

Review: Schmigadoon! Is a Real Nice Clambake. I'm Mighty Glad I Came.

By Hayley Levitt

For anyone having *Smash* déjà vu, yes, this is the second consecutive Broadway season where a TV show crafted as a sendup-cum-love letter to the stage metamorphoses into a medium for the motherland. *Schmigadoon!*, now at the Nederlander Theatre, started its life on Apple TV+ as Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio's satire of the gee-willikers joviality of the Golden Age musical. As seems to be the fate for these Broadway-adjacent series, the show was yanked after its second season, a sequel called *Schmicago* that paid homage to gritty '70s classics. If my calculations are correct, that can only mean Tim Cook cruelly deprived us of an '80s mega-musical-themed season three. But if that's the collective sacrifice we had to make to coax *Schmigadoon!* into its natural habitat, it was well worth it.

Schmigadoon! as a TV show was a gift to musical theater buffs whose greatest joy will forever be Leslie Uggams' musical stylings on June's bejeepers. Paul, the stage show's sole author and composer, has maintained every one of the original property's hilarious and charming treasures while making the work of condensing six television episodes into a well-paced stage musical look effortless.

Doctors Josh Skinner (Alex Brightman) and Melissa Gimble (Sara Chase) still meet and fall in love by way of hospital vending machine. An ill-fated hike then lands them in a magical world where life is a musical—primarily of the Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lerner & Loewe, Meredith Willson variety. Melissa, a scholar of Broadway classics, is enamored. Josh, a man whose personal hell is a Sound of Music sing-along, is desperate to escape. The only way out is love, but with Josh and Melissa's relationship flat-lining, they start looking for romance among *Schmigadoon!*'s toe-tapping residents.

Not to beleaguer comparisons to [Smash](#) (it was a harmless musical that should be allowed to rest peacefully in its Broadway grave), but one of the things that makes *Schmigadoon!* feel so much more at ease in a room full of musical theater nerds is that it indulges their actual cravings. Devotees might say they want the backstage industry drama, but who really wants to see the rusted machinery in the bowels of Disney World?

Our true desire is to be close to the magic, which, in most cases, is just a dance ensemble where the girls wear twirly gingham made to be tossed around by a balletic cowboy or backwoodsman (costume designer Linda Cho, set designer Scott Pask, and lighting designer Donald Holder collectively nail *Schmigadoon!*'s TV aesthetic while tastefully cranking up the color to pop onstage). Once Paul casually gestures at the patent absurdity of the entire genre, he gives director and choreographer Christopher Gattelli full leave to craft its most decadent version. We laugh at

Schmigadoon!'s (Emmy-winning) "Corn Puddin'" because we love Carousel's "Clambake." (Doug Besterman and Mike Morris pay loving homage to every piece of source material in their meticulous orchestrations.)

Who better to deliver this loving mockery than performers who have probably had the characters they're spoofing on their career bucket lists ... or at least their high school résumés. McKenzie Kurtz, an emerging Broadway jewel, gives a masterclass in musical comedy as Betsy, the town's Ado Annie-coded waitress who sings one of the score's new additions "Not That Kinda Gal." Her brief flirtation with Josh gives way to his more viable romance with Emma Tate, the Music Man-meets-King and I ingenue played by sparkling triple threat Isabelle McCalla (Ayaan Diop plays her Winthrop-esque little brother Carson, and his unflappable stone face will turn your eyes to hearts).

On Melissa's side of the dating pool, there's Danny Bailey (the hilarious and multi-talented Max Clayton), a Billy Bigelow type written in the font of Dick Van Dyke for his showcase, "You Can't Tame Me." Melissa then moves on to Doc (a stolid Ivan Hernandez)—essentially Captain von Trapp if he were a hapless but swarthy doctor. The bounty of riches continues down the cast list: There's comedy legend Brad Oscar as the town's closeted Mayor Menlove; the great Ann Harada as his unsuspecting wife, Florence (she and Chase channel the aggrieved ladies of Guys and Dolls with their duet "What's the Matter With Men?"); Maulik Pancholy as the soft-spoken Reverend Layton (and occasional leprechaun); and of course, belting comedienne Ana Gasteyer leading the showstopping ensemble number "Tribulation" as conservative fear-monger Mildred Layton.

Brightman and Chase, as our anchors to reality, don't get Schmigadoon!'s flashiest moments. The former, who's used to being run ragged in shows like School of Rock and Beetlejuice, sings the sum total of a song-and-a-half. But between Brightman's straight-faced misery and Chase's cautious delight, they're a winning pair of tour guides whose quotidian chemistry keeps us invested through all the silliness. It's that lingering hint of a raised eyebrow that allows us to fully give in to the comedy and the fantasy of Schmigadoon!, a simple, musical wonderland "where the men are men / and the cows are cows."