

Review: 'MacGyver: The Musical' at Stages is a clever invention

By Doni Wilson

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Carolyn Johnson and Hannah Levine in 'MacGyver The Musical' at Stages Theatre

Remember the television show starring Richard Dean Anderson called “MacGyver” in the 1980s?

This was a time when we knew who our enemies were (communists) and we felt sorry for those living in oppression. MacGyver was good looking, likable and *nice*. He had amazing ingenuity: He could come up with creative solutions to the most fraught situations, using things such as paper clips and improvisational inventiveness to fix the most difficult fixes. He didn’t need profanity or violence. He could “MacGyver it” – a phrase we still use today.

But that was then and this is now. Before the start of “MacGyver: The Musical,” the send-up of the show currently running at The Gordy, we see big-screen photos of Cher, Tom Cruise, Ted Koppel, Joan Jett, all sorts of ’80s awesomeness, backed up by vintage rock music. We are about to go behind the Iron Curtain so MacGyver can help East Germans who are oppressed politically and personally.

The East German punk band The Hamburgers, whose jackets are made of American flags, has their instruments set up in the center of the stage, and whether it is an austere military office or a graffiti-filled street, the scene design (Jodi Bobrovsky and Kirk Domer) works perfectly. You always know where you are in this show.

After having to MacGyver our way through a pandemic, it's the right time for this show's nostalgia and energy, a perfect blend of a superlative cast, comedy and memorable music, with the added drama of MacGyver being played by a member of the audience.

Artistic director Kenn McLaughlin (who directs and stages this production) explains in the program that the creator of "MacGyver," Lee David Zlotoff, wanted "MacGyver not as a character or cultural icon but rather as an aspirational idea. MacGyver embodied the belief that we can confront every obstacle using whatever limited resources we may have..."

Zlotoff convinced McLaughlin that for the musical version, they needed to "put a totally unrehearsed, untrained, but courageous human at the very center of the story" – and a young woman from Huntsville played the role with good humor and enthusiasm, aided by cue cards.

That choice might be a huge risk in itself, but the production was already having to MacGyver it up with the author of the music and lyrics Peter Lurye stepping in for another keyboardist, and Houston favorite and Stages veteran Mark Ivy taking on with aplomb the major role of Johann for another actor .

This fast-paced and fun musical works because the actors not only have impeccable comic timing, but the singing is terrific. They even sing in the correct accents – which makes it even funnier. (Carolyn Johnson not only performs but is also the dialect coach.)

The plot hinges on two East German siblings (Ingrid, played by the stellar Hannah Clarke Levine, and Johann, played spot-on by Mark Ivy) who have not spoken for years after the deaths of their parents, who tried to escape from East Germany to the West. They were adopted by their Aunt Hilde, an East German militant, played by the superlative Johnson, a Carol Burnett-level comedian who nails every number, not only musically but with a mastery of demanding physicality in multiple roles. The choreography is cute, the lines funny, whether about freedom or French existentialism ("not that it matters").

Audiences will enjoy the wide-ranging and wonderful songs by Lurye and a cast that delivers. From the moving "On the Other Side," a wistful song of wishing to escape the oppression of East German life, to hilarious numbers such as "Drink, Drink, Drink" and "We are the Tools," these songs, well, they rock. The cast includes Broadway and television veterans like Jay Aubrey Jones, the vivacious and talented Levine, Mike Dorsey, Brandon Grimes and Katrien Van Riel (all making their Stages debuts) along with the superlative comedic and musical talents of Johnson and Ivy. You couldn't ask for a better team of players for this original take on a blast from the past. The cast alone is worth this trip down memory lane, when we really did have heroes like MacGyver, who showed us how to get out of difficult moments with humor and hope.

Doni Wilson is a Houston-based writer.