

^ School' in session

Disney's musical hits right note with regional theaters

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^ Cheerleaders, you want to grab your pom-poms!"

The instruction comes from director Tamarah Ashton, and the actors at Newhall's Canyon Theatre Guild - ages 13 to 17 - promptly hop to it.

It may be summer, but Disney's "High School Musical" never figures to be out of season.

A kind of cross between "Romeo and Juliet" and "Grease" "HSM," the upbeat tale of mismatched teens uniting over a mutual love of musical theater is being put on in high schools, professional and semi-professional productions - even an ice show - across the country.

It began as an idea for a live stage show before being filmed as an original movie for the Disney Channel. The movie aired in early 2006, and immediately caught on, selling scads of CDs and DVDs and prompting numerous tie-ins. The film's sequel, reuniting the original cast members, airs Aug. 17 on the Disney Channel.

Meanwhile, "High School Musical's" popularity has gone positively supernova.

A live concert tour, featuring most of the original cast members, sold out arenas across the country. The new professional stage version, directed by Broadway veteran Jeff Calhoun, launched its national tour last month in Detroit and will be followed by "High School Musical: The Ice Tour," opening in September at Madison Square Garden.

The experiences, Disney executives promise, are different from each other and different still from the Wildcat pep rally sampler that people can see periodically at Disney California Adventure.

Everybody's doing it

What's that? You say you couldn't possibly wait for the ice "HSM" to get to Staples (Oct. 4-5) or the stage show to reach the Kodak (as yet unscheduled dates in December)? As it happens, Disney has taken care of that problem.

Last October, the company released the school and amateur rights to "High School Musical," meaning that the show is likely coming to a theater or school in your neighborhood, oh, sometime in the next 5 minutes.

"If you're able to license 400 to 500 productions in a year, you're considered a very big success," says Steve Fickinger, vice president of theatrical licensing for Disney Theatricals. "We have, in eight or nine months, licensed it to 1,500 schools and amateur groups, with new ones coming on every day."

That's, indeed, a lot of hoopsters learning dance steps to "Get'cha Head in the Game." And to what does Fickinger attribute the "HSM" crush?

"First of all, the score: the songs are hook-y, catchy melodies that can make you want to sway in your seat," says Fickinger. "There's humor, heart and great pathos."

"All Disney stories are aspirational," he continues. "It's always about who kids want to be, whether they want to be Woody from 'Toy Story,' or Peter Pan or Cinderella or Troy and Gabby."

It's their life

"The cliques are very much there in junior high school. We can relate," adds Megan Tripp, 14, who plays the backstabbing Sharpay in the Canyon Theatre Guild production. "Then there's the musical part of it. Everybody loves a good musical, especially the theater kids here. We love to sing and dance."

Canyon Theatre Guild made a point of jumping on the rights to stage "HSM" the moment they became available. It's one of 8 Southland productions (see box) scheduled to open between now and Aug. 24.

Canyon Theatre Guild will stage four performances of "HSM" Friday and Sunday as the company's summer workshop production. Everybody who signed up is guaranteed a part, and, although the cast is large, a female heavy gender split meant that Ashton and her team needed to get a little creative to make all the pieces fit.

"The skater dudes, as they're called in the script, are all girls, but girls can be skaters, too," says Ashton who is a professor of education at California State University, Northridge's Department of Special Education. "We had to do that. We added on to the jocks. We have a coed basketball and we've made the cheerleaders part of the jocks. So, yeah, we kind of fudged a little bit."

A little bit of ^ Grease'

Which means that Melissa Lincoln, 13, is playing the cello-loving skater dude, Ripper. And loving it.

"Last year, I was Eugene in ^ Grease.' I got to be really goofy and get stuffed in a locker," she says. "I love funny parts."

Fickinger is accustomed to companies making such maneuvers, having seen gender switches and color-blind casting to accommodate the dictates of a given production's population.

Ashton likens the play to a contemporary version of "Grease," which, she says, "was the high-school musical of our generation." People, teenagers especially, instantly got behind a story about being stigmatized for trying something new.

"It's really kind of hokey with the song about everybody sticking together, but it's still true," says Ashton. "So I think in that respect, it will ring true with any age group."

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HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL

Where: Canyon Theatre Guild, 24242 N. San Fernando Road, Newhall.

When: 1 and 7 p.m. Friday and Sunday.

Tickets: \$8. (661) 799-2702. www.canyontheatreguild.org.

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