

'Blonde' titillates while it's brainy

Show is mainly eye and ear candy but empowerment message comes through.

By Lawrence Toppman
Theater Critic of *The Charlotte Observer*
Posted: Thursday, Apr. 23, 2009

Is it possible to resist any musical comedy that offers a jaunty parade led by a pink-suited drum majorette, then urges us minutes later to read the works of Thomas Hobbes?

Hobbes, you may recall, was the 17th-century British philosopher who argued that, without a social contract, the life of man is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” But “Legally Blonde” is quite the opposite: a gigantic group hug, rich in humor, surprisingly sophisticated and just the right length at 150 minutes.

The show is mainly eye and ear candy, from Elle Woods' well-schooled Chihuahua Bruiser to the flood of witty songs. Yet the message of empowerment from the hit movie comes through: For every “Bend and Snap” number that worships the booty, there's a “Chip on My Shoulder” that reminds us not to let it override the brain. In fact, “Blonde” has things both ways. It titillates us with sorority sisters in short skirts and lingerie, the way chorus-girl shows did 80 years ago, then convinces us to take our heroine seriously once she's wearing business suits and a new air of self-respect. (And the show does employ women of different face and body types in its chorus, which not every national tour can claim.)

The book by Heather Hach stays faithful to the script of the 2001 film. Elle (properly perky Becky Gulsvig) gets dumped by status-conscious Warner (Jeff McLean) as they graduate from UCLA. She tries to convince him she has the class to be a future senator's spouse by following him to Harvard Law School, but he swiftly picks up with class-conscious Vivienne (Megan Lewis). Elle makes two new friends, scruffy attorney Emmett (D.B. Bonds) and lovelorn beautician Paulette (huggable Natalie Joy Johnson). But the most important person in her life may be law professor Callahan (Ken Land), who's defending a fitness expert against a charge of murder. If Elle helps him get the client off, her legal future may be assured.

Composer-lyricists Laurence O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin have done two rare things. First, they've written new lyrics for almost every verse of every song: Few phrases come back again to drive a lyric into our brains, so we have to listen closely. That may be a drawback for some folks: The show has only one real ballad, and even that speeds up, so the emotional mood gets monochromatic. (Hearing these numbers one after another can be like listening to a clever dorm mate who's buzzed on Red Bull.)

Second, O'Keefe and Benjamin assume we're capable of absorbing puns, sharp put-downs and double entendres at top speed. The musical is smarter than the movie, possibly because the lyrics had to be written for repeated listening on the cast album. So we can absorb broad strokes of humor easily but have to work to pick up nuances, especially when director-choreographer Jerry Mitchell fills the stage with activity. (I've never seen a quintet of people sing while jumping rope at top speed for a fitness video. Props to lissome Coleen Sexton and her backup singers.)

Without its peppy cast, especially in the Greek chorus of Delta Nus who appear in Elle's visions, the show might collapse. Luckily, Gulsvig's Elle is energized without being overbearing, aptly naive but never dumb. She gets gravity from Bonds as the man we want her to end up with, and from Land as the man we know she ought to stay away from. (His urbane creepiness suggests Jack Cassidy's slick villains from 1960s musicals, which is praise indeed.)

I assume the show is at Ovens Auditorium because its spacious sets needed a longer load-in than the Belk Theater would have allowed – Opera Carolina was performing there Sunday afternoon – and because the larger area backstage at Ovens lets the big sets get on and off more quickly. Almost everything about the national tour seemed charmed Tuesday night: For once, Ovens' infamous acoustics permitted almost every word to get through, at least to the middle of the orchestra section.

A few of those words came from hometown talent. Tally Sessions has one verse of “The Harvard Variations” as obnoxious Aaron but disappears too quickly after that. Alex Ellis is in the mix as Kate, one of many Delta Nus, but comes into her own in the big trial scene as the spoiled daughter of the murder victim. Imagine the title character of “Annie” about 15 years older and ingesting hits of nitrous oxide, and you'll just about have her.