

# For wide appeal, theater goes 'Legally Blonde'

By JOE HENDERSON  
Special to The Star

Theatre in the Park is swapping out a classic musical for a relative newcomer next season as part of a shift to appeal to a broader audience.

Instead of the planned production of "Sweet Charity," the theater will present "Legally Blonde," based on the novel by Amanda Brown that also was made into a film. The musical opened on Broadway in 2007.

"Sweet Charity" is a great old show. It was produced at The Theatre about 33 years ago," said producing artistic director Tim Bair. "Legally Blonde' appeals to today's audiences."

Bair wants to present more recent works.

"I think it's important to bring different styles of shows to The Theatre in the Park rather than producing the same ones every few years," Bair said. "Frankly, I don't want to repeat a show within 10 years unless there are extenuating circumstances. For

example, I love 'Annie,' it's a great show, but I don't want to do it over and over."

Next season the theater also will perform "Sweeney Todd," "Urinetown," "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" and — as two one-act plays — "The Jungle Book" and "Sleeping Beauty." None of them have ever been produced at Theatre in the Park.

"Legally Blonde" follows Elle Woods, the star of her sorority on a California campus, who goes on to study law at Harvard after her boyfriend dumps her.

"When we learned that Music Theatre International was making the rights to 'Legally Blonde' available it took us less than an hour to decide to go for it," Blair said with a laugh. "It's a great show, very timely, with a lot of singing and dancing and it hasn't been shown in community theater here."

Jill Geller, superintendent of recreation for Johnson County Parks and Recreation District, which operates The Theatre in

the Park, is enthusiastic about the substitution.

"I like it, I'm excited about it. We've had a lot of success producing shows that also have been movies. They've drawn well," Geller said. "I like a nice mix of shows. I like the classics, too."

Bair noted that The Theatre in the Park has a strong tradition of producing family oriented shows.

"This is not a drastic change. We'll always have shows for the family with four children," he said, "but we owe it to our audiences to offer some shows that may not have as much appeal for that family and their kids."

Bair thinks producing more current shows will increase the number of performers in the artistic community auditioning for roles who otherwise might not be interested in Theatre in the Park.

"There are a number of performers who have expressed interest in these shows," he said.

Bair hopes to schedule shows similar to those he produced when he was artistic director of the American Musical Theatre in San Jose, Calif., before moving to The Theatre in the Park. He said shows there were selected by himself and the executive producer.

"The 2011 season was already set when I arrived here. We did substitute 'Les Miserables' for 'Willy Wonka' for financial reasons and that proved to be a success that provided a wonderful opportunity for high school-age performers."

The process for selecting shows at Theatre in the Park starts when Bair learns what is available and makes his recommendations to the Theatre Council. Then the council makes its recommendation to the Parks and Recreation District Board of Commissioners, where the final determination is made, Geller said.