

She's far more than just a (legal) blonde: a star is born

Sheridan Smith is cheering everyone up, says **Zoe Strimpel**

MEETING Sheridan Smith, the 28-year-old star of the smash hit *Legally Blonde: The Musical*, is rather like a game of hide and seek. Or, as it turns out, a treasure hunt.

For the former star of such television gems as *Two Pints of Lager* and *A Packet of Crisps* and Gavin and Stacey, has gone awol. Phone-calls and texts from a variety of staff yield nothing. Sitting in her pink and girly dressing room amid fan letters, cans of Veet, bottles of (unopened) Champagne, we're beginning to give up hope when a call comes. Could we possibly have the interview instead in the old-world Italian restaurant across the road where she's just having some supper with her boyfriend (not James Corden, since you ask)?

We make our way towards a man in a baseball cap. No Sheridan. "She's just putting her face on," he tells us. "She's terrified of having her picture taken and just wanted to make sure she looked alright. A drink?"

We accept a glass of wine and some tropical fruit, and wait, expectantly. At last, Lincolnshire-born Smith – now-famous star of the West End's biggest musical – appears. "Oh god," she begins. "I'm so sorry for all this. I'm such a diva aren't I? I was just starving and then we don't get to see each other much," she bubbles, indicating Man in Cap. "And then I hate having my picture taken so I thought, 'oh I better go and do something with my face. Do I look ok?'"

You can't not love her – instantly. Far from being a diva, or even a polished, perfect-looking pre-Hollywood type, Smith is more of a rock chick, with leather jacket and tousled hair. She often heads to Soho after her performances to do more singing for fun with friends. And, wonderfully, she's scarfing down pasta only an hour

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before she's due on stage. "I pop a Gaviscon before I go on, and I'm fine."

She has 18 songs per performance, and more dancing than a Bolshoi ballerina to do every day, sometimes twice. Even so, "I eat crap. Jam sandwiches, pizza, burgers," she says. Unlike some actresses, Smith seems to be telling the truth – her plate of



Above: Sheridan Smith at Salieri restaurant; right: As Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*.

Pictures: Alice Hepple/CITY A.M.

creamy penne is disappearing fast down her gullet right now.

For a headline act in a sold-out West End show, Smith isn't the obvious profile – "I normally play sluts and chavs" as she puts it – particularly in a theatreland that includes the likes of Keira Knightley. What does she make of the sudden, massive critical acclaim both for her and for *Legally Blonde* (which hardly lit Broadway alight, after all)?

"I prepared myself to be slated because it's a big, pink show. I'm thrilled it hasn't turned out like that. It's a nice challenge for me too – I've never played a rich girl from LA before," she guffaws.

Her success begs the question: what next – Hollywood? Not so fast: "The way I see it is: treat every job like it's your last. I'm just thinking about doing this run until the end of October. It's great to be on posters and have nice things said and all, but I'm just keeping my head down. And I am working with such wonderful people – I can't take all the credit."

Smith never had formal musical training – she's obviously uncannily gifted. When she heard *Legally Blonde* was transferring from Broadway, she got her agent on the case and auditioned. "I've always loved musical theatre," she says. "But I'm never going to be [classical soprano] Leslie Garret."

She was right to go for it not just for her own success, but because she's actually cheering London up. "It's a real tonic," she says. "I reckon it's been so popular because of the recession; there was a guy I was chatting to after the show the other day who came to the show having lost his job that day, but was now feeling much better. Ditto with a girl who'd just found out her boyfriend had been cheating on her. It helps cheer people up on a number of levels."

Legally Blonde runs until 23 Oct at the Savoy Theatre. legallyblonde-themusical.co.uk

