



## **‘Schmigadoon!’ Broadway Review: TV Series Adaptation Delivers a Fizzy and Delightful Love Letter to Musical Theater**

By Naveen Kumar

It’s tempting to argue on principle that “Schmigadoon!” is everything that’s wrong with Broadway: a double-baked potato of familiar IP that relies on affection for a TV series, which itself relies on affection for golden age musicals. But the effervescent stage show, from creator Cinco Paul and director-choreographer Christopher Gattelli, is all but irresistible — a giddy love letter to the form that’s enough to turn even the most skeptical curmudgeon into a walking heart-eye emoji.

Start out a stick in the mud, and you’ll have Alex Brightman as your stand-in. The Tony-winning “Beetlejuice” alum plays the straight-man foil to the swirl of stock characters that greet him and his girlfriend, played by Sara Chase, when they stumble into a magical town — where all of life is a musical — after getting lost on a Catskills couples’ retreat. The only way back to their native New York City is, of course, to find true love.

That they’ll eventually rediscover each other is obvious, which means their dalliances along the way with various romantic leads from the American songbook need to deliver on entertainment value alone. “Schmigadoon!” doesn’t just want the couple to fall for each other again — it wants audiences to fall in love with the American musical in all its sincerity, absurdity, and cringeworthiness.

Paul, who co-created the Apple TV+ series and drew from season one for the musical’s script and score, performs a dexterous trick, poking fun at the form’s many ridiculous tropes with an unmistakably affectionate hand. Together with Gattelli, the pair are keenly aware of what makes a musical tick — and why people love, or love to hate them — leveraging much of it to their advantage.

Almost immediately, Chase’s character — a doctor back home, but a damsel out here — catches the eye of a carnival barker (a fantastic Max Clayton) who’s all brawn and broad smiles and straight out of “Carousel.” Brightman’s cynic is meanwhile a magnet for the town’s country-fried jailbait (McKenzie Kurtz), plucked from “Oklahoma!” Look out behind her! There’s daddy with a shotgun.

The town also has a pied piper of the purity police (Ana Gasteyer, in peak form) and a light-in-his-loafers mayor (Brad Oscar), who has a conveniently daft wife (Ann Harada, reprising her role from the series). While not exactly a feminist screed, the script grants nary a free pass to the glut of hackneyed gender conventions in the golden-age canon without at least cracking a joke. The overexaggerated femininity, in Linda Cho’s frosting-on-an-Easter-cake costumes, is its own winking critique.

The heart of the story is the bond between the IRL couple, and it has been drawn in finer detail since the show's try-out last year at the Kennedy Center, where I found it thinly sketched. Additional material in the script, and deepened work from the actors, now lends an emotional charge to the will-they-or-won't-they plot, despite the obvious happy ending to-be. Chase is a warm and wry powerhouse as a musical-theater geek still happy to drag her beloved artform's dated faults. And Brightman, who's built a reputation playing wilder roles, shows his range by going straightfaced as the sourpuss fish out of water. Not just in contrast to the hijinks around them, the two feel grounded and worth rooting for.

Gattelli, who also choreographed the TV series, does much of his best work here through dance, a hypervigorous storm of limbs that manages to be funny while conveying story and character. Together with the candy-colored, pop-up-book design (the set is by Scott Pask and lighting by Donald Holder), there's a topline sense of frenzied too-muchness constantly willing the audience into submission.

This being a Lorne Michaels production, there are also well-timed punch lines everywhere — in the lyrics, the tone, the staging, and in the blinking arrow that says “fun” and points to a hunky bachelor's crotch. But the plot also retains a serial quality that saps momentum and betrays its TV roots. The couple tries out one set of lovers in the first act, then another — “The Music Man”-coded schoolmarm (Isabelle McCalla) and “The Sound of Music”-inspired doctor (Ivan Hernandez) — in the second. By the time intermission hits, you can practically hear the writers' room mapping out a season's worth of episodes.

It's no knock to say that you might leave the theater humming well-known tunes from other shows, so uncannily does Paul evoke beloved songwriting styles without replicating exact melodies. Just as the story mines humor from the collision of old-fashioned ways with a modern frankness, Paul's score combines the appeal of jaunty golden-age sounds with a freshness that feels present day.

Not that anyone wants to think about the present day. The concept in “Schmigadoon!” of a literal portal through which to escape reality is undoubtedly part of its appeal. Even musical-theater haters would have to ask, why even bother trying to come back?