

“I DON’T DANCE”:
A QUEER READING OF DISNEY’S *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL*

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Abstract

Despite its apparent heterocentrism, Disney's *High School Musical* franchise warrants a queer reading due to the gendered dynamic between sports and musical theatre, thereby rendering the central conflict (i.e., Troy Bolton's decision between basketball and singing) as one that potentially transgresses dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. The franchise frames musical theatre as a stereotypically 'queer' pursuit due to its ties with camp culture, stylized effeminacy, and homosexuality. Sports culture is placed in diametric opposition, depicted as the traditionally 'masculine' pursuit due to its focus on cisgender, heterosexual male physicality and superiority. However, in a subversive twist, *High School Musical* offers a campy representation of normative masculinity through latent homoeroticism, revealing the trilogy's implied address to queer boys. Troy operates as a locus of identification for this queer boy spectator because of his pseudo-sexual identity crisis, "coming-out" storyline, and tenuous rapport with his father/coach. Rather than being a legitimate love interest, the character of Gabriella Montez operates as Troy's "beard" since their relationship provides the perfect heterosexual "cover-up" for his queer passion for singing. In conclusion, this essay reconciles *High School Musical* with its 'Disney-fied' origins and exploring why Disney products seem to perpetuate hidden queerness in a contemporary era where queer readings of films seem less and less relevant.

Growing up in 2000s suburban America with ready access to cable television, most of my early media exposure came from a handful of kid-oriented channels that were available to most young viewers my age. Chief among these was The Disney Channel: a premium cable channel that The Walt Disney Company launched in 1983 with content aimed toward a “tween” audience of around ages 9 to 12 years old, specifically girls.¹ However, as a closeted queer kid, the content produced by The Disney Channel (later re-branded as just “Disney Channel”) never quite reflected my identity or experiences. Openly queer characters simply “didn’t exist” within their universe of shows, no matter how much I wanted them to. Of course, this in no way stopped me from clocking in as much screen time as possible. So, I became enmeshed with their assortment of television series and made-for-TV films, and none so much impacted me as *High School Musical* — a 2006 Disney Channel Original Movie (or DCOM, for short) followed by two sequels in 2007 and 2009, respectively.² I can still remember waiting patiently on my living room couch for *High School Musical 2* to premiere on a Friday night in August, and then seeing *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* in theatres with my mom and younger brother. I knew all the songs, and even some of the dance moves. At the time, I rationalized that my obsession with teen heart-throb Zac Efron (who plays the male lead, Troy Bolton) must have stemmed from a childhood crush that many of my female and female-presenting peers shared. However, when I recently re-watched the films as a college student, I was hit with an entirely different realization that completely shifted my attachment to the trilogy: despite his apparent heterosexuality, Troy Bolton was actually queer, just like me.

Loosely inspired by forbidden teen romance films like *Grease* (1978) and *Westside Story* (1961), the films follow basketball star Troy Bolton (Zac Efron) whose life changes forever when he meets the reserved and “geeky” Gabriella Montez (Vanessa Hudgens) over winter

break; the two instantly connect over music during a round of karaoke at a New Year's Eve party. When they suddenly meet again at school a few days later, the two decide to secretly audition for the winter musical together. With a strict clique hierarchy ruling over their school, East High, this decision throws the entire student body into chaos, especially because no one knows about Troy's secret passion for singing, not even his parents. Apparently, jocks and musical theatre do not mix. This forces Troy to decide if he will submit to other people's expectations and become the self-proclaimed "basketball guy" of East High; or follow his own heart and pursue singing instead.

At a glance, Disney's *High School Musical* appears to be cut from the same cloth as any other mid-2000s DCOM when it comes to normative representations of gender and sexuality. The leads are both cisgender, heterosexual teenagers—one boy and one girl—who find themselves falling in love. As is true for most of Disney's filmography, there are no explicitly queer characters, meaning that no one self-identifies as 'queer' or any of its sublabels (gay, bisexual, transgender, et cetera) nor are there any overt queer relationships on-screen (i.e., no physical or romantic affection between characters of the same gender). Thus, at the surface level, *High School Musical* is considered a 'straight' franchise. However, when read 'against the grain,' a queer subtext is made plain.

The history of reading 'straight' films as queer is not a new concept. Film theorists such as Alexander Doty, who wrote the seminal *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (2000), have established a queer mode through which to view mainstream texts. Here, queerness is not seen at face value but uncovered as something "covert, secret, [and] subcultural."³ In short, queerness manifests as an implicit meaning because, as Doty argues, "certain sexual things could not be stated baldly—and still cannot or will not in most mainstream products." Even today,

systemic homophobia largely prevents queer representation, both behind and in-front of the camera, from entering mainstream entertainment, often resulting in ‘queer-coded’ narratives instead. Considering that *High School Musical* was produced and distributed by Disney, a company known for its “hyper-heterosexual” heroes and heroines, it is no surprise that any and all queerness in these films is covert.⁴

In this essay, I argue that, despite its apparent heterocentrism, the *High School Musical* franchise warrants a queer reading because of the dichotomous and gendered relationship between sports culture and musical theatre. When positioned in relation to this central dichotomy, several characters are either queer- or straight-coded, thereby rendering the central conflict (i.e., Troy’s decision between basketball and singing) as one that potentially transgresses dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. To this end, in the first section I examine how musical theatre is framed as a stereotypically ‘queer’ pursuit due to its close ties with camp culture, stylized effeminacy, and homosexuality, using the characters of Sharpay Evans, Ryan Evans, and Kelsi Nielsen as examples. In the second section, I demonstrate how sports culture is placed in diametric opposition, depicted as the traditionally ‘masculine’ pursuit due to its focus on cisgender, heterosexual male physicality and superiority. However, in a subversive twist, I also posit that *High School Musical* offers a campy representation of normative masculinity, particularly in the sports-themed musical numbers “Now or Never” and “I Don’t Dance,” through the use of latent homoeroticism. In the third section, I explore who this campy representation of masculinity may be addressing, revealing the trilogy’s implicit address to queer boys.

As such, I offer a queer interpretation of Troy’s dilemma between sports and musical theatre as a pseudo-sexual identity crisis and coming-out storyline. To support this argument, I

provide a character study of Troy, examining his tenuous relationship with his father/coach and the subsequent pressure he feels to participate in traditional masculine rites such as sports. Additionally, I argue that, rather than being a legitimate romantic interest for Troy, Gabriella operates as his “beard” since their relationship provides the perfect heterosexual “cover-up” for his queer passion for singing. In the final section, I outline the possible implications of this queer reading, reconciling *High School Musical* with its ‘Disney-fied’ origins and exploring why Disney products seem to perpetuate hidden queerness in a contemporary era where queer readings seem less and less relevant.

