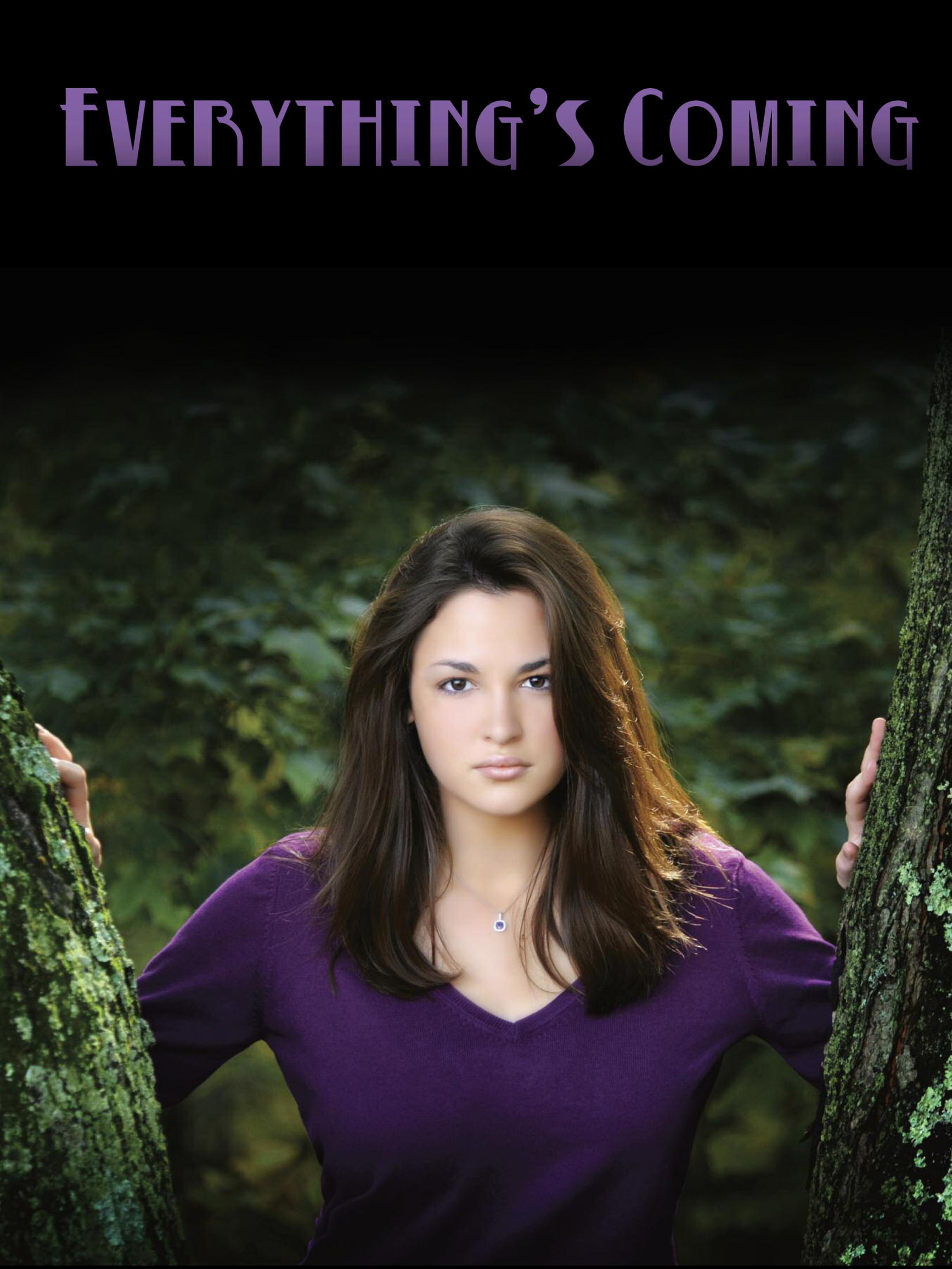
Everything's Coming



Up Roses for

HANNAH ROSE DEFLUMERI

Georgia Monaghan

What a difference a year makes! A year ago, Hannah Rose DeFlumeri was a senior at Newtown High School, sitting at home, and lamenting the fact that she still did not know which college she would be attending in the fall. News that she had not been offered a place in the Musical Theater program at the University of Cincinnati had come as a disappointing blow. Fast forward a year, and Hannah Rose is celebrating over one hundred performances in a featured role in the national Broadway tour of *Legally Blonde: The Musical*.

