

## Sound and Noise

### Legally Blonde: The Musical – Fairy Tale With A Twist

Posted by [writeforsoundandnoise](#) on March 15, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)



*Legally Blonde: The Musical* is coming to Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium from February 22 to 27. While the story line is much the same as the popular movie – a 'sorority star' follows her Harvard-bound boyfriend to law school and discovers a new side of herself – the feel-good musical adaptation contains twists that are sure to surprise attendees. I had the opportunity to chat with Kahlil Joseph (Professor Callahan) about audience reactions to *Legally Blonde* and what it's like to play the 'bad guy'. Kahlil, whose career has spanned television (*Days of Our Lives*), film (*Special Ops: Delta Force*), and stage (*Les Miserables*), will try to seduce his student ElleWoods in *Legally Blonde*.

**Jenna Marynowski:** What about audience reactions to your character specifically?

**Kahlil Joseph:** My character — Professor Callahan — is the one character in the show who is completely opposite from everyone else's characters and what the whole show stands for, essentially. Whereas the whole show is, like I said, very high energy, happy-go-lucky for the most part, Callahan is very deliberate and calculating and dark and not a nice guy. So, I get the fun task of being the hated person in the entire show, which has actually been a lot of fun because when you have an audience that actually applauds when you have something bad happen to you, it's actually a very gratifying feeling – and I'm not being sarcastic. It makes me feel like I did my job so thoroughly – that I got the audience so involved, emotionally, and they detest me so much that, by the end of the show, they're actually applauding when I get what I deserve, I feel like I've done the best job possible.

**JM:** What was the preparation like to play the “bad guy”?

**KJ:** It was very, very detailed. I’m the kind of actor that firmly believes in order to play a bad guy well, you have to believe that what you’re doing is right to the point of delusion. That is what makes you very convincing and genuinely off-putting and scary. I decided, okay he is this superstar – a very well established attorney that runs a billion dollar law firm. He’s an established, respected, Harvard Law professor. He’s got some very serious, potent, credentials.

Unlike previous actors that have played Callahan – who have been older, Caucasian men – I am the youngest by far, and the first actor of colour to play this role which is something I’m very honoured to have been given. And so, obviously, my approach, being very organic, was different since I’m not an older, Caucasian male, I don’t have that presence or aspect to my character, that’s just the reality of it. Therefore, how could I make this a very convincing portrayal in a very real way, of a very established man in this role? Well, I brought a new brand of fire to the role. I decided my character is a younger law professor and as a result there are [people who are] young for a job like this, who have, through extremely hard work, forced themselves by fighting like a dog to get to the top of the food chain in the work world. As a result there comes, for a person of that exceptional ability, quite a bit of fire and a big chip on his shoulder. I kept that in mind, essentially with the mentality of ‘I am God because of what I’ve done and my achievements and my age and look at you, you’re just getting started, you’re nowhere close to where I am’.

You can tell, there is a quite a bit of arrogance to the character as well. But I believe that just calling it arrogance is not accurate. Me, as the actor, I cannot place a value judgement like that on my character. What I have to do is say ‘that’s not arrogance, that’s very, very true. It’s well-deserved. I earned the right to talk like that and to think like that because I have pushed myself in ways that most people cannot’. That’s what makes it real. Now to you, to outsiders listening to me think like this, that’s when it can be alarming. But to me, it has to be absolutely real. My mentality has got to be ‘Well, how can you not get that? How can you – the audience member – not understand that?’ That’s what makes me even more arrogant and delusional and off-putting and scary because at the same time, I’m not blowing hot air. The students fear me, other corporations fear me, there is an incredible amount of power this man has and he knows just how to use it to his advantage. Anytime someone in any position of power is intelligent and knows how to manipulate that power without using his emotions – he is a very, very dangerous player.

I also made him more deliberate with my physicality. The rest of the cast is much more fluid in their bodies – they dance, they move around a lot and they are very high energy, very happy-go-lucky. I, on the other hand, I operate more on stillness, with slower, deliberate gestures. The way I walk or carry myself physically is different from the rest of the characters.

The way I talk is very different from the rest of the characters. There are voice and speech choices I made for Callahan that were very carefully thought out. I thought, being a Harvard Law professor, his diction and his speech is extremely clear... Callahan, just by listening to him, he sounds very formidable. So the voice and speech were big choices.

The other thing that helped me immensely in the preparation of this role – I actually was a real professor at UCLA in the School of Theatre, teaching voice and speech to the acting students. I taught there from 2007 – 2008 as a professor, so to any naysayer, I’ve always said ‘well, you better believe it because I actually am speaking from professorial experience’ and therefore I believe I’m the first actor in this role that actually has been a real professor.