Literature Review

Arguably the first comprehensive critical treatment of Disney, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (1995), edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, compiles a series of essays focused on “explicating Disney ideology through fifty-five years of feature films.”⁵ As the collection emphasizes, while Disney projects a “seemingly apolitical” image, their products nevertheless illuminate a fervent undercurrent of political rhetoric that constructs matters of gender, identity, and culture. In essence, “the trade-marked Disney innocence is not divorced from politics,” but directly feeds a longstanding dynamic between entertainment and pedagogy that “operates on a systematic sanitization of violence, sexuality, and political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference.”⁵ Thus, by policing how and what is represented in their magical world of ‘family-friendly’ iconography, Disney instructs audiences in normative and non-normative identities and experiences.

When it comes to sexuality, Robert Hass states in his chapter that the full-frontal female nudity in the 1991 film *Billy Bathgate*, adapted from a novel of the same name, revealed that

“Disney’s idea of progressive, ‘more mature’ entertainment is conventional Hollywood’s objectification of the female body.”⁶ His sarcastic tone is quite palpable, demonstrating how regressive Disney is when it comes to ‘liberalizing’ their media in comparison to other mainstream texts. Haas goes on to say that even more “stunning,” however, is the film’s “implicit” acknowledgement of the mere “existence of homosexuality” by editing out a particular scene from the source material where the main character has a homoerotically charged moment with another man. His argument is that, in removing this particular scene, Disney recognizes that there is “something” (re: homosexuality) to be removed, and by default recognizes that homosexuality does indeed exist. In short, while female nudity seems to be a ‘huge step’ for a company dedicated to preserving a largely asexual image, a queer-coded male hero is still a definite no-go. Rather, queerness is something Disney reserves almost exclusively for its villains.

As many theorists have examined, the Walt Disney Company has a long and tenuous relationship with the LGBTQIAP+ community, among other marginalized groups. However, to say that Disney’s potent conservatism renders all its products as certified “gay free” zones is veritably inaccurate. Queerness has always existed within Disney films, though it usually takes a symbolic form rather than manifesting at face-value. Edited by Johnson Cheu, *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability* explores issues with the conglomerate’s on-screen representation of marginalized identities, from an examination of the exoticized Tiger Lily in *Peter Pan* (1953) to a genderqueer reading of *Mulan* (1998).⁷ As Amanda Putnam argues in her chapter, “Mean Ladies: Transgendered Villains in Disney Films,” Disney’s filmography is filled with both queer-coded villains—think of the masculinized Cruella de Vil or drag queen-inspired Ursula—and heroes who embody

heteronormative ideals as “they fall in love, get married, live happily ever after, often singing, dancing, and acting googly-eyed right off into the sunset.”⁴ In other words, when it comes to Disney products, contentment is only available to those characters who are heterosexual or, more accurately, perform as such.

Sean P. Griffin supports this argument in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (2000), a survey of Disney’s (implicit) queer appeal to gay and lesbian audiences in the twentieth century.⁸ Despite being an “upholder of heterosexual normativity,” he argues that queer consumers have long identified with and provided queer readings for Disney products and characters, particularly its villains. Thus, the demonization of queerness via antagonists is a well-covered and central pattern in Disney’s representations of non-normative gender and sexuality. As such, while I do indeed argue that Sharpay Evans, the main antagonist of the *High School Musical* franchise, is queer-coded due to her hyper-femininity and drag-like performance, my queer reading extends beyond the “villain” of the franchise. As I outline in my chosen case study, numerous characters harbor subtextual queerness, including but not limited to the male lead, Troy Bolton, whose golden boy status could only characterize him as traditionally heroic. Therefore, because of Troy’s characterization as a “good person,” *High School Musical* may potentially break the previous cycle in Disney media where to be “good” is to be “straight.”

Moreover, it is important to note that both Cheu and Griffin focus solely on the subtextual queerness of Disney’s animated feature films. In contrast, there has been very little written on the queerness of other areas of Disney entertainment, such as its live-action movies or Disney Channel tween content. Indeed, most academic discussion of Disney has largely overlooked the company’s historic presence on cable television entirely. A recent collection of

essays edited by Christopher E. Bell begins to fill this gap in research by examining the positive and negative impact of 15 of Disney Channel's "most major programmatic offerings."¹ Yet this work focuses almost exclusively on the live-action series produced by the cable channel. The only 'queer reading' of a live-action DCOM occurs in Sara Austin's chapter, "Children of Queer Bodies: Disney Channel Original Movies as Social Justice Narratives in *Descendants 2*."⁹ Austin examines the failed queerness of the second film in the *Descendants* franchise (2015, 2017, 2019)—a trilogy of films that follows the children of iconic queer-coded Disney villains such as Jafar and Cruella de Vil. She argues that, as a text, *Descendants 2* resists socio-economic change by vilifying one of the central characters, Uma, the daughter of Ursula and a fervent advocate for social justice. Once again, Austin's research focuses on Disney's villains, or in this case, their children.

Beyond their shared company parentage, the *Descendants* property shares another central element with *High School Musical* that further supports queer readings for these two texts: both are film musicals. As a genre, the musical has long been associated with queer, specifically gay male, culture. Both D.A. Miller (1998) and John M. Clum (1999) explore the gayness that circulates throughout the history of musical theatre, focusing on the postwar period.^{10, 11} Specifically, Clum investigates the intersections between musical theatre and camp culture—a distinctly queer discourse examined in seminal works such as *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto.¹² Gerald Mast (1987) begins to outline *why* gay culture, camp, and the musical are so closely aligned when he states, "musicals represent an extravagant and excessive frippery and gay people possess some special sensibility that finds an outlet in extravagance, excess, and frippery."¹³ Just as camp is rooted in the over-the-top and artificial, so is musical theatre and, as Mast argues, gay culture in general. As I examine in the

first section of my essay, these associations reign true for *High School Musical* as well, seeing as the East High drama department perpetuates the relationship between campy stylistics and queer-coded characters. For example, Sharpay Evans is a campy diva, just as her younger brother, Ryan, is a stereotypical effeminate boy who loves to sing and dance. Thus, by and large, the musical's main locus of identification has been positioned as queer viewers and queer men in particular.^a As argued by Barnes (2015), Clum, and Miller, offering a queer reading of a musical is much easier since many of the creators are, in fact, gay men.^{10, 11, 15} This remains the case with the *High School Musical* franchise, since all three films were directed by openly gay filmmaker and choreographer, Kenny Ortega. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the central perspective of the trilogy revolves around a queer-coded teen boy.

The one scholarly reference to queerness in *High School Musical* I have found is by Amanda Nell Edgar.¹⁶ She argues that the film's lukewarm progressiveness is overshadowed by the largely white cast, encouragement of submissiveness as a desirable female trait, and the use of oppressive generic conventions such as heterosexual romance and the male gaze. While I agree that the diegesis is constructed as a pervasively white-washed environment, I disagree with her statements that the film romanticizes female submissiveness in the character of Gabriella solely to codify traditional gender norms. Rather, in my third section, I argue that Gabriella's adherence to conventional notions of femininity actually supports that her character operates as Troy's heterosexualized "beard." Moreover, my examination of the latently homoerotic musical numbers "Now or Never" and "I Don't Dance" highlights the potential presence of a queer male

^a Although, other theorists such as John M. Lovelock (2016) and Grace Barnes (2015) re-address *who*, exactly, connects with the musical; the former expands the purview to encompass men of all sexualities and the latter emphasizes a need for more female perspectives within this male-dominated genre.^{14, 15}

gaze and subsequent gay spectatorship, opposing Nell Edgar's assertion that the film is dominated by female objectification in service of a heterosexual male spectator.

