



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam nec tellus odio. Vivamus et tortor ac est dignissim maximus.

# THE START OF Something New

BY COURTNEY POTTER

Thanks to Disney+, *High School Musical* is boldly reimaged for today's audience.

**T**o the everyday passerby, East High School—located on South 1300 East in Salt Lake City, Utah—looks like any other suburban high school in the United States. Set foot on campus and you'll find classrooms a-plenty; a lush green football field; and halls teeming with teenagers. But for fans of the Emmy®-winning *High School Musical*, a Disney Channel Original Movie first broadcast in January 2006, East High means something more. It means love, hard work, friendship, compassion... and some show-stopping musical numbers along the way.

Beginning this fall, the halls of East High will once again ring with the sound of HSM's celebrated songs (along with a host of fresh tunes) when Disney+ premieres *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, its innovative new take on the globally beloved franchise. Disney twenty-three recently spoke with writer and executive producer Tim Federle, as well as members of the show's talented, fresh-faced cast, and their enthusiasm—for the show itself, and for the relevant stories they're bringing to a new generation—is unmistakable.

## GET'CHA HEAD IN THE GAME

*High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* picks up in present day, 13 years after the original movie aired, at the real-life location where it all began: East High, home of the Wildcats. The 10-episode scripted series follows skateboarding junior Ricky (Joshua Bassett) and his ex-girlfriend Nini (Olivia Rodrigo)—a performer who just returned from summer theater camp with newfound confidence and an ambitious new boyfriend named E.J. (Matt Cornett). Soon enough, Ricky launches an impetuous plan to prove himself to Nini by auditioning to star opposite her in the school's first-ever production of *High School Musical*. In the weeks leading up to an against-all-odds opening night, "show-mances" blossom, rivalries flare, and lives are literally changed forever. Most episodes will not only feature a unique, rehearsal-room reinterpretation of an iconic *High School Musical* song, but also a brand-new tune written especially for the series—which additionally stars Broadway veteran Kate Reinders (*Wicked*) as Miss Jenn, East High's mercurial but well-meaning new drama teacher; Sofia Wylie as Gina, a recent transfer student and die-hard "theater kid"; Frankie A. Rodriguez as Carlos, the production's impas-

sioned student choreographer; Dara Reneé as Kourtney, Nini's "ride-or-die" best friend; Larry Saperstein as Ricky's skater pal Big Red; Julia Lester as E.J.'s aspiring-songwriter cousin Ashlyn; and Mark St. Cyr as East High S.T.E.M. teacher Mr. Mazzara.

For a television series to follow a group of charismatic teens as they rehearse and perform a musical is one thing; recapturing HSM's legendary "lightning in a bottle," and filtering it through the lens of 2019's significant cultural sensibilities, is another... but it was a task writer Tim Federle was more than ready to tackle. "I was always kind of a 'Disney guy,'" admits Federle, a former dancer who tread the Big Apple boards in (among others) the original Broadway production of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* before setting proverbial pen to paper with novels including *Better Nate Than Ever* and Fox's recent Oscar®- and Golden Globe®-nominated animated film *Ferdinand*. "So when Disney+ announced that they were interested in *High School Musical* as a franchise, I went in and pitched my [idea]," he continues, "which was, 'Rather than try to continue the storylines of [original HSM characters] Troy and Gabriella, what if it felt like a documentary film crew was following around a group of students at East High, in Utah, who were putting on *High School Musical* for the first time?' I was really passionate about it, and for whatever reason really felt like I knew what to do with this." Disney+ agreed. Thanks to Federle's pitch, the ensuing series is fresh and more mature in tone—from the documentary-esque style of its camera work to the contemporary subject matter it conveys.

With the framework of the series in place, it was time to cast the players—most of whom grew up within the formative, tuneful shadow of the original Disney Channel movie and all its later forms. Case in point: "My first musical [as an actor], when I was 8 years old, was *High School Musical*," confesses Bassett, who stars as Ricky. "I can't make that up! It was a local community theater production. But [HSM] was huge in my house growing up. Every time the next one came out, my family would always watch the premieres together." He even auditioned, years later, for *High School Musical 4*—a Disney Channel project that was eventually scrapped. Ultimately, getting cast in the Disney+ series was a true "full-circle" moment; as Bassett explains, "It's pretty surreal that it's now become a reality for me." And that goes for his fellow cast members, too: "High School Musical was the first [movie musical] I ever saw,"



admits Cornett, who portrays Ricky's nemesis E.J. "It made me more interested into the musical side of things." Adds Rodrigo, who stars as Nini, "I was definitely a [HSM] fan. It's really, really exciting and surreal to [now] be a part of this franchise—and to get to see it live on in different, new, beautiful ways."

