

## ‘Legally Blonde: The Musical’ offers serious fun at Village Theatre

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Betsy Stewart and the company of “Legally Blonde: The Musical” at Village Theatre. (Auston James)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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## Theater review

On opening night of Village Theatre's "Legally Blonde: The Musical," Issaquah Mayor Mary Lou Pauly took to the stage to legally proclaim Nov. 15 "Elle-saquah Day" in the Eastside city. The proclamation, which Pauly made in a specially purchased pink top, was met with enthusiastic cheering.

The house was packed with patrons wearing the signature pink of Elle Woods, the play's hero. Directed by Meredith McDonough, "Legally Blonde: The Musical" — an exuberant, optimistic show that runs through Dec. 22 in Issaquah, continuing in Everett Jan. 4 to Feb. 26 — is a local production featuring big musical numbers on attractive, maximalist sets, with onstage appearances by two very good dogs.

With music and lyrics by Laurence O'Keefe and Nell Benjamin and book by Heather Hach, the hit 2007 Broadway musical was based on the 2001 movie (itself based on a novel by Amanda Brown). In many ways, "Legally Blonde" is better suited to musical theater than film, requiring few plot changes to slot into the Broadway formula.

In a story that plays with the tension between being fun and serious, California sorority girl Elle Woods enrolls in Harvard Law School to win back ex-boyfriend Warner. While trying to prove to him that she can be serious, Elle helps a friend get her dog back and defends a sorority sister against murder charges, discovering that the pursuit of law is more fulfilling than the pursuit of a husband.

After gracing stages for nearly two decades, one might expect "Legally Blonde: The Musical" to feel dated. But after the loss of hard-won legal rights and the rising popularity of social media tradwives celebrating traditional gender roles, its story of female empowerment feels timelier than ever.

"Legally Blonde: The Musical" keeps the most memorable lines ("What, like it's hard?") while making minor tweaks throughout that smooth over some of the film's missteps. In addition to acknowledging the concept of privilege, the stage adaptation offers a smarter way to deal with the film publicly outing a gay witness via the fun musical number "Gay or European."

But the play isn't immune from undercutting its own message at times. In the movie, Elle replacing a bonehead boyfriend with a better man is incidental to her own character development, but the musical centers the love story. While movie Elle was

blithely unaware of the patriarchy, musical Elle buys into it. She needs a man to guide her to important realizations that the movie character reached on her own, while her contribution to his development is a makeover. When I couldn't decide if adding a makeover scene made things worse or if it helped that a man was the one made over, my teenager set me straight: It doesn't matter. Makeover scenes are fun.

And they've got a point. However uneven the story may be in its feminist messaging, the musical never falls short on the fun. The big all-female opening chorus "Omigod You Guys" delights with an impressive quick change and the world's most unflappable chihuahua. It ends with another big, joyful chorus — seriously, this musical loves its chorus numbers — and in between, "Legally Blonde" never slows the energy drink-fueled pace.

Aided by a script with more bite in its humor than the film, Betsy Stewart's Elle is a little less cloying, but maintains the character's charm even when she's at her sappiest. Ethan Carpenter compensated for love interest Warner's lack of character with a singing voice that made you understand Elle's attraction, while Coleman Cummings was perfectly cast as Elle's upgraded boyfriend, the supportive Emmett.

Trina Mills' characterization of salon worker Paulette is completely different from Jennifer Coolidge's movie character. But she is just as endearing and manages to hold her own against two scene-stealing colleagues — an adorable bulldog and UPS deliveryman Kyle, played by Richard Peacock. Even collapsed into a Greek chorus, Elle's California sorority sisters conveyed more individuality than their cartoonish movie counterparts, while her musical Harvard besties brought humor and depth to their roles.

It was truly delightful to see so many women on stage at the same time dancing in character instead of in unison. In my daughter's words, the choreographer (Katy Tabb) really "popped off," and I must agree. Cy Paolantonio as court defendant Brooke Wyndham leading the jump rope/self-defense workout is a high point, but every dance was technically challenging, artistically interesting and fun to watch.

Prioritizing fun is the smartest thing about "Legally Blonde: The Musical." Musical theater isn't the best venue for investigating feminist theory, but it can motivate people of all ages and genders to wear pink while cheering for the success of female characters. And in a divided country where feminism is losing ground, shared laughter over comedy, love and a bit with a dog is good medicine.

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## “Legally Blonde: The Musical”

Through Dec. 22; Village Theatre Issaquah, 303 Front St. N., Issaquah; 140 minutes with one intermission; accessibility: [st.news/village-accessibility](https://www.st.news/village-accessibility); \$53-\$123; 425-392-2202, [villagetheatre.org](https://villagetheatre.org)

Jan. 4-26; Village Theatre Everett, 2710 Wetmore Ave., Everett; 140 minutes with one intermission; accessibility: [st.news/village-accessibility](https://www.st.news/village-accessibility); \$53-\$123; 425-392-2202, [villagetheatre.org](https://villagetheatre.org)

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