



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

NAME OF COMPANY: **EXETER MUSICAL SOCIETY**

NAME OF PRODUCTION: **'LEGALLY BLONDE'**

VENUE: Northcott Theatre, Exeter

DATE: Tuesday April 5th 2016

ADJUDICATOR: Caroline Whitehead

A nonsensical fairytale

This show, with music and lyrics by Laurence O'Keefe, is based on the 'chick flick' film starring Reese Witherspoon. It has an absurd storyline and requires plenty of pink and fizz, combined with pop lyrics, foot-tapping rhythms and a comedic style. This company delivered this in huge quantities to the obvious delight of the audience. I imagine that few of them left the theatre humming the tunes, which are on the whole eminently forgettable, but nevertheless it was an evening of light entertainment in the contemporary musical genre.

The unlikely scenario of the Delta Nu Sorority President, Elle Woods, getting into Harvard Law School, dressed in pink and clutching her Chihuahua in order to get her man, was confidently played out with an energetic Greek Chorus offering observation and advice. Inevitably Elle Woods gets more than she bargained for and learns some important lessons along the way. The music is fast paced and, although there are very few moments of genuine pathos, it nevertheless galloped along towards its corny conclusion and gained deserved applause.

This is a frothy, American show that is light, fun and fast with some good dance routines. Not to be taken too seriously but a tale with some moral lessons and a happy ending, of course. Having seen this musical several times, I often wonder why Laurence O'Keefe didn't finish the story after the Legally Blonde Remix. There always seems to be a good climax at that point and then we are thrown into the Scene Of The Crime and another 15 minutes of the show. You did well to resume the pace and steer us towards the second finale.

Staging

A pink set was a given and this worked well. Some of the moving parts as the show unfurled were trickier to introduce on to the stage at the pace that was required and this was obviously a challenge to the stage management team. There is really no let up in the scene changes and sometimes they were only just in place.

Similarly, the lighting cues looked a little untidy with all that was going on particularly where the upbeat dance routines fell away to a duet or solo number. I felt that there were opportunities you missed to just change the pace a touch to give the audience – and the cast and lighting operators – a chance to take a breath.

I'm not sure what the purpose of the smoke was in this performance. It didn't seem to add anything, neither mystery (no need for that in this story) nor a blank canvas for a lighting effect. It is such a bright and sharply focused show that the clouded effect seemed altogether unnecessary.

On the night that I was there you clearly has some sound and feedback issues and this was just unfortunate and an inevitable consequence of live performance. I am sure on other nights there were no such issues. Just watch the sound balancing though, particularly when switching from solo performance to company numbers. The number that worked perfectly for the sound balance was 'So Much Better' at the end of Act 1, so perhaps the sound issues were behind you by that point.

This looked like a fairly new cast for the Society, which is inevitable I suppose with such a young requirement. You were fortunate to have some talented additions, notably Elle, Warner and Paulette, in the lead roles. Lots of young faces in the company numbers helped with the energetic choreography and supported the youthful characteristics of the performance.

Elle: This is a massive role and one that you obviously relished. You certainly looked the part and your energy did not wane for a moment. It's a tough role vocally because of the nature of the songs and the strength required across the whole of your vocal register. The support you gave it was admirable, but just be careful of diction so that we can also hear your words. There were one or two occasions when I would have liked more tenderness in your tone – more for contrast than anything else really, especially in your scenes with Emmett. And watch you intonation in your sustained notes. The 'musical theatre' tone that is perfect for this style of show doesn't always work when there are long notes to reach and keep in tune. It's the difference between supporting your voice from your diaphragm as opposed to placing it across your nose. It is a difficult balance, particularly when you need to change techniques in one song. Glen Close was an expert at this in her original performance of Sunset Boulevard. But then she was a diva!

Warner: You definitely had the look and the swagger of an arrogant and ambitious, albeit average student. In some ways, this role doesn't get a chance to develop much and the audience never really gets to empathize with the character. You do have some nice vocal moments in the first half. Make sure you sustain some of your longer notes. I know that Warner is too full of himself to break into a ballad style but I think you missed a trick, in the 'Serious' duet with Elle for example, to show us what your voice was capable of.