As such, I offer a new case study to the discourses of spectatorship and musical theatre, arguing that Disney's *High School Musical* addresses an adolescent queer male spectator by engaging with queer iconography (i.e., camp) and themes (e.g., coming out). Moreover, my interpretation of *High School Musical* provides a queer reading of a contemporary 'straight' film and serves to help track the trajectory of Disney's relationship with queerness in the contemporary era. In particular, my essay contributes to the diminutive field of research on Disney Channel content and matters of diversity in tween/teen media. As today's young viewers continue to have growing access to a variety of queer films and television series, it is important to examine past texts like *High School Musical* in order to trace how on-screen queer representation has or has not changed overtime.

“Toodles!”: Camp, Effeminacy, and Musical Theatre

At the center of the *High School Musical* trilogy lies the division between musical theatre and sports culture because, as Amanda Kehrberg so clearly states, “musicals and sports in American society are generally viewed as incongruous, if not aggressively oppositional.”¹⁷ The reason for this tenuous dynamic lies in an extensive history that posits athleticism as an emblem of conventional Western masculinity and musical theatre as a feminine, and thereby ‘gay,’ discourse. The “long-established trope that musical theatre is a homosexual artform” is not a subcultural matter, but rather a stereotype that manifests again and again in mainstream culture.¹⁴

John M. Clum outlines the multi-faceted “gay sensibility” that is inherent to film musicals: “Their heightened theatricality, their exaggerated, often parodic presentation of gender

codes, and their lyrical romantic fantasies offered my generation of cocooned gay adolescents an escape from the masculine rites that disinterested and threatened us.”¹¹ Thus, by questioning the ‘naturalness’ of gender, the musical genre both challenges dominant ideologies and provides a space for those individuals (re: queer people) who do not quite ‘fit’ into what Dhaenens calls the rigid “heterosexual matrix.”¹⁸ Much of the musical’s “gay voice” of which Clum speaks, including its theatricality and artificiality, is innately tied to another central facet of queer culture—camp—which he himself characterizes as “an over-theorized but crucial term that explains many of the links between musical theatre and gay culture.”¹¹ Camp continues to be one of the main aesthetic lens of queer media, and is less of a neat, contained practice than a shifting sensibility. In her foundational essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag outlines a general definition: “To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.”¹⁹ Sontag goes on to list fifty-eight aspects of camp, though each in some way harkens back to this statement: how camp is deeply entrenched with exaggeration and the unnatural, to the point that “it proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’.”

Sontag also outlines two distinct types of camp: “One must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious.”¹⁹ In other words, earlier versions of camp seen in classical Hollywood film musicals like Warner Brothers’ *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) do not *mean* to be funny, over-the-top, or ridiculously theatrical; they are meant to be taken at face value, rather than read against the grain. The “innocence” of this kind of camp renders it as more of an enigma than a definable

practice: something that exists below the radar, outside the dominant culture, as a private code of sorts.¹⁹ At the time Sontag was writing, however, deliberate camp was also beginning to manifest in popular culture, which she describes as wanting “so badly to be campy that [these films are] continually losing the beat.” Texts like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and the original *Batman* series (1966-68) are perfect examples of intentional campiness as they both reek of self-awareness. The former, for instance, is in no way subtle about its queer theatricality as one of the central characters is a bisexual transfemme alien. Despite being made in the contemporary era where deliberate camp is becoming more of the norm, *High School Musical* is actually closer to the “innocent” camp of classical Hollywood since it is supposed to be read as a ‘straight’ film. Here, the double meaning of this word is implied as *High School Musical* is a) meant to be taken seriously and b) meant to be a distinctly heterosexual film. Thus, the campiness of the franchise is *implicit* rather than overt. I will further explore the implications of this in the final section of this essay, in which I examine Disney’s relationship with queerness in this franchise.

Moreover, due to its “degree of artifice” and “exaggeration,” camp inherently subverts gender codes. As Bergman states, “camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire.”²¹ This artificiality, then, is an element of camp that overlaps with Clum’s statement about the appropriation of gender roles within musical theatre. To use the words of queer theorist Judith Butler, both camp and campy musicals frame gender as performance—a mere “stylization of the body” achieved through repeated acts, rather than being “natural” (re: predetermined).²² In *High School Musical*, this concept is literalized, as both musical theatre and sports are performative by nature; however, while the former impersonates gender, the latter codifies it.

As such, when speaking to the main ‘archetypes’ of camp culture, characters who embody a “stylized effeminacy” are central to the camp sensibility.²³ In *The Culture of Queers*, Richard Dyer argues that “camp is not masculine. By definition, camping about is not butch. So camp is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role.”²⁴ Camp concerns itself with the marginal, and as Booth argues, what is more marginal than the traditionally feminine? Therefore, camp displays an over-exaggeration and parody of traditional femininity, usually through drag or drag-like performance. As such, Camp queens are the inevitable image of gayness in art and media.”²⁴

It is no surprise, then, that the character perhaps most associated with musical theatre in the *High School Musical* franchise could be a poster child for hyper-femme aesthetics. Sharpay Evans (Ashley Tisdale) is, for all intents and purposes, a diva: a “larger-than-life” and “exceptionally charismatic” female character who is one of the most common, and most campy, figures in the musical theatre genre.²⁵ From her brightly colored (usually hot pink) outfits and garish jewelry, to her stiletto heels and big, bouncy blonde hair (which in and of itself looks artificial), Sharpay oozes with femme embellishment. She does not just walk into rooms, she struts, swishing her hips back and forth while sending lustful glances to her many ‘admirers’ and saying things like “Toodles!” Her stage-ready appearance plays on the notion of a constant spotlight following her every move. Chad Danforth (Corbin Bleu), Troy’s best friend and fellow teammate, even makes a joke at the start of the first film that Sharpay spends her vacations “shopping for mirrors” and later calls her a “mountain lion,” emphasizing her catty, narcissistic, and volatile temperament. The audience quickly learns that Sharpay Evans is prone to tantrums when ‘inept outsiders’ attempt to dethrone her position as ‘queen bee’ of the East High musical theatre department—or if anyone pisses her off in general.