Remarkably, Hannah was personally invited to audition for the role of Vivienne Kensington, the determined New England antagonist in *Legally Blonde*, while still attending high school. The invitation was extended based solely on the YouTube video of her performance as Mama Rose in Newtown High School's spring production of *Gypsy*. Last April, Hannah uploaded a video of her rendition of "Rose's Turn," the musical's stunning climax, and arguably one of the most demanding songs in the history of American musical theater. In less than a month, Hannah's YouTube video received over ten thousand hits, the acclaim of several influential theater bloggers, and the attention of the directors at Clemmons/Dewing Casting.

Yet Hannah almost walked away before auditioning for the role of Vivienne, one of *Legally Blonde's* main characters, after arriving over an hour late to the audition. Hannah's mother Jacquelyn explains, "We missed the first train into New York City, but waited for a later train hoping to make it on time. When we arrived at the audition there were already hundreds of girls waiting." Some of the girls in line told Hannah that the open call was already closed. Although she was ready to walk away, her mother encouraged her to find one of the casting directors to let them know she had attended the audition, although late. On giving her name, Hannah was immediately escorted past the waiting lines and straight through to the audition room. Her mother recalls the surprised looks on the waiting hopefuls' faces when Hannah announced her chosen song—"Once Upon a Time," from the musical *Brooklyn*—a particularly difficult number. The girls seemed to hold their collective breath waiting to see if she could nail such an ambitious song. Their disappointment was palpable when Hannah hit every note masterfully. Hannah was invited back for two more auditions and on the third day was offered the role.

Hannah recalls that her love of musical theater started early: "The first Broadway show I ever saw was *Beauty and the Beast* when I was in elementary school. I was amazed by how elaborate the show was with its big costumes and dance numbers." Hannah has regularly attended Broadway musicals with her family ever since. Hannah explains, "Music is something that runs through my veins. My mother was a singer—she sang with bands as a teenager and in college, and my uncle is a bass player in a New Orleans jazz band that travels all over the world."

Left: Hannah DeFlumeri, photograph by Darren Wagner

Although Hannah says that singing has always been an integral part of her life, she did not start to take singing seriously until her freshman year of high school, when she began taking voice lessons with Sabrina Post at Sabrina's Encore Productions in Newtown. Hannah explains, "I always knew I could sing, but Sabrina taught me technique and how to sing so I can maintain my voice for eight shows a week. That's invaluable. I don't know what I would do without that knowledge—I am so grateful for it."

In high school Hannah began performing in community theater, also with Sabrina's Encore Productions: "Once I started getting really involved in community theater I remember thinking that this is the only thing I can do—not that this is my only option, but that this is the only thing I can see myself doing for the rest of my life." Hannah explains, "What I love so much about musical theater is the energy, it's so releasing." She loves pretending to be someone else: "I sing, act and dance for a living—it's insane!"

Hannah's last community theater role before going on tour with *Legally Blonde* was as Éponine in *Les Misérable*s, presented by Sabrina's Encore Productions. After only the first few rehearsals she knew it was going to be a very special show: "Everyone was so committed and invested in making the show amazing. We had these long, long character discussions where we would sit in a circle and go through who we were, how we were connected to the other characters, and how the music helped us express to each other how we felt." Immediately following the closing night of *Les Misérables*, Hannah left Newtown for *Legally Blonde* rehearsals in New York. She describes her experience in *Les Misérables* as "electric" and one "that will stick with me forever."

Newtown High School's drama department also gave Hannah the opportunity to stretch herself in a variety of rich and dramatic roles. *Gypsy* was a brave and unusual choice for a high-school musical, but for Hannah the announcement that *Gypsy* had been selected as the musical for her senior year was a dream come true. She had dreamt of playing the role of Mama Rose ever since seeing her idol Patti LuPone in her Tony-winning performance of the role in the Broadway revival of *Gypsy* the previous year: "I was in the Dominican Republic with my family when a friend called to tell me that *Gypsy* had been chosen. I was very, very excited. When I saw the show the year before I walked away so inspired and awestruck and feeling like I needed to do this show. I thought I would have to wait until I was in my fifties to play that role, but I still listened to the cast recording obsessively. Once I knew we were doing *Gypsy* I started working on the role immediately because I wanted that part to be mine."