**JM:** That’s interesting. Were you also one of the youngest professors at UCLA?

**KJ:** Absolutely... I was definitely able to draw from that and I definitely used my voice to my advantage as a tool for whatever character I play and that has helped me immensely. If the character is a more authoritarian type of figure I instantly bring on my deep voice. If the character is more unsure of himself or is a younger person I can raise my voice (*demonstrates*) and I still sound like a guy, I just sound much younger, I’ll talk a little faster. I’ve worked in many different kinds of roles because I can change the way I speak and the way I sound.

**JM:** Does Professor Callahan have any of those ‘unsure’ moments where you do move your register up?

**KJ:** I’ve been asked in the past “is Callahan an insecure type of man with a Napoleon complex that needs to overcompensate in what he does?” and I have answered “absolutely not”. He has a God complex. That’s what this is. Which makes him a completely different kind of adversary to deal with. If Callahan was coming from the place of a “little man” complex... people like that need to compensate. They need to show to others that they are very powerful and that they are in charge. Be it through a louder voice or through their actions, they always have to be asserting themselves. In my case, I can just wave my hand and shut people up. I can lower my voice and I’ll say ‘listen’. And that’s all I have to say.

Here’s something in my acting preparation as well – the use of the pause. It is very, very powerful when done correctly. If you pause for the sake of pausing, it doesn’t work. It becomes self-indulgent. On the other hand [you can] use pause for effect. An example is when you really want to get people’s attention. If, in a room full of many people you say ‘listen’ and you don’t continue what you’re about to say, it automatically will draw them to think ‘okay, he’s got something to say, everybody shut up’. It’s little things like the pause which I’ve employed in my portrayal of Callahan. He needs to do less because he already is “more”. He’s such a powerful man that he doesn’t need to do very much.

**Jenna Marynowski:** [Callahan’s] sense of being powerful, do you think it is an internal thing or has he been told?

**Kahlil Joseph:** It’s absolutely internal. Certainly, he’s extremely confident and that comes from his track record, with his credentials as a very powerful law attorney as well as a Harvard Law professor, his track record speaks for itself. [He realizes] ‘wow, look at my track record, I don’t have to tell anyone how good I am, my work speaks for itself’.

In my opening song [Blood in the Water](#) the essence of that song is that I’m telling my students that in order to succeed as a lawyer you have to become a shark that goes after its prey and you smell the blood in the water and rush to crush your opponent. The song, while it has very sarcastic, funny moments in there, it’s pretty dark with the advice he’s offering his students on the first day of Criminal Law 101. For instance, one of his students is challenged on an example scenario. The scene is: your client is a banker and he has defrauded a very old lady. She trusted him with her entire life savings to invest and he spent it on drugs, pornography and hookers. Are you going to defend this man? The student answers “of course not” and I instantly berate the student for his stupidity.

It’s a trick question, my reasoning is ‘you moron, this is an easy win for us, you put the old lady on the stand who’s not going to have any competent legal defence because she can’t afford any. She’s going to get some incompetent person from legal aid, our firm will put her on the stand, call

her old, call her crazy... destroy her credibility and your guy will go free and as a result, what will happen to you? You'll get high and you can get laid'. There are always nervous laughs that come from the audience when they hear me sing that because I'm serious, even though I'm telling the student with a smile. They know that Callahan is serious.

Then I challenge another student, a female student in class. I ask her 'there's this infamous mafia hit man who killed a nun, ran over three puppies because he missed his actual target and killed a nun instead and he drove away. Would you defend this person?' And the female student responds 'I wouldn't defend him because he's a typical man'. Callahan knows the student is a lesbian and he attacks her calmly when it's least expected, he brings it out of nowhere. He dismisses her with 'Oh, you lesbians think you're so tough' and it puts her immediately on the spot. She gets fired up and snaps at Callahan and he makes an example out of her for the fact that her emotions got the better of her. She will find herself out of a job very quickly when clients and law firms see how easily her emotions rise to the surface.

He's ruthless through the song. You get a strong sense of who he is in that opening song. He then makes his real point — 'Why am I telling you all of this? It's because I run a billion dollar law firm, I hire four interns every year from this very class. I will select four young sharks who I respect and those four will have a guaranteed career.' That's my point. From this moment on, any opportunity you get to cut someone else's throat and move up the ladder in my class, you are getting yourself closer to success.

**JM:** Do you notice a tension that scene creates in the audience?

**KJ:** Almost every audience member has come for a great time, they've come to watch a fairytale. It's nice, it's sweet, it's funny, and then you've got this granite pillar of a man – a stone wall who's very cold, very opposite to what this entire show has been about so far.

Yes, they certainly are tense. They don't know what to do with me initially. From that moment on, whenever Callahan comes onto the stage, the audience is always nervous and concerned for the characters I'm going to be interacting with. What is he going to do to them? Because they know that, for the most part, I'm there to attack.