Her “excess talent and ambition” as a performer further cements her diva status, with all her solo musical numbers emphasizing a thematic need for *more*: more status, more money, more adoration.²⁵ For example, her song from the first film, “Bop to the Top,” commemorates doing “anything it takes to climb the ladder of success.” When Gabriella and Troy make it to the callbacks, facing off against Sharpay and her brother Ryan for the lead roles in the winter musical, she plots an elaborate scheme to sabotage their relationship and thus their chances—a common behavior in queer-coded ‘diva’ Disney villains like *Sleeping Beauty*’s Maleficent, who seek to spoil the heterosexual union of the main couple. Rather than wanting to “steal” a romantic partner for their own, as many heterosexual villains in conventional Hollywood films are wont to do, these queer-coded villains wish to “disrupt and frustrate heterosexuality’s dominance,” thereby allowing for a queer reading.⁸ Sharpay follows suit as she is never really seen as a legitimate romantic interest for any of the male characters—save Zeke’s (a basketball player) brief crush on her in the first film that never materializes into an actual relationship. Thus, despite her erotic physicality and hyper-femme appearance, Sharpay is not an object of heterosexual male desire. She repeatedly tries to flirt with Troy, much to his discomfort, but seems more interested in the social capital that would result from dating East High’s ‘most eligible bachelor’ than in Troy himself. In *High School Musical 2*, Sharpay enters a strictly transactional relationship with Troy to achieve just that: she helps him network within the world of collegiate basketball, using her family’s immense wealth and connections to do so, while he promises to help her win a talent show by singing a duet together. Of course, Gabriella re-enters the picture and ruins any chance she has of school-wide domination.

On the other hand, her twin brother Ryan Evans (Lucas Grabeel) is the effeminate ‘twink’ to Sharpay’s over-the-top prima donna, playing into another central stereotype of

gayness. As Nick Haramis explains, in general, “twinks are young, attractive, hairless, slim men,” evoking a queer aesthetic through a lean, feminine body that directly challenges the imposing, rough, hairy physicality conventionally associated with the masculine form.²⁶ Ryan, with his naturally smooth skin and lithe torso, already adheres to the archetype. Just in case the audience was not already well-aware of his effeminate style, his wardrobe consists of monochrome outfits made of pastel button-ups, tight pants, and (usually) a matching flat cap or fedora worn a bit askew. He moves with a dancer’s fluidity and grace, emphasizing a sensual control over his body, and even choreographs the school musical in the third film. When it comes to attitude, he is not beyond rolling his eyes in an overly dramatic fashion or letting his wrist fall limp in a stereotypically gay manner. His central personality trait, beyond his devotion to musical theatre, is a traditionally feminine submissiveness, especially when it comes to the wants and needs of his sister. The subtext is clear: Ryan is ‘so gay’ that he not only loves musical theatre, but he also lets a girl boss him around.

The dynamic between the Evans siblings is an imbalanced one, with Sharpay calling the shots and Ryan playing along. In the multiple duets they perform together, Sharpay always dominates the stage both in terms of presence and singing time, rendering them more like ‘solos’ where Ryan just pops in momentarily. Their shared number in the third film, “I Want It All,” is appropriately titled since the lyrics explore Sharpay’s self-centered ambitions to become a superstar. While Sharpay attempts to lure her brother in with fantasies of shared success (“You and I, all the fame”), Ryan quickly shoots down her hollow promises by referencing his sidekick status (“Sharpay and what’s his name”). Lovelock calls this kind of peripheral gay character in a musical a “dancing queen” — a stereotype that “denies gay characters any discernible narrative

impact upon the musical by reducing them to a single musical number.”¹⁴ Ryan, however, is not even given the luxury of a solo, diminishing his character’s status below even that.

Even the resident student composer and lyricist, Kelsi Nielsen (Olesya Rulin), is queer-coded with her ‘butch’ wardrobe of baggier clothing, muted tones, spectacles, and mariner caps. In the first film, Sharpay calls her a “sawed-off Sondheim,” referencing the famous gay composer and lyricist known for the recurring queer themes in his work.¹¹ Indeed, Kelsi’s compositions are filled with similar undertones of latent desire and queer longing, like this snippet from the duet “Breaking Free” in which the two leads want to be together despite the external forces pulling them apart: “You know the world can see us / In a way that's different than who we are / Creating space between us / 'Til we're separate hearts.” Therefore, with Ryan and Sharpay as the faces of the East High drama department and Kelsi as its creative genius, the franchise swiftly and repeatedly characterizes singing, dancing, and performing as queer practices that challenge gender norms. As such, Troy’s interest in singing is presented as a threat to his carefully crafted reputation as the totally-heterosexual-and-very-manly “basketball guy” of East High, which I will explore in the following sections.

“I Don’t Dance”: Sports Culture, Homophobia, and Campy Masculinity

As most people can guess, sports culture is a masculine discourse. Dating all the way back to the sculptures of Ancient Greece, the male form has long been portrayed as “inseparable from activity,” a trend that continued into the Renaissance period when artists often rendered the male body with “active, ripping muscles,” directly contrasting with the “simplistic curves of the passive female form.”¹⁷ Later in history, as modern sports culture was being developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women were intentionally barred from

participating. Without any medical evidence to back up their claims, white male doctors and educators argued that any “rigorous” activity would sabotage a woman’s ability to menstruate and reproduce.²⁷ As such, sports quickly became an activity that was not just associated with masculinity but necessitated it. The still-common phrase “you throw like a girl,” which is used to emasculate male athletes for being ‘weak’ or ‘uncoordinated,’ is enough evidence in and of itself to display the inherent misogyny of sports culture.

While women’s participation in athletics has steadily increased, specifically with the operation of Title IX legislation, sports remain segregated on the basis of gender (e.g., The National Basketball League versus the *Women’s National Basketball League*) and continue to be “an institution in which traditional masculine scripts are enacted.”²⁸ As Ramaeker and Petrie state, “Sports place men in direct competition, where the demonstration of greater physical prowess often leads to winning and social status and power. Sport also reinforces traditional masculine norms [...] including denial of pain [...] and using one’s body as an instrument of violence.”²⁸ In other words, the sports discourse upholds dominant gender ideology by requiring and praising male athletes who perform stereotypical proponents of traditional masculinity, with the sports arena as the central stage on which to display such traits. It is no surprise, then, that the iconic film musical *West Side Story* (1961)—a *Romeo and Juliet* retelling and direct *High School Musical* predecessor—opens with a brawl between rival all-male streets gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, on a public basketball court in New York City. This athletic setting is thus the perfect location to ‘duke out’ who is the more dominant, violent, and thus ‘masculine’ group of the two. *High School Musical* similarly uses the basketball court (in all three films) and the baseball field (in the second film) as spaces to explore, perform, and negotiate masculine edicts.

Combined with the well-established antifeminine sentiments of sports culture, the widespread “conflation between homosexuality and femininity” results in the idea that athleticism is not just a man’s game, but a straight man’s game.¹⁴ As Daniels argues, “to be an athlete is to be masculine and heterosexual. To be feminine and/or homosexual is antithetical to being an athlete.”²⁷ As such, homophobia runs rampant in the history of sports culture, with ‘queer’ often being a stand-in for ‘weak,’ ‘unathletic,’ ‘loser,’ or any descriptor that conflicts with dominant preconceptions of athleticism.²⁸ Homophobic slurs in particular are about as common in the sports film as the misogynistic objectification of women.

