

MacGyver The Musical Has All The Tools To Engineer Fun

[Jessica Goldman](#) February 25, 2022 8:00AM



Keivon Akbari, Hannah Clarke Levine and Katrien Van Riel in *MacGyver The Musical*
Photo by Melissa Taylor

MacGyver, the US covert operative in the eponymous mid-'80s hit TV show, could solve problems/get out of dangerous situations using only a paper clip and some duct tape. But that's child's play compared to the wonderous feats *MacGyver The Musical* is pulling off at Stages in this premiere production.

And by wonderous we mean fun. Pure fun. Fun in a way that serves up nostalgia, interactive theater, universal comedy, a rocking live band, classic musical numbers, killer performances, smart use of video projection, and a plot with just enough edge up its sleeve to keep us interested despite the predictable outcome.

What's just as much fun is learning who plays MacGyver, as this changes every production.

The musical (Book by Kate Chavez, Lindsey Hope Pearlman, Robin Ward Holloway, and creator of the TV series, *MacGyver*, Lee David Zlotoff. Music and Lyrics by Peter Lurye) begins in the theater lobby where four audience members have volunteered to audition for the starring role.

Put through their acting, singing, and dancing paces by McQ (Yasir Ali Muhammad) who will later usher the chosen performer through the production, we declare a winner and then shuffle into the theater eager to see how our newly minted actor fares.

No doubt what goes on behind the scenes from there is a mad scurry to get things explained to the newbie MacGyver (in this production a middle-aged man with Clint Eastwood vibes) and outfit him with the necessary tech equipment.

The 20 minutes or so we wait goes by rather quickly thanks to the pounding '80s rock music, eye-catching graffiti-clad walls enveloping the theater, and a video stream showing clips of classic 80s moments. Everything from MTV videos to Dirty Dancing to Golden Girls to Peter Jennings delivering the news. For this Gen X critic, it was teenage memory lane writ large.

Once the musical opens, however, the creators smartly drop the reminiscence renaissance and give us a show that everyone, even the MacGyver ignorant, can enjoy.

The story is simple. The year is 1989 and MacGyver is sent to East Berlin to thwart a Communist overthrow of the rest of Germany. Excellent narrative choice, by the way, nothing un-PC about making the Stassi the bad guys. Once there, MacGyver meets a double agent contact Johann (Mark Ivy), and his estranged punk singer sister Ingrid (Hannah Clarke Levine).

Both are trying in their own way to end Communist rule, Johann by betraying East Berlin leader Heimlich (Jay Aubrey Jones) and his second in command Hilde (Carolyn Johnson). Ingrid, well, by being a punk with her band Die Hamburgers (Keivon Akbari, Mike Dorsey, and Katrien Van Riel).

MacGyver being MacGyver uses his nonviolent ingenious everyday tool-based methods (including the best/funniest use of a zip line) to help the siblings overthrow Heimlich's nefarious plot and reunite in familial harmony.

If this sounds somewhat cheesy, it is. It's meant to be. But while writers here are channeling the earnest '80s where dripping irony and wink wink comedy hadn't yet found its way into the zeitgeist, they do inject enough self and audience awareness into the show to let some of the steam out.

So, back to our layperson MacGuyver. While this certainly isn't the first show to have an audience member take on a role, what this production gets right is the dual methods of framing the part. Firstly, while it may sound like MacGyver has the lead role, here he's really more of a device that can be used when needed but not taxed upon too heavily, lessening the need for stellar performing.

Smarter still is the way MacGyver interacts with the show. Using graceful physical wrangling and cue cards with never more than one line on them at a time, McQ escorts, directs, and prompts the performer for the entire production, ensuring that lines are read, marks are met and nerves and egos are kept in check.

Not to say the role is robotic. Far from it. There's plenty of room for MacGyver to show some personality (they weren't asked to sing and dance in the audition for nothing) but not enough leeway to run the show aground.

Our focus then mostly falls to the rest of the show's tremendous performers delivering no less than 18 musical numbers. Yes, that's a couple songs too many and yes three hours from audition to final act is far too long for a show like this.

Also, as is the issue with musicals everywhere these days it seems, several of the numbers get drowned out by overly loud musical accompaniment. Frankly not helped in this case by the three-sided stage, often resulting in singing performers with their backs to us for long stretches.

But thanks to Director Kenn McLaughlin wringing every bit of energy, comedy, and feeling out of this exuberant musical, we allow the extra and indecipherable moments without too much fuss.

Lurye's numbers (accompanied by an onstage band) range from an approximation of dialed back, poppy punk to standard ballads and humorous peppy numbers.

Most notably of the latter is, *I'll Take Care of You*, sung to great comedic effect by the sleazy Russian grifter/seller of secrets, Boris (Mike Dorsey). His, you do something for me and I'll pay you back, lyrics are funny enough, but made extra juicy by the character affirming line, You scratch my back and then I'll scratch my back.

Can We Do This also gives the giggles as Hilde (Johnson here, and throughout the show, serving up a superlative comedic performance) and her colleague Messerschmidt (Brandon Grimes) debate withholding crucial information from Heimlich in a kind of Stassi-esque tango.

In the show's most touching moment, Ingrid fantasizes about what life could have been like and will be like after the Wall comes down in *On the Other Side*. It's a beautiful ballad Lurye gives us made all the more stunning by Levine's precisely emotive singing.

Mercifully, there are no big dance numbers in the show. No one needed to see high kicking Stassi agents, after all. Instead, McLaughlin (also credited with staging the show) peppers just enough dance-y moves into the production to give it the full musical feel.

For the visual feel of the punks and the Stassi, we have Costume Designer Kristina Ortiz Miller to thank for making sure the communists are militarily starched and the rebels present believably spiky and raccoon-eyed.

It should be noted that *MacGyver The Musical* was meant to premiere just as the pandemic shut down productions as a whole. Timing is a funny thing, to be sure, but who knew that when Stages was finally ready to launch a show about the threat of violent communist takeover it would coincide with real-world events?

In time, other playwrights no doubt will tackle Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, helping us make sense of it all.

Meanwhile and unexpectedly, *MacGyver The Musical* now serves as both a joyfully fun-filled theatrical experience and wishful thinking. If only life imitated art a lot more in this case

MacGyver The Musical continues through March 4 at Stages, 800 Rosine. For more information, visit stageshouston.com or call 713-527-0123. \$87-25.