**Jenna Marynowski:** What's behind the musical adaptation of *Legally Blonde*?

**Kahlil Joseph:** I think that when there is a decision made about transforming a non-musical into a musical, if the story can be expanded or translated into song and dance successfully then you've got a musical. I think that the fact that it's a popular story, especially amongst women and even men are familiar with the story, you've got the possibility of a commercial success and I think that's the simple reason why *Legally Blonde* – with good writing as well – has been able to make a successful transition from film to the stage.

**JM:** How do you think that the songs move the plot forward differently than dialogue in the movie does?

**KJ:** There are a lot of moments in the film that work very well on film – that's the beauty of film. It can be subtle – the beauty of the close up is that it can capture the character just being rather than acting. The characters in a movie, they don't have to do too much. You could not do that same thing on stage in an auditorium. Certain things would read better to the audience if it was put into a slightly more exciting format which would be a lot of those moments in the film get

made into a song in the musical. [The lyrics] contain the dialogue from the film that tells the story all the same. For instance when Elle Woods decides to go to Harvard Law School, in the film you'll have her thoughts captured on camera and you'll see some exchange of dialogue between her and her friends talking about it, thinking about it and with her friends. All that happens on stage is they make it into a song where she's interacting with her sorority sisters, her parents, asking them "I want to go to law school, what do you think" and they respond. It's just put into a song, it covers the same story. Callahan, in the film he could easily be giving them a lecture on the first day of law school about how I think they need to be functioning if they want to succeed. On the other hand, I think it's much more exciting if you put it into a very witty, but dark and detailed song. It still captures everything I need to tell them, but it's done in a more exciting format for the stage.

**JM:** Do you think the songs convey emotion even better than dialogue?

**KJ:** I wouldn't make that distinction. I'm a huge fan of acting on film and television, because I do it as well and I enjoy it thoroughly. I don't think a song necessarily contains stronger emotional choices than spoken dialogue and I think many people might argue that it's the opposite. I personally think it's like comparing apples and oranges because they're different conventions in performance. Film and television is much more intimate. It's a different set of rules, a different set of expectations than an audience has when they watch a film or a TV show. Theatre is more elaborate – the audience accepts that they are in a space that is supposed to give essences or indications of where they are. That's where the sets come into play. The audience knows we have agreed to transport ourselves to a different place and time. Whereas in film and TV because you film on location, the audience can believe much easier that they are already there. On stage there is a term called 'suspension of disbelief' – the subconscious agreement that the audience has made with the play that they accept that certain things are – even though they're not actually there – like a location. They've agreed to accept the fact that yes, because of what this backdrop or lights indicate, we agree to be transported to this different time and place. That is very crucial as far as being able to appreciate as an audience what you're going to watch. The show openly admits to not taking itself seriously at all. We know it's a fairytale. We know that, for instance, the way Elle gets into Harvard Law School through a song and a dance is make-believe. We know it sometimes borders on the ridiculous, but we openly admit it. Just like in any other fairytale, where there is a suspension of disbelief and people still are moved by other factors in it such as the 'never say die' mentality or the fact that things do work out in the end quite a bit in life, it gives them hope. In the same way, that's all we ask of an audience when they come to watch our show. You've just got to come with the right mentality to watch the show.

**JM:** So, they should be prepared for a fairytale, but with a little bit of a twist from your character?

**Kahlil:** Yes. Our show is entertainment. I think our biggest strength is that we don't pretend to be anything beyond that, as far as the story.

**JM:** It sounds like it's going to be a great show.

**KJ:** It will be. I believe it is because of the factors I expressed and [the audience] coming with the correct mentality. With a show like ours, I would encourage the audience to come and look at it from an entertainment factor. Does it have great songs? Yes. Does it have energizing dance routines? Yes. Does it have comedy? Absolutely. Do you like the lead character, Elle Woods? Yes. Do you hate the lead antagonist, Callahan? Yes. So you've got all these points and factors

that have been thoroughly covered, and then you've got two hours of very good entertainment... Various forms of entertainment are not everyone's cup of tea... If you decide not to watch a show because that kind of entertainment is not your cup of tea, that's fine. All I'm saying is make an educated, well thought-out decision on why you would or would not want to see this show. I mean for any kind of show.

**JM:** So then, for *Legally Blonde*, the audience shouldn't base their attendance on their past experience with musicals?

**KJ:** I'm very confident that everyone who does come will have a really good time, if they take it for what it's worth. They certainly will despise me. At times they will like me. I've made this character so unpredictable and a mix of so many things. I'm very proud of the way my portrayal has turned out.

— Jenna Marynowski

Photograph by Kate Turning.

Filed under [Concert Preview](#), [Interview](#)

[← Legally Blonde: The Musical – Fairy Tale With A Twist](#)