

EMILIA RORDEN, ELLA GREENE AND SIV SERENE BARNUM IN LEADER OF THE PACK



## DO WAH DIDDY ILLUMINATED

*Very Little Theatre ends its 85th season paying tribute to pop legend Ellie Greenwich*

**E**llie Greenwich is the boss. A master songwriter, Greenwich had a hand in composing buckets of Top 40 hits, such as “Chapel of Love,” “Hanky Panky,” “Da Doo Ron Ron” and other baby-boomer jams.

*Leader of the Pack* is a musical review with enough dialogue slipped in to provide an endearing sketch of Greenwich’s life. The play blurs the line between song and story, attempting to tell the tale using the composer’s own music. Greenwich’s light pop music is echoed by a play that never drives too deep yet manages to illuminate her greatest hopes, both dashed and fulfilled.

Director Peg Major is no stranger to the crowd-pleasing musical extravaganza. Her decades on the Eugene theater scene have left her with a sense of what will entertain audiences. For *Leader of the Pack*, Major casts singers, gives them highly

achievable dance numbers and unleashes their inner ham.

With breakneck pacing and a patina of bright smiles, this production goes down like an ice cream soda. While parts of the play were a little too squeaky-happy 1960s for some, the cheerful fun resonated with most.

This production is powered by the extraordinary performance of Beth Milton as Darlene Love. Her mind-blowing vocals and confidence elevate even the simplest of lyrics.

Haley Henderson is sweet as young Ellie, and grows stronger as she transitions from a star-struck girl to a successful, driven woman. While the script’s quick switch of actresses to facilitate the aging of Ellie feels awkward, Kim Fairbairn finished the play nicely as an older, wiser Greenwich.

Seeing as the play spans five decades, has 17 cast members and I don’t know how many scenes, the costumes were a monumental undertaking. There are places where costumer Paula Tendick steals the show, as with “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” and others where you wish there had been time for just one more fitting or a little more moustache glue.

Any woman who managed a killer career throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s is deserving of her own musical, but in this case it is particularly apropos. *Leader of the Pack’s* energy and charm are a fitting tribute to Ellie Greenwich. — Anna Grace

*Leader of the Pack runs through Aug. 16 at the Very Little Theatre; \$15-\$20.*

## BLONDE AMBITION

*The Shedd puts on a frothy, sparkling production of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes for OFAM*

**I**ntellectual though he was, writer H.L. Mencken positively came undone, his friend Anita Loos observed, under the beguiling spell of some ... blonde.

Loos was inspired to document Mencken’s lovestruck unraveling, first as a fictional serial in *Harper’s Bazaar*, and later in her bestselling 1925 novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which was read by simply everyone, *dahling*. Jazz-Age stalwarts, from Edith Wharton to William Faulkner and James Joyce, praised Loos’ daffy depiction of life in the Roaring Twenties, chronicling, according to Loos herself, the era’s “idiots and fools.”

Written as the diary of a dizzy young flapper from Little Rock, Arkansas, named Lorelei, with misspellings, malapropisms and all, Loos’ novel, the subsequent 1949 Broadway musical (with adaptation by Loos and starring Carol Channing) and a 1953 film (with screenplay by Loos and starring Marilyn Monroe) cemented Lorelei in American iconography and defined Anita Loos as one of the most pioneering and successful creative women of the last century.

Flash-forward to The Shedd’s Oregon Festival of American Music 2014, and Lorelei lives again, in this frothily engaging production directed by Ron Daum, with musical direction by Robert Ashens.

“The good thing about diamonds is they always look new,” espouses Lorelei, played with gusto by Shannon Coltrane. Angie Fisher’s Dorothy provides comic sass to Lorelei’s lilt. And together, these two gal pals are a force. If it’s romantic novelty they seek, they needn’t look far on this cruise ship bound for Paris, replete with multiple swains, including the entire U.S. Men’s Olympic team.

Potential suitors abound, and Trevor Eichorn shines as a spot-on Henry Spofford III, an upright “college man” who gets weak-kneed around Dorothy. Eichorn’s approachable physicality and magnetic facial expressions fill the Hult Center’s cavernous Silva Hall. Likewise, Matt Musgrove is refreshingly broad as zipper salesman and health nut Josephus Gage.

Choreographer Laura Hiszczynskij takes full advantage of the sizeable cast, creating sporting numbers that have a consistently cheeky and athletic ring.

Playful sets by Mark Huisenga transport us from New York to Paris. And like dollops of rainbow sherbet, Jamie Parker’s costumes poke fun at the excess and eccentricities of the age. — Rachael Carnes

*The Shedd’s Gentlemen Prefer Blondes runs through Sunday Aug. 10 at the Hult’s Silva Concert Hall; \$11-\$46.*



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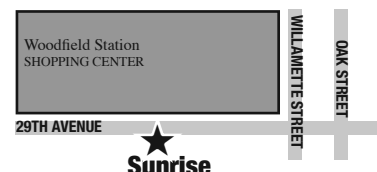
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