



IN THE PINK After Sheridan Smith's parts in *The Royle Family* and *Gavin & Stacey*, her role as the not-so-dumb blonde in *Legally Blonde* is making her name

OMG, I'm like, so hot right now

Sheridan Smith stars in *Legally Blonde* as Elle, a girl who discovers hidden strengths — just as the actress has had to overcome tragedy herself, she tells Jude Rogers

Down the tiny lane behind the Savoy Theatre, through the lovely stage door and down corridors swooshing with costumes and wigs, we find tonight's leading lady. Her room is full of glitter, pink cards and flowers, bright mirror bulbs lighting her small, pretty face. Then she sees me. "Hi-veerrrr!" Sheridan Smith bounds over, planting a smacker on my cheek, and asks if I want a brew. Her publicist insists that he can make us some. "Are you sure? I have a kettle!" She flicks the switch, shaking her head when it won't stick. "Oh go on, then," she laughs, rolling her eyes. "What a diva, eh?" Sheridan Smith may not be a name that rings bells, but her critic-wowing turn in *Legally Blonde: The Musical* is likely to change that. You'll know her face already, first seen on TV in *The Royle Family* in 1999, then a succession of TV comedies from *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* to *Gavin & Stacey*. Until now, however, she's played second-fiddle characters, a girlfriend, sister and, recently, Jonathan Creek's sidekick. So to play an American sorority girl, high-kicking and singing on

stage eight times a week, should be quite a challenge — before you watch what Smith can do. Taking on the role of Elle Woods, a rich teenager who chases her ex-boyfriend to Harvard Law School, wangles a place for herself, and discovers her own academic talents, Smith brings warmth and impeccable comic timing to a character originally made famous by Reese Witherspoon in the 2001 movie. Smith also makes its fairytale story line almost believable.

She looks at me nervously as I applaud her performance. "I was thinking about you, the other night, you poor thing, landed in this shower of pink," she says, tucking her skinny limbs nervously into her chair. "But I'm really glad you liked it! Although I'm still terrified of doing it."

Born in Epworth, a Lincolnshire village, in 1981, Sheridan Smith is a friendly, self-effacing, girl-next-door type. She is half-North of England, half-Welsh, and delighted to spot my own Swansea accent, keen to share tales of holidays in the Mumbles and the wisdoms of our mothers.

Her parents met as country and western singers and made a living performing in pubs and working men's clubs. As a young girl, she loved performing with them, singing songs such as Dolly Parton's *Coin of Many Colours* while standing on a stool. She would be upset when she wasn't allowed to join them, which inspired her mother to write a song called *You Won't Be Late Tonight, Will You Mama?* Smith sings it now, very shyly — a ballad about a child standing in the window with a teardrop in her eye. "That shows how much I wanted to be with them," she laughs, her cackle big and earthy. "From here, no way back."

But when Smith was 8, a family tragedy changed her life. She had a brother, Julian, ten years older, who died of cancer in 1990 — something only revealed recently when her mother mentioned it in an interview with a local newspaper. She said how proud she had been about the resilience of Sheridan and her other brother, Damian.

When you experience bereavement as a child, I ask, do you think it gives you the drive to push yourself harder? Smith wells up in seconds. "Yes. Yes it does." She dabbs a hankie to her eyes, and I apologise for asking. "No, not at all. I've never spoken about it, really, and I should. There's always been that extra bit of drive in me, just for him." After Julian died, she explains, she threw herself into dancing classes in Southorpe, which she would attend three nights a week, entering competitions and winning awards. "They were my focus. It's not that they stopped me grieving, but my life became about trying to do something."

She takes a breath. "Julian's always been at the back of my head all these years, he's really never left it. But recently, since all this — she gestures around the bright, fluffy room — "and the opening night, everyone coming down on the bus, he was right at the front again. And I was really... She sniffs, trying to make light of what she means. "There's a moment in the show where I cry, actually, and I was genuinely just roaring with tears, wishing he was there." She smiles. "Maybe he was."

Her classes paid off. Smith won a place with the National Youth Music Theatre as a teenager, performing as Tallulah in *Bugsy Malone* — a production so good that the film's director, Alan Parker, was persuaded to run it in the West End. After that, Smith got an agent, a role in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, and, in 1999, was named an actress to watch in a broadsheet article about up-and-coming young talents, in which she posed for a photograph next to the young Jamie Oliver. Her role in *The Royle Family*, as Anthony's girlfriend, Emma, quickly followed.

But Smith still worries about her abilities as a serious actress, despite receiving good reviews for her stage performances — in

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SISTER ACT Smith and Corden on TV

Michael Wynnes *The People are Friendly* at the Royal Court, in 2002, and two Shakespeare comedies in the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in 2006.

"I didn't train, you see, and I feel I might have missed out there. So instead, I've just watched people to see what they do. Me, Liz Smith and Kathy Burke, them probably thinking I'm a lunatic child!" Women have been her inspirations, she says. She is also pleased that there seem to be more big female roles about, and that West End productions are swinging towards them — *Calendar Girls* being the other obvious example. "Because generally you're the girlfriend of the lead, or the mistress, or the lover. And in this show, I have two lovers! Bring it on!"

It's a year since Smith won the role of Elle. She had seen *Legally Blonde* on Broadway, adored it, and pestered her agent when she heard it was coming to Britain. That wasn't like her. "But I was thinking, 'Come on, love, you're 27, you can do this now.'" She shakes her head. "But ever since I got it, I've been waiting to be found out. Thinking can I get away with 18 songs every night? Can I glide on top of everything when beneath I'm doggy-paddling?"

During rehearsals for the show, she had other pressures, too. Smith's on-off relationship with James Corden, her brother in *Gavin & Stacey*, came to an end last November, although they remain very close. As we talk about him, he texts her. "Awwwww," she says, her voice squeaking sweetly. "He's read something in a paper about me, and said he was proud." She looks at her phone. "It's nice we still do that. It's a shame when people who have been together so long lose that closeness. Especially when we're just two normal people."

Not that her life is that normal any more. After those glowing reviews, everyone is now talking about what Smith will do next — which baffles her, frankly. "Good God, I'm in this job 'til October! I have to keep working at it, make sure I don't get ill, all that stuff." Nevertheless, she is looking forward to going back home for a break. "Walk the dogs up the fields, lean on a front door for an hour and have a chinwag with the neighbours — just be myself." She hugs me tightly when I leave, and it's hard to think of her — this refreshing new star — being anything but *Legally Blonde*. Savoy Theatre, London WC2 (legallyblondethemusical.co.uk, 0844 8717687), until Oct 23. Watch Sheridan Smith in *Legally Blonde* at timesonline.co.uk/stage