Hannah's preparation for the role of Mama Rose was exhaustive: "I read Gypsy Rose Lee's book with Kristin Stoller, who played my daughter, Louise. I watched the film and many different performances. But there comes a point where you need to make it your own. I remember sitting there looking through my book—it was all highlighted and all crazy and I remember thinking, I am going to make this role mine."

To date, Hannah's performance of "Rose's Turn" on YouTube has received over twenty thousand hits. Viewers have been lavish in their praise, with comments ranging from "I'm giving you a standing ovation in my basement" to "Give the girl a Tony." Almost all are stunned that this kind of performance is possible from a high-school student. One viewer writes, "I am honestly in shock that this girl exists. How can someone this young in high school be this good?" Some who have seen the many Broadway greats perform this song claim that Hannah's version is the best they have seen. One viewer insists, "I stopped breathing." Another proclaims, "I saw Patti LuPone. I was more interested in you."

The critical acclaim has continued in press reviews of Hannah's performance in *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. One Columbus, Ohio reviewer makes special mention of eighteen-year-old Hannah, describing her as "a strikingly mature vocal powerhouse." Another Columbus reviewer writes that Hannah plays her character with "both grace and venom." And a Michigan theater critic notes that "Ms. DeFlumeri surprised the audience in the second act, showing off an impressive, powerful belt." These reviews are even more remarkable considering that Hannah is the youngest, least experienced cast member on the tour; in fact she is lovingly referred to as "the fetus" by the older members of the cast.

Being the subject of press reviews is not the only new experience for Hannah since landing a role in a national Broadway tour. In community theater it is unlikely for anyone to perform more than four shows of any one production, but in *Legally Blonde*, Hannah performs eight shows a week with five shows on weekends. On November 14, 2010 Hannah wrote on her Facebook wall: "Today marks 29 shows with one day off."

How has she adapted to this intense schedule? "It is very, very different. You really have to balance your energy and take care of yourself. I didn't realize that you really are on your own on tour and you have to get enough sleep, eat well, drink lots of tea, go to the gym, and take care of your body, because without a healthy body you can't do what you love."

Hannah DeFlumeri performing "Rose's Turn" in Newtown High School's production of *Gypsy*. Photograph by Darren Wagner.

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What other advice would Hannah give to young performers who aspire to follow in her footsteps? "Give one hundred percent in every rehearsal and every performance. The stage is where your character lives, and I believe in stepping out on that stage fully in character every time, whether it's a dress rehearsal or even a technical rehearsal. That way you will never falter. And you never know who is watching."

After over one hundred shows in more than fifty cities throughout over thirty states and territories in the United States and Canada, Hannah is thrilled that her final performances in *Legally Blonde: The Musical* will be in New Haven, Connecticut, less than forty minutes from her Newtown home. She will be able to stay with her family, instead of in a hotel, and family and friends who have not been able to travel to see her perform on tour will have the opportunity to attend the closing performances.

What is ahead for this talented young performer once her national Broadway tour debut comes to an end? Will she begin the musical theater program at Ithaca College, where she was able to defer her enrollment for a year while she took advantage of this opportunity? "The fact that I can go to college is something that is looming over my head. College is definitely a very big possibility. We'll see what happens when I get to New Haven and over the summer. My plan in high school was to go straight through to college, to study musical theater, and then move to New York. When it didn't turn out that way I really didn't know what to make of it. I don't know what is the right way to go next, but I am confident I'll be led in the right direction because I have been thus far."

Legally Blonde: The Musical's final shows will be performed at the Shubert Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, on May 13, 14, and 15, 2011.

In the words of Gypsy's signature song, we know,

You'll be swell! You'll be great!

Gonna have the whole world on a plate!

Starting here, starting now,

Blow a kiss, Take a bow.

Hannah, everything's coming up roses!

Above right: Performing in *Smokey Joe's Cafe* for Sabrina's Encore Productions. Photograph by Darren Wagner.
Right: Hannah DeFlumeri performing in the national Broadway tour of *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. Photograph by Carol Rosegg.

Smokey Joe's
Cafe