In a subversive twist, *High School Musical* intentionally plays into many of these same stereotypes—firmly establishing sports and musical theatre at opposite ends of a gendered binary—only to deconstruct them, or at least attempt to do so. In the opening sequence of the third film, the East High men’s basketball team performs a group number (“Now or Never”) as they face off against the West High Knights in the state championship game. As viewers quickly see, this scene exemplifies how the series often treads the line between perpetuating ideals of traditional masculinity and offering a campy performance of gender. Losing 26-45 at the start of the film, the Wildcats must reaffirm their collective manhood during a tense half-time team meeting and overcome any ‘minor obstacles’ like physical pain in order to dominate the other team. In a montage of different plays, the Wildcats become more aggressive in their tactics: wrestling on the ground for a loose ball and racing down the court to play man-on-man defense. However, with campy flare, this potent display of masculinity is undercut by the fact that the team is singing the entire time. Even when Troy takes a charge from the opposite team, knocking him to the floor in a vigorous display of masculine endurance, Gabriella rises from the faceless hordes of screaming fans to inspire him to keep going through song, effectively acting as

his traditionally feminine muse standing on the sidelines along with the rest of the all-female cheerleading group. The lights darken and the moment stills as they sing back and forth to each other in what can only be described as an overly dramatic presentation of traditional gender roles. All in all, the life-or-death tone and homoerotic spectacle that is sweaty Zac Efron running around in a sleeveless jersey with his pretty-boy features and bulging biceps while belting out lyrics makes this scene almost too much to take seriously—just like camp.

An even more explicitly homoerotic sports-related sequence occurs in the second film during a duet between Ryan Evans and Chad Danforth, Troy's ultra-macho and low-key sexist best friend who at one point refers to the "female mind" as "foreign territory." In the aptly titled "I Don't Dance," Chad and Ryan compete against one another in a staff baseball game at the resort that the main cast is working at over the summer. The two face off beforehand when Gabriella recruits Ryan to help their friend group win the annual resort-wide talent show. "If you wanna play ball, then grab a mitt. But I don't dance," says Chad, basically calling Ryan too 'sissy' for baseball and himself too 'manly' for dance. Ryan smirks and takes a step forward, closing the space between them, and retorts, "You don't think dancing takes some game?" Chad looks him up and down: "You got game?" to which Ryan replies smugly, "A little." In a time-worn baseball ritual to decide who bats first, the umpire throws a bat in the air upside down and Chad catches it on the shaft (yes, it is very phallic) followed by Ryan, and then it is fist over fist until someone reaches the top. The homoerotic overtones of 'topping' are indeed not lost in the mix as Ryan places his palm on the handle of the bat, winning the proverbial 'coin toss' and earning him a wave of surprised cheers.

Once the ‘foreplay’ is over, the number transforms into Chad’s symbolic bisexual awakening as Ryan sings while pitching balls to him: “I’ll show you that it’s one and the same / Baseball, dancing, same game / It’s easy / Step up to the place, start swingin’.” Chad, fervent in his refusal to do anything ‘gay’ like dancing, belts back: “I wanna play ball now, and that’s all / This is what I do / It ain’t no dance that you can show me, yeah.” (Again, the irony of saying such things while dancing.) Cue a sequence of mutual smirking and flirtatious teasing as Ryan tries to convince his opponent to ‘just try dancing.’ “You’ll never know,” Ryan sings while shimmying and swiveling his hips salaciously, “if you never try.” In response, Chad steps up to bat and thrusts his leg out, twisting it lewdly while singing, “I’ll show you how I swing.” (The sexual innuendo of “swinging” is quite clear.) Even the costuming implies a sensual focus on their respective bodies, with Chad wearing fitted baseball pants and tank top underneath an unbuttoned jersey, and Ryan dressed in his usual all-white outfit of tight pants, button-up, and askew flat cap. Combining the traditionally masculine rite of baseball with the latent homoeroticism of all-male sports teams, the musical number actualizes the common phrase, “they play for the other team,” used to describe someone who is gay. Here, Ryan and Chad literally stand on opposite sides, while the former attempts to coerce the latter into ‘transgressing team-lines.’

After the game ends and Chad wins, he somewhat indulges the idea of letting Ryan ‘teach him some moves’: “Evans, I’m not saying I’m gonna dance in the show. But if I did, what’d you have me do?” With his back facing Chad, Ryan just smiles to himself and walks away. We then cut to the two of them eating side-by-side and having, curiously, *switched outfits* off-screen. Borgstrom interrogates a similar musical number in *Grease* (1978)—a direct predecessor of *High School Musical*—in which Danny Zuko (John Travolta) and the rest of his bad boy greaser gang

bond while repairing a beat-up dragster in “Greased Lightning.”²⁹ In the process, the scene “move[s] beyond a mere celebration of male identity [and] into a satire of masculinity itself.” As he argues, “Boys will be boys, the number seems to say, even though these particular boys wear silver lamé coveralls and grind against each other while engaging in traditionally macho activities such as car repair.” The performance of masculinity (whether it be fixing up a car or playing baseball) is undercut by the homoeroticism of the musical number. Moreover, the use of non-diegetic song and dance encourages a pseudo-subconscious exploration of queerness in these fantasy-like sequences.

Using both “Now or Never” and “I Don’t Dance” as examples, the franchise blurs the lines between integrated and backstage musical. In the former, musical numbers are inextricable from plot and not viewed as ‘performances’ so much as narrative performed through song and dance (think *The Wizard of Oz*); the latter involves actual ‘in-film’ performances that are separate from the plot, which usually involves some sort of play or musical that the characters are a part of (think *Show Boat*).³⁰ As such, characters like Chad are able to participate in integrated sequences like “I Don’t Dance” while refusing to sing or dance in diegetic numbers—bouncing between fantasy (integrated) and reality (backstage). As such, just because Chad presents as a heterosexual man in non-musical moments does not mean that his subconscious desires, when set free during integrated numbers, will agree. Using this line of logic, the choice to depict sports-related plot points *with* song, rather than without, adds a new layer of queer parody to these otherwise traditionally masculine sequences.

This is taken a step further in relation Troy, who throughout the trilogy uses non-diegetic solos set in athletic spaces to ponder his identity as a queer (coded) man, placing the two

“halves” of himself in direct conversation—which I will examine in the following section. Here, the sport-related musical number is not just a campy homoerotic spectacle but a tool to negotiate the pressures of hegemonic masculinity and coming out. Circling back to the idea of fantasy versus reality, *High School Musical* could then be read as a utopian musical—a concept outlined by Richard Dyer in *It’s Only Entertainment* in which he interrogates the “two taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment” as “escape” and “wish-fulfilment.”³¹ In this context, entertainment (namely the musical) offers “the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide.” Who, then, might the franchise be addressing as it examines the pressures of cisgender, heterosexual masculinity via song?

