

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

For One Night I Became a Star of 'Heated Rivalry'

The unauthorized musical parody of the hit TV show gives the role of Scott Hunter to an unsuspecting audience member — and one recent night that was me.



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By Tim Teeman

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The house lights came up suddenly, and the performer Ryann Redmond announced, “Tonight, the role of Scott Hunter will be played ... by one of you.” A chorus of oohs and ahhs rippled through the audience at “Heated Rivalry: The Unauthorized Musical Parody,” which opened on Tuesday at the Culture Club in Manhattan.

This cheerfully bare-bones, affectionately barbed parody of the hit TV show mainly skewers the secret romance between two professional hockey players, the Canadian Shane Hollander (Jimin Moon) and the Russian Ilya Rozanov (Jay Armstrong Johnson). The frisson of excitement pulsing through the theater a week ago halfway through the parody was in part an appreciation that the TV show’s popular secondary love story — between the hockey hunk Hunter and his smoothie-barista lover, Kip (Ryan Duncan) — would also feature in the musical.

When Redmond's eyes fixed on me — “Yes, you. Come on up” — my initial response was puzzlement. Critics don't tend to get picked. But I had no notebook-in-lap, and I discovered later, the actors didn't know where reviewers were seated. As the audience whooped, Redmond guided me backstage.

“Follow the script, it's only a few lines,” she said, dressed as one of the show's Susans, character stand-ins for the female fan base of “Heated Rivalry.” More cheers greeted my reappearance onstage. Any mortification or nerves vanished, evaporated, *pffft*, perhaps because I wanted to meet the room's merry mood. Or maybe it was an inner ham waiting to be liberated; my dream has been a role — and fade-out shot — in “The Young and the Restless.”

Also, I watched “Heated Rivalry” on TV more invested in Scott (François Arnaud) and Kip (Robbie G.K.) than Ilya (Connor Storrie) and Shane (Hudson Williams). While both clandestine gay romances feature hot bodies and passionate longing, Scott and Kip (to me) seemed more engaging as characters. Like many viewers, I cheered their exhilarating ice rink moment in Episode 5. That evening onstage, I thought: “If I'm Scott Hunter for one night only, then, dammit, I'll be my best Scott Hunter.”

Something else sharpened my attention. Surveying the script, I saw they weren't just a “few lines,” but *seven* pages. “Scott” isn't a one-and-done character; he's integral to the show. Volunteer Scott has to commit to his bit.

In the musical, as on television, Kip's making smoothies when Scott comes into his cafe workplace for the first time. Recalling how absurdly freighted the lingering looks in “Heated Rivalry” are, I channeled my extremely buried, inner hockey stud as best I could. “I came here because I was running. You think I get this physique by sitting at home,” I said as my flirtiest Scott. “No. I chase miles — breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

The audience laughed and hollered. I paused and cruised Duncan, remembering how Scott and Kip had locked eyes on TV. “Now what's a fella like me have to do to get a smoothie around here, pretty-lips?” And then: “How's that banana coming

along? Daddy's hungry." (As for Scott and Kip's climactic ice-rink kiss, you'll just have to see for yourselves.)

Ryan Duncan, right, as Kip with Cherry Torres. The musical parody casts an audience member to play Kip's lover, Scott. Matthew Murphy for The New York Times

After the show, I nervously awaited the reviews in real-time; *phew* — on that night, there were universal raves from audience members and some critics I knew. "The British accent really helps," one man said. Flatteringly, I was asked if I was an actor or a plant. I floated home on a magic carpet of head-swelling compliments, performer's buzz and elated shock.

Two days later, I sought a tougher set of critiques from the director Alan Kliffer and from Dylan MarcAurele, who wrote the book, music and lyrics, as well as Duncan and Redmond. "You and all our Scotts have been great so far, we haven't had a bad one yet," said Kliffer. "I'm touching a piece of wood superstitiously as I say that."

The idea for an audience member playing Scott, said MarcAurele, first came from a friend, the dramaturg Rose Oser. “It made sense given our small cast and wanting a mid-show jolt,” he said.

Kliffer and Redmond scope the audience before and during a performance, looking for a potential Scott, says Redmond, who is giving off “the right vibes, engaging with the jokes and ready to play.”

To date there haven’t been any female Scotts, and though the script states the audience member should be “ideally a cheerful but awkward, straight 55-year-old male” — which, umm, doesn’t exactly encapsulate me — the team insists the role is open to all ages, genders and sexualities. Some as-yet-unnamed celebrity cameos are planned. Duncan appeared in the movie “Forrest Gump,” and would love for Tom Hanks to play Scott for one night (he also suggests Lea DeLaria). Redmond proposes Mark Ruffalo and Bad Bunny. All gasped at the idea of Arnaud himself showing up.

I thanked Duncan for my thrilling turn. He would soon meet that night’s Scott.

“You were wonderful,” Duncan said, “so whoever they are, they have some very large skates to fill.”

“Young and the Restless” producers, I’m available.

Heated Rivalry: The Unauthorized Musical Parody

Through Sept. 7 at the Culture Club, Manhattan; heatedrivalryparody.com. Running time: 1 hour 25 minutes.