

The verdict is in: Legally Blonde is a winner

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, September 25, 2008

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Legally Blonde The Musical is ready for the road.

The show, which opened its national tour this week at the Providence Performing Arts Center, is an entertaining romp with a jazzy score and a fine cast who gave it their all at Tuesday's opening. It's the kind of show that's sure to have a life way beyond Providence.

Sure, Legally Blonde is light, the sort of silly stuff that Broadway has a knack for dishing out. But it's also fast-paced with a lot of clever banter and a feel-good message: be true to yourself. It's even got a fetching Greek chorus.

Suffice it to say if you liked Reese Witherspoon as Elle Woods in the film version of Legally Blonde, you're going to love look-alike Becky Gulsvig as Elle in this upbeat tour.

Gulsvig is a petite 26-year-old from Minnesota, and as a package she's got it all. She can belt, dance and summon a troubled expression when it looks like her hopes of becoming a lawyer are dashed.

Actually, the show sticks pretty close to the movie, except for the scene when Elle tries to get into Harvard Law School, one of the more improbable moments in this story of self-discovery. Rather than send a video of herself in a bikini in the family pool as Witherspoon does, the Elle of the musical shows up at the Harvard admissions office with a troupe of cheerleaders and prances around in a sparkling pink (pink being her favorite color) majorette's costume. That, and a confession that she is trying out for law school for the sake of love, was enough to earn her one of the coveted spots in the class.

But otherwise, this is the now familiar story of a fashion-conscious sorority queen who enrolls in law school to win back the boyfriend who has dumped her for someone more "serious."

Again, the whole premise is a little implausible. Elle is a fashion major at the University of California at Los Angeles when she decides to head to Harvard Law to impress stuck-up Warner Huntington III, played by dashing Jeff McLean. Forget case law, Elle is more interested in having her nails done.

For the first act, Elle, the quintessential Valley Girl, seems incredibly shallow, just interested in boys and the latest beauty tips from Vogue. What does this musical say

about women? Elle never quite gives up her fondness for fashion. She actually wins a crucial case based on her knowledge of cosmetics and her membership in sorority.

But she does come into her own by the end of the show, and learns that she doesn't have to cling to a guy to be happy. She even seems to develop a fondness for the law.

And she gets the eventual backing of her chief rival, Vivienne Kensington, who was Warner's squeeze for a while. That's a nice touch.

In the end, the men in the cast come off looking rather shabby, at least that's the case with Warner and lecherous Professor Callahan, who is played by a chilly Ken Land.

Only Emmett Forrest, who stands by Elle when she is down and out, comes across as a respectable soul. He's a sort of mild-mannered, self-effacing sort played by D.B. Bonds, who was the Freddy in last year's tour of Dirty Rotten Scoundrels.

It's Bonds and Gulsvig who pretty much carry the show. They've got charm and fresh-faced appeal, along with solid singing voices, even though Gulsvig could sound a little strident in the more challenging vocal numbers. But in sweet ballads like "Legally Blonde," she shines.

Still, it was some of the lesser roles that were the more engaging, like Kyle, the hunky UPS guy, and Natalie Joy Johnson's Paulette, the down-to-earth beautician who doubles as Elle's therapist. Ven Daniel nailed the part of Kyle, strutting about the set in shorts, flexing his buff bod, while Johnson summoned some impressive vocal firepower for the tune "Ireland."

And don't forget the dogs: Elle's perky Chihuahua Bruiser, who carried off his tricks without a hitch, and Paulette's loveable bull dog Rufus, who Elle rescues from Paulette's nasty ex-boyfriend.

There are few if any memorable tunes in the score by Laurence O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin. Many of the songs, particularly those for Land, the law professor, were sort of half spoken. Others were of a jazzy ilk. But nothing that grabbed you.

But the sets, with their towering Ivy-league columns and a funky beauty salon, were impressive by touring standards.

Again, don't go looking for much in the way of substance when it comes to Legally Blonde. But if you're looking for a fun night out, for a tight high-energy evening of theater, then this is a show worth catching.