“Basketball Guy”: A Questioning Troy Bolton and Queer Boy Spectator

There is no way around it: Troy Bolton is queer. As mentioned in the first section, Clum describes the “gay voice” of the musical as something that offered his “generation of cocooned gay adolescents an escape from the masculine rites that disinterested and threatened [them].”¹¹ The *High School Musical* franchise, specifically the first film, similarly addresses the pressures to conform to heterosexual masculinity through Troy’s character arc. Thus, building on the gendered dynamic between sports and musical theatre as explored in previous sections, this section posits Troy as a queer-coded figure due to his implied fear of coming out, his faux straight romance with Gabriella, and the recurring theme of a sexual identity crisis that manifest in his solo numbers.

As explored throughout the franchise, the rigid definition of Western manhood inhibits Troy’s ability to ‘be true to himself.’ It’s no surprise that his domineering father acts as the effective gatekeeper of masculinity within the trilogy, always there to remind Troy that

basketball should be his only focus, going so far as to force him to practice while on vacation because the championship game is coming up. To make matters even more explicit, his father also happens to be his coach: a recurring “hyper-masculine” figurehead in sports films whose job is to literally instruct his players in the codes of manhood (aggression, domination, etcetera) and punish them when they do not perform.¹⁷ Troy thereby keeps his passion for singing hidden—one might even say ‘closeted.’ When Gabriella unexpectedly arrives at East High, throwing his life out of balance, Troy whispers while walking in the hallway with her, afraid that his friends might discover his winter break dalliance with a microphone:

Gabriella: “Why are you whispering?”

Troy: “What? Oh, uh... my friends know about the snowboarding. I haven’t quite told them about the singing thing.”

Gabriella: “Too much for them to handle?”

Troy: “No, it was cool. But, you know, my friends, it’s, uh... it’s not what I do. That was, like, a different person.”

At first, Troy tries to deny that anything ‘weird’ is going on; most of his dialogue in the first film could be quickly followed by an obligatory “but I’m not gay.” (A similar, though slightly watered-down, “I don’t sing” is what he tells the emcee who chooses him for karaoke at the New Year’s Eve party.) Later he attempts to slyly bring up the winter musical with Chad before practice, saying that they get “extra credit” just for auditioning, which is always good “for college,” he hastily adds. Chad swiftly dismisses the idea, jokingly asking if “LeBron James or Shaquille O’Neal auditioned for their school musical” and saying that the “music in those shows

isn't hip-hop or rock, or anything essential to culture. It's like show music. It's all costumes and makeup... (shudders)... oh, dude. It's frightening." Picking up on his best friend's homophobic repudiation of musical theatre, Troy quickly backtracks and tries to say that he "thought it'd be a good laugh; Sharpay's kind of cute too," hiding his queer desire behind a shared ridicule of showbiz coupled with mock heterosexual attraction.

The first film continues to play with the implicit idea that Troy is 'questioning his sexuality' when he tries to broker a similar conversation with his father while practicing on the basketball court in their backyard. The interaction, when read through a queer lens, strikingly mirrors an almost coming-out scene: the way Troy talks around the subject, subtextually asking for his father's support only for him to completely miss the point, and then ultimately surrendering to what is expected of him:

Troy: "Hey Dad, did you ever want to try something new, but were afraid of what your friends might think?"

Coach Bolton: "You mean, like, going left? You're doing fine. C'mon."

Troy: "Well...no. I mean, what if you wanna try something really new and it's a total disaster and all your friends laugh at you."

Coach Bolton: "Well then maybe they're not really your friends. That was my whole point about team today. You guys gotta look out for each other. You're the leader."

Troy: "Yeah, but dad I'm not talking about—"

Coach Bolton: “There’s gonna be college scouts at our game next week, Troy. Know what a scholarship is worth these days?”

Troy: “A lot.”

Coach Bolton: “Yeah. Focus, Troy, come on.”

In a pivotal moment later on, Troy confides in Gabriella while hanging out at his “private hideout” (the rooftop school garden), completely safe from the public eye since his friends “don’t even know it exists.” “Seems like everyone on campus wants to be your friend,” says Gabriella. “Unless we lose,” Troy replies, underscoring how deeply his status and self-worth are tied to adequately performing masculine ideals (i.e., producing a winning season). After she admits that it “must be tricky being the coach’s son,” Troy replies that it “makes me practice a little harder, I guess. I don’t know what he’s gonna say when he finds out about the singing [...] My parents’ friends are always saying, ‘Your son’s the basketball guy. You must be so proud.’ Sometimes I don’t wanna be the ‘basketball guy.’ Sometimes I just wanna be ‘a guy.’” Efron plays the scene with absolute sincerity, explaining how Troy feels pressured to preserve his parents support and love by assimilating to their idea of a ‘real man.’ As a queer adult, it is almost painful to watch his internal struggle between who his parents expect him to be and who he is. The scene also cracks a hole in his straight romance with Gabriella. Here, she acts more like a conciliatory ally than a romantic interest, hinting at another way to read her character: as a beard.

The term “beard” is used to describe someone who is in a fake relationship with a closeted gay person of the opposite gender as a cover up. Gabriella is, arguably, the only main character who cannot be read as queer. Even her best friend Taylor McKessie (Monique

Coleman) spends a bit too much time fawning over Gabriella, wearing neckties, and comparing the basketball team to “cavemen,” to be read as completely heterosexual—despite entering a relationship with Chad at the end of the first film. In his lesbian reading of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Doty states that the film “has no heterosexual love interest at all; heterosexuality becomes an echo in a very gay film, rather than the other way around.”³ In the *High School Musical* trilogy, Gabriella serves a similar purpose as, when contrasted with a character like Sharpay, she is every bit a refusal of camp and reaffirmation of traditional femininity. She is demure, unathletic, chaste, and has a bleeding heart. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, her main role is to act as Troy’s cheerleader and muse, denying her any real agency as a character. To use another example from *Flaming Classics*, Doty argues that the relationship between Marilyn Monroe and Lorelei Lee’s characters in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) can be read as queer partly due to “grotesque and embarrassing attempts to establish heterosexual love relationships” with “weak, ineffectual men.”³ The same could be said here: when compared to everyone else, Gabriella is rather two-dimensional and asexual. In the entire trilogy, she and Troy kiss all of two times: once at the end of *High School Musical 2* and again during the third film. Both instances are relatively quick and unerotic moments when the camera does not linger any longer than it has to.

The only thing saving her from inarguable conventionality is her exceptional brainpower, but even her self-proclaimed status as her previous school’s “freaky genius girl” falls relatively flat seeing as everyone (save Sharpay) immediately loves her. Unlike Troy, her choice to join the Academic Decathlon team is not earth-shattering and, within the confines of the film, in no way challenges established gender ideology. Instead, it is how her presence motivates Troy to pursue singing that truly disrupts the status quo, though it is established that Troy partook in singing

before he even met Gabriella. When the two talk at the New Year's Eve party, she asks about his singing experience. "Yeah, sure. My showerhead is very impressed with me," he replies. Despite his glib tone, the sentiment highlights something important: Troy is not pursuing musical theatre just to hang out with Gabriella (i.e., get the girl), but to finally realize a long-hidden and very queer passion. Their developing relationship thus provides the perfect cover for his real motivations, effectively portraying Gabriella as Troy's beard.