Vivienne: I loved your fiercely protective and dismissive demeanor in the first half and was looking forward to the more sensitive side that you were going to bring in the second half. That didn't quite work for me. Your opportunity to allow us to like you more was in the hairdressers and I think by then you were too caught up in your haughty character to make the change. That said, your posture and movements across the stage were perfectly in tune with this key character and your control of Warner was accomplished.

Emmett: You were just right for this role - that rather self-conscious, diminutive exterior hiding a warmth and courage that needed a young love to draw it out. Your voice was soft and gentle, which was a welcome contrast to the brashness of many of the company numbers, and you managed to create real integrity in your feelings for Elle. Your tone was fine throughout and intonation was spot on. Especially in 'Chip On My Shoulder', which was a tricky number for you. You looked a bit too good in the suit transformation though... other interpretations I have seen make that reveal into a comic moment. We knew at that point that you were destined to get the girl – not that it mattered really.

Paulette: If there is a moment for some real tenderness and raw emotion in this glitzy show then you had it and I was delighted to see how well you delivered a change of pace and some real drama. I loved your character and the way you drew us into your back story. So many of the characters in this show are just planted on stage in the moment, the fact that Paulette has a story to tell means that you had an opportunity for us to warm to you and you used it to full advantage. The role has similarities to Adelaide in 'Guys and Dolls', with a heart on the sleeve openness and the moment of your outpouring came just at the right point after the ditsy Greek Chorus. We grew to love you and longed for your happy ending – a really nice sub-plot actually. Your role was perfect for you and I really enjoyed every scene you were in. Well done.

Callaghan: From your first entrance, we knew we were in for a treat. For me it was a turning point, certainly in terms of good diction and great voice projection. 'Blood in the Water' had real star quality and you were in command of that stage. And your deliberate moves around the stage were a welcome contrast to the rather chaotic dance routines that we had seen up to that point. Your portrayal of the domineering senior figure was spot on and such a nice contrast to all the younger cast. If I had a criticism at all it was the rather awkward pass at Elle in the second half. Although I knew that was coming, you might have given us some clues to that as the story unfolded – maybe a glance or two - because without any hint that you were attracted to her at all, that kiss became a bit clumsy and forced when it did happen. Indeed that was the only sticky point in your scenes. At all other times, you were a joy to watch.

Enid: It is only a small role, but you took it on with great skill. The contrast of your character with the frothy pink girliness of many others is important to the story and gives the show just a hint of moral integrity. I heard every word of your lyrics and you managed to combine comedic timing with some strong messages.

Greek Chorus: There is no doubt you were energetic and bubbly, if a little chaotic in some of the choreography. Elle seemed to welcome your interventions, so that relationship worked well. Just take care with your diction. However light hearted and frivolous the advice you are giving is, the audience do want to hear it. That said, your entrances were always surprising and dramatic, adding to the fun of the story.

Company: You had plenty of choreography to cope with and big numbers to get through and on the whole these worked well. Sometimes the blocking looked a bit messy and faces were looking down, which didn't help us to understand the storyline. Even if you are dancing and moving around the stage in yet another energetic number, we do want to hear your words. 'Whipped Into Shape' is an example of this challenge. 'Bend and Snap' is another moment when the stage can look messy and if we lose the narrative, we are left looking just at the spectacle and we are disengaged. On the other hand, 'Gay or European' was a real triumph – your diction, timing and movements worked brilliantly.

Orchestra: This was an accomplished band and you were clearly enjoying yourselves. You were totally in command of the fast pace of the show, albeit sometimes you were disconnected with your performers on stage. There were moments when I longed for a change of pace, for dramatic effect, and I did get a few, notably in Paulette's 'Ireland' number. Your greatest moment for me was the 'Gay or European' number, which galloped along towards a tumultuous climax and had everyone with you right through to the end.