 2005 *Sugar*.) But all throughout the production, VanSpeybroeck's unforced casualness extends to the way she slips effortlessly into ensemble mode during choreographer Katie Ross' dance routines, and her continual, happy willingness to cede the spotlight to the show's second bananas, particularly the sorority sisters and eventual Greek-chorus figures whom Becca Johnson (nee Meumann), Autumn Loose, and Liv Lyman portray with delirious, shrieking fizziness.



And nowhere does VanSpeybroeck's generosity as a performer serve the show better than in her scenes with Ben Holmes' teaching assistant Emmett, a lovable schlump who could easily be overshadowed by a more aggressive Elle. In this presentation, however, it feels as though the characters are on equal footing – Elle with her bashful admiration of Emmett's smarts, he with his incredulous recognition of hers – and the actors' relaxed, goofy near-flirtations and obvious affection for one another are so offhandedly touching and funny that Elle and Emmett could almost pass as lovers in a pastoral comedy by Shakespeare. (Tapscott likely has a soft spot for *Legally Blonde's* male ingénue, having played the role in the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's 2012 staging of the show.)

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Holmes is at all times marvelous here. Blessed with one of those divinely rich bari-tenors that make you smile no matter what lyrics are being sung, his vocals are spectacular, and like the musical's lead, Holmes steals laughs through sneakily subtle readings that tend to hit you two or three beats after the fact. (Upon first entering Elle's shockingly pink dorm room, Emmett surveys his surroundings and says, in a half-whisper, "Well, hell-o-o-o-o, kitty") Yet whenever Holmes and VanSpeybroeck share a moment,

Legally Blonde

is truly magical, just as it is when designer Tom Vaccaro's impressively functional set finds a courtroom morphing, instantly and brilliantly, into a bathroom. (The stenographer duly takes notes on toilet paper). And just as it is when Erin Platt's Paulette does *anything*

It's always dangerous to say "best performance yet" regarding a performer of Erin Platt's (formerly Erin Lounsberry's) consistent excellence. But even considering the competition of her previous portrayals, I'm not sure I've ever enjoyed Platt more than as *Legally Blonde's* vocally brash, inwardly blushing beautician, an exuberant East Coast life force who melts at the sight of an ample tush and shouts the word "Celtic" like it has knives attached. Frequently fall-down hilarious, never more so than when quickly considering (and even-more-quickly abandoning) the demonstration of an Irish jig, and oftentimes unexpectedly moving, Platt doesn't give even one predictable line reading here. (For added enjoyment, Paulette's deliciously tacky wardrobe selections are the finest of costumer Nicholas Munson's many great offerings.) But while, for all of the role's built-in trappings, Platt's Paulette is nobody's caricature, this is a show in which even caricatures are a terrific time: Sara Tubbs, a huge talent on whom I have an unrequited and unapologetic crush, as the sneering back-stabber Vivienne; Kathryn Martin as a honking, ultra-permed witness for the prosecution; Max Moline and Daniel Williams as a pair of acrimoniously bitchy Europeans.



As Thursday's preview performance was still technically a rehearsal, I'm hoping the show's overall sound quality was addressed prior to Friday's opening night, because lyrically, I wound up missing a *lot*. Music director Joe Maubach's 10-person orchestra played quite well, but whether it was a fault of the musicians, poor projection, or too-lowly-amplified vocals through the sound system, the singers tended to get drowned out on group numbers, and especially those with speedy tempos. Composers Laurence O'Keefe's and Nell Benjamin's wordy and articulate lyrics are frequently so clever that it's a shame when you lose them. (Thursday's

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preview was also waylaid by a few too many popping body mics, most notably when a pair of background characters played Frisbee.)

In general, designer Zach Chaplain's lighting effects had a lot of zest, but the center-stage down-light – seemingly the same one used so frequently for solos in June's *Les Misérables* – was far too restrictive for the Greek-chorus and slapstick CPR action that took place within it. Several performers, on Thursday, would've benefited from added bursts of confidence, because what they're doing would be kind of great if they committed to it more fully. (At numerous points, it was difficult to tell if Doug Kutzli's pedantic law professor was speak-singing or merely off-pitch, and Anthony Natarelli, as the amusingly egotistical dim bulb Warner, could stand to be an even bigger cartoon.) Meanwhile, for dog lovers, it was probably unfortunate that the show's famed chihuahua Bruiser merely appeared with his head poking out of a bag for the duration of his performance. You actually see more of the pup's body in his program headshot than you ever do on stage. (Canine-wise, Brusier was handily out-acted by the dog playing Paulette's pooch. To our audience's absolute delight, when Platt scratched Rufus' belly, he *also* scratched it with his hind leg.)

But for those who, like me, have followed 18-year-old Lauren VanSpeybroeck's career since her days as Chip in Music Guild's 2005 *Beauty & the Beast*, allow me to share a story that made my *Legally Blonde: The Musical* experience, despite the production's random flaws, a must-see event. I wound up watching Thursday's preview alongside friend and area actor Wendy Czekalski, who played the Wardrobe to VanSpeybroeck's Chip. As the lights came up for intermission, which was preceded by the up-tempo, you-*go*-girl anthem "So Much Better," Wendy was openly weeping. Once outside, she said, still crying, "It's just that I watched her grow up!" We certainly did. And whether you yourself cry or not, it's hard to imagine any similar fan of *Legally Blonde*'s lead leaving this production disappointed. So congrats, all, on the show

And congrats, Ms. VanSpeybroeck. I'm betting that you're currently making a lot of area theatre-goers feel like the proudest of parents.

Legally Blonde: The Musical runs at the Prospect Park Auditorium (1584 34th Avenue, Moline)

Delta Nu Attitude: "Legally Blonde: The Musical," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through July 20

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*through July 20, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)762-6610 or
visiting QCMusicGuild.com .*