So, bombarded by casually homophobic friends, oblivious parents, and a supportive, though ultimately faux girlfriend, where does Troy go to truly "be himself," or at least start figuring out who that really is? In each of the films, Troy is given a single non-diegetic solo number, all of which take place (at least in part) in athletic settings and address the contradictory forces at work in his life: the fact that he loves musical theatre, yet also feels pressured to assimilate into dominant, heteronormative culture. In the first film, Troy has what can only be described as a mental breakdown during basketball practice, where he and the team perform "Get'cha Head in the Game"—a number all about assimilation into the dominant culture. "Coach said to fake right / and break left," Troy sings at the start, while running drills the boys. This first lyric emphasizes the pressure to conform to the edicts set forth by 'gatekeepers of masculinity,' such as sports coaches, fathers, or in Troy's case, both. Troy continues to dance around with his teammates as they all sing that he needs to "just keep [his] head in the game," with basketball taking on the larger symbolism of the dominant ideology. Even the style of the song, which appropriates a percussive beatboxing-like sonic landscape, is more akin to the music Chad previously describes as "essential to culture" (re: more masculine). When Troy momentarily belts out an impressive vocal run, running dangerously close to "showtune" style, he catches himself before returning to the original beat. "Wait a minute / Not the time or place," he sings.

Troy's "inner conflict" carries throughout his solos in both the second and third films as well. In "Bet on It," Troy ruminates on his recent break-up with Gabriella over summer break; though the song's lyrics once again vibe with an undercurrent of something more... queer. With Troy dressed in a slim-fitting, all-black outfit, not only does the number exploit an opportunity to show off Zac Efron's lean physique and metrosexual styling, but it also repudiates Disney's usual palette of bright hues often associated with its hyper-heterosexual fairy tale heroes. Pretty much any animated feature will confirm that black is the calling card of most queer-coded Disney villains. Similar to "Get'cha Head in the Game," Troy stomps around a golf course while singing about the external pressures that control his sense of identity: "Everybody's always talkin' at me / Everybody's tryin' to get in my head / I wanna listen to my own heart talkin'." Like many queer teens, Troy is riddled with confusion and angst, torn between his own feelings and the expectations of others.

His final solo, "Scream," takes place after Gabriella has left for early admission at Stanford University, repeating many of the same thematic undercurrents that imply a (sexual) identity crisis. As graduation approaches, Troy is in the midst of making a decision about his future: will he pursue a career in musical theatre or professional basketball? To sort through his emotional dilemma, he makes a late-night trip to East High. In one sequence, a hailstorm of basketballs rains down around Troy as he crouches down in the darkened gym and covers his ears in fear. The image reinforces how Troy feels helpless and overwhelmed by what is expected of him—namely, to be the "right" kind of man—using masculinized sports iconography to do so. Moreover, the song makes the symbolism of Gabriella's absence even more potent as Troy belts out, "It's... It's like nothing works / Without you." While this can be read as Troy grieving a heterosexual love interest, it also subtly suggests her status as a "beard." Without the

heteronormative “shield” that his relationship with Gabriella provided, Troy may just have to face the fact that he is queer.

Thus, this trio of musical numbers firmly cements Troy’s character as quasi-queer through their negotiations of gender, sexuality, and identity. However, Troy’s inner struggle does not quite get the happy resolution that he—and so many queer viewers—deserved. Despite the *High School Musical* franchise (and the first film in particular) espousing a central theme of “be yourself,” even if that means going against the status quo, it does not quite succeed in realizing this thesis, as the characters are still by and large restricted by the dominant ideology. Within the story world, Troy is only allowed to pursue his passion for musical theatre if: 1) He does so with Gabriella, preserving heteronormative gender roles, and 2) it does not interfere with his duties as captain of the basketball team so as to keep up some semblance of normative masculinity. At the end of the third film, for instance, Troy compromises by attending UC Berkeley. “I’ve chosen basketball, but I’ve also chosen theatre,” he says, emphasizing his decision to continue to toe the line between the two. To make his assimilation even more apparent, he ultimately stays with Gabriella as well, despite going to different colleges. It seems like Troy is not quite ready to give up his heterosexual façade.

With its pseudo coming-out storyline and implicit queer elements, *High School Musical* offers potential identification for gay (and bisexual) boys who feel similar to Troy: compelled to conform to dominant gender ideals while confronting latent, and widely forbidden, desires. This underscores a potential division between the trilogy’s intended audience and its implied spectator. The former is in essence who Disney’s marketing and development departments thought the films would appeal to—the group they would explicitly target—which, of course, is tween girls.³³ However, the spectator is a construction of the text itself, and doesn’t always align

with the target viewership.³⁴ Considering Troy’s pubescent identity crisis and negotiations with gender ideals, this would be queer boys, especially considering how the eroticization of Zac Efron in such musical numbers as “Now or Never” or “Bet on It” can appeal to both heterosexual girls and queer boys. For the latter, he operates as both a locus of identification *and* an object of queer desire; we see the story *through* Troy’s eyes while also looking *at* him as an erotic spectacle. But why not just address queer boys explicitly? Why not make Troy canonically queer? Well, this more to do with *who* is making the franchise.

“Stick to the Status Quo”: Disney’s Heteronormative Agenda and the Limits of *High School Musical’s* Queerness

Since *High School Musical* was created from the resources and talent of a highly conservative global entertainment empire—The Walt Disney Company—this central element of its production must be reconciled with its latent queerness. In 2004, two years before the first *High School Musical* premiered, R. Thomas Umstead claimed that “Very few networks provide a more diverse on-air lineup of characters and shows than The Disney Channel. Through such groundbreaking series and movies as *The Proud Family*, *The Cheetah Girls* and *Going to the Mat*, the network has offered a broad representation of cultures, religions and physical and mental capabilities.”³⁵ He then goes on to cite a comment from then Disney Channel president of entertainment, Rich Ross, who claimed that after joining the network in 1996 he felt that diversity was “missing from the channel at that point, so it became mandatory to be inclusive if we were to march forward as a kid-driven brand,” which meant including “different ethnic and religious diversities” as well as subjects like “kids with disabilities.” His sentiment was (and still is) a hollow one, as Disney Channel remains overwhelmingly whitewashed, non-disabled, de facto Christian, and heteronormative both behind and in front of the camera.