### COUNTING ON YOU

Any musical theater performer will tell you that, once the scripts are cracked open, a group of seemingly diverse individuals quickly morphs into a tight-knit company. And from the jump, the cast of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* did just that. Before shooting even began, new friends Barnett and Cornett caravanned from the Los Angeles area to Salt Lake City... and their very first stop? East High, of course! "The first place I wanted to go when we got there was East High School," Barnett reveals. "So we drove for 12 hours and went straight there!" Adds Cornett, "It was so much fun... we would call each other [during the drive] and have jokes over the phone. And then once we got to Utah, we decided we're not even going to our apartments first—we're going to the school! We actually met up with Olivia and her mom there [too]. Never in my life did I think I would be star struck by a building."

Cast bonding didn't stop there. Says Cornett, "When we all first got to Salt Lake... [for] a week straight, all of us were [set up] in this conference room together, being pulled back and forth: 'You come to set,' 'You come to hair and make-up,' 'You come here,' 'You come there.' It was just a great time for us to bond. We would sit and play [board games together] for hours on end." Later, during production, "If, say, five of us have an hour-long break, we will choreograph and shoot a spontaneous music video," confesses Barnett. "It's just a fun-loving cast—everyone's so freakin' talented... [and] they'll show up on set even when they're not called, just to support each other. Just to be there! It's always nice to have that kind of support from your peers."

The effects of that close-knit camaraderie will certainly be seen onscreen, too. "We've got a really big, really fun [musical] number in Episode 6 that all of the kids perform in," Federle explains. "When we were rehearsing this number before shooting it, [cast member] Dara Renee had a little bit of a knee twist... One of the things that's so extraordinary about theater people, and also TV people, is this attitude that 'the show must go on.' And so, in 20 minutes, we taught her dance part to the actor playing Big Red [Larry Saperstein]; he stepped in, and Dara got another solo in the song that featured her in an entirely different way. I just remember being so proud of the cast—and crew—for having a moment that could've ground the entire [production] to a halt, and instead we found something even more exciting to do with the cast and with that number."

### WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Central to *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* is a sense of inclusion, explains Federle, "with the actors we've cast, the stories we're telling, and the places we're able to take a modern audience—who has both grown up with the original movie, and [now] lives in a world that's evolved." For instance, Rodrigo's character Nini is being raised by two moms; "I remember the first time I [read] the character breakdown," says Rodrigo. "I really liked the way that they portrayed it. [Having two moms] was just something normal. It wasn't a 'social statement,' because in reality it isn't—it's just a reality for many kids... I resonated with that."

"I think a lot of TV series deal with teen issues beautifully," Federle adds. "And they offer a really honest portrayal of what it's like to be a modern teenager. [But] what I wanted to do—and what I think makes *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* different—is offer that 'slice-of-life' reality. Not only because we shoot the show with a documentary style, but also because we're able to push this level of music... These characters aren't just people you are going to laugh with, and aspire to be friends with, but they've also got these extraordinary musical talents."

The original *High School Musical* debuted at a time when musical

theater-style performance had all but disappeared from screens; Hollywood's opulent, big-budget movie musicals were largely curios of the past—and pop culture touchstones like Fox's *Glee* had yet to premiere. For an entire generation of kids (and their parents), however, a Disney Channel TV movie suddenly made exploring music and dance "cool" again; if East High basketball star Troy Bolton (as portrayed by Zac Efron, late of *The Disaster Artist* and *The Greatest Showman*) or math and science whiz Gabriella Montez (played by Vanessa Hudgens, most recently seen in Fox's *Rent: Live*) could do it, so could you. And as this new series proves, you definitely don't have to be "the star" to succeed. "We've got the types of characters who look and feel and love and sing in ways that are often relegated to the sidelines of stories," Federle continues. "In our show, the thing I'm really proud of—and the thing I think is going to resonate with audiences, and has certainly been meaningful for our actors—is that the 'sidekicks' get their own story lines, their own songs, their own romantic arcs." That special salience is not lost on the show's cast. "There is [a sense of] 'magic' in this show," Barnett proclaims, "and I cannot wait for the world to see it!"

Here's what you might not know about musical theater: It's never just



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam nec tellus odio. Vivamus et tortor ac est dignissim maximus. Cras suscipit urna eros, eu pretium lacus congue eu. Vivamus sem nunc, tristique eget pharetra eget, tristique in justo.

about the show, or the actors, or the elusive standing ovation. It's about finding a place to belong. It's about creating a "chosen family," where everyone can geek out together over the latest Original Broadway Cast Recording. It's about realizing every single role is crucial—whether you're the lead character, "Townsperson No. 2," or a spotlight operator. And ultimately, it's about unmasking your most authentic self. These concepts are universally relatable—and fundamental to this new Disney+ series. "People might not always understand your obsessions," explains Federle. "And you don't need to convince anyone that your obsessions are okay—you just have to find people that share those same obsessions. If there's anything that I hope *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* captures, it's the energy [you feel] when you get enough people together who love something the same way—there's nothing that can stop that love. There's nothing quite as magical as finding your own 'tribe.' That's certainly what theater has taught me, and that's certainly what I hope this show brings as a warm, funny 'comfort food' to a new generation of viewers."

Look for *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* only on Disney+!