Thus, while all three *High School Musical* films were directed by openly gay filmmaker Kenny Ortega and display a certain level of awareness regarding the rampant queer undertones—a musical number like “I Don’t Dance” cannot simply manifest subconsciously—the trilogy is still in many ways constricted by the company that flipped the bill and no doubt had ample say in its creative direction. Ortega said as much in a 2020 interview with *Variety* where he admitted that the character of Ryan was definitely supposed to be queer and almost came out in the final film until plans changed.³⁶ “Disney is the most progressive group of people I’ve ever work with [but] I was concerned because it was family and kids, that Disney might not be ready to cross that line and move into that territory yet,” he stated. “So, I just took it upon myself to make choices that I felt that those who were watching would grab. They would see it, they would feel it, they would know it and they would identify with it. And that is what happened.” His words exemplify the “pure” camp of the franchise, as the queerness of *High School Musical* is only meant to be understood by a select few (re: queer viewers) who exist at the margins of mainstream culture. As Bergman states, “the person who can recognize [naïve] camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp [perform in an artificial or exaggerated or mock effeminate way] is a person outside the cultural mainstream...”²¹ Rather than imbue *High School Musical* with deliberate, self-aware camp for any viewer to pick up on, Ortega offers an undercurrent of queerness, forced to navigate the confines of a repressive, homophobic system—much like the directors of classical Hollywood had to do. Thus, with *High School Musical* as the perfect example, Disney texts are “innocent” camp. Despite any queer undertones, they are supposed to be taken seriously as wholesome children’s entertainment, underscoring Disney’s regressive approach to diversity since, even in 2006, they were still distributing “naïve” camp typical of the classical Hollywood era. As such, the *High School Musical* trilogy should not be upheld as a

flawless beacon of diversity (whether in terms of race, gender, or sexuality), and is instead exemplary of the kind of wishy-washy, repressive, and sometimes outright terrible representation so often produced by Disney and its many subsidiaries.

A case in point: a few years ago, Disney Channel featured its first openly queer (and Jewish) character in Cyrus Goodman (Joshua Rush) on the tween show *Andi Mack* (2017-19).³⁷ The series admittedly dilly-dallied in giving queer fans explicit confirmation of his sexuality, waiting until the third (and final) season for Cyrus to actually say the words “I’m gay” out loud, while simultaneously never allowing him to kiss long-time crush TJ, despite their mutual romantic feelings and no hesitation showing kisses between heterosexual couples. Even the recent spin-off series on Disney+, *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (2019-present), pushes its sole gay couple to the side in favor of yet another central heterosexual romance between its two Troy and Gabriella types, Ricky Bowen (Joshua Bassett) and Nini Salazar-Roberts (Olivia Rodrigo).³⁸

So, in April 2020, queer fans everywhere rejoiced when Disney+ announced a straight-to-series order for the 20th Century Fox-produced show *Love, Victor*, a spin-off based on the beloved 2018 queer teen romance film, *Love, Simon*, which made history as the first gay teen film to be released by a major studio.³⁹ (For clarification, 20th Century Fox distributed the film *before* being bought out by Disney.) Set to follow Latinx teenager, Victor Salazar (Michael Cimino), after he moves to Creekwood, Georgia with his family and begins to question his sexuality, the series seemed to mark a giant step forward for Disney entertainment. Finally, there would be no more ‘reading between the lines’ or waiting for that one side character to come out; now, the *main* character of a Disney text would be explicitly queer. Senior Vice President of

Content for Disney+, Agnes Chu, even released an official statement emphasizing the corporation's newfound support for people of marginalized sexual identities:

“*Love, Simon* is a powerful story embraced by critics and audiences alike for its universal messages of authenticity, love, and acceptance. We are honored to partner with the talented team at 20th Century Fox Television to bring this new chapter of a beloved story to Disney+, continuing the personal and uplifting narrative that captivated fans of the original film.”⁴⁰

It seemed too good to be true, and like many things with Disney, it was. In February 2020, the show was officially moved to Hulu, as Disney found that platform more equipped to house the show's “more mature themes.”⁴¹ Having screened the entire first season myself, *Love, Victor* is about as sexually explicit or overly “mature” as the film that inspired it—which is to say, not at all. Besides a few romantic (though ultimately tame) kisses between heterosexual and gay couples alike, the show features absolutely zero hot-and-heavy make-out sessions, or god forbid, actual sex scenes. As such, it seems that the only thing that made the show “more mature” is the fact that it features a gay teen protagonist and not a straight one, perpetuating the harmful stereotype that positions any queer content (no matter how unerotic) as innately hyper-sexual and inappropriate.⁴¹ Apparently, Disney+ has no problem keeping *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) on their streaming platform—which features a villain bent on global genocide—but a couple of smooches between two boys is “too much” for younger audiences to handle.

More so, this decision emphasizes how little Disney has changed. Instead of explicitly placing their brand in support of Victor's story—and others like it—they would rather hide behind the ambiguous Hulu logo that harbors no surface-level ties to The Walt Disney Company

(although Disney remains the majority stakeholder for the streaming platform⁴²). Therefore, even as queer content becomes increasingly available elsewhere, Disney is still bent on marginalizing characters of non-normative sexualities and genders. All three instances that I have outlined underscore Disney's efforts to placate queer viewers with painstakingly slow-going representation without alienating the largely cisgender, heterosexual (and white) viewership that they have always catered to. Can we really say, then, that *High School Musical*'s main intention is to offer queer boys a story that accurately and positively reflects their experience?

Harkening back to Doty's concept of the "utopian musical," the franchise definitely presents an idealized version of reality aimed at offering "escape" and "wish fulfillment" to audiences through over-the-top musical performances and a believe-in-yourself attitude. However, as Jack Zipes argues, "the great 'magic' of the Disney spell is that [Walt Disney] animated the fairy tale only to transfix audiences and divert their potential Utopian dreams and hopes through the false promises of the images he cast upon the screen."⁴³ Thus, the power of utopia—or perhaps more appropriately called the 'happily ever after' in this Disney-fied context—lies in a rose-colored version of reality that is not readily attainable for everyone. Like the queer-coded Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), queer viewers gaze into a magic mirror and ask to see the fairest one of all. As the smoke curls and tension builds, they hope to see themselves gazing back, only to be utterly disappointed when another heterosexual face appears.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Disney's *High School Musical* presents the discourses of sports and musical theatre as traditionally masculine and inherently queer, respectively. As such, Troy

Bolton's decision between these two activities is, essentially, one that determines his expression of gender and sexuality in relation to the dominant ideology. As viewers witness his inner struggle with the pressures of normative culture, his character adopts an implicit queerness that encourages the construction of a queer boy spectator. Ultimately, Troy assimilates into heteronormative society by continuing his relationship with Gabriella and pursuing basketball at the end of the trilogy. His implied queerness and subsequent failure to resist established social and sexual systems highlights a larger conversation surrounding Disney's relationship with queer representation in their media. Namely, *High School Musical* demonstrates that, even today, queerness in Disney products must be suppressed, marginalized, and/or censored. From queer-coded villains to normative heroes who embody heterosexual ideals by falling in love and living happily ever after, Disney is far from perfect when it comes to matters of diversity; rather, they are quite 'behind' when compared to other major studios. Even as contemporary scholars argue that there is a lessening need for queer readings as LGBTQIAP+ representation becomes more explicit on screen, Disney is still producing subtextual queerness and "naïve" camp in the contemporary era.⁴⁴

Notes

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2. *High School Musical, High School Musical 2, High School Musical 3: Senior Year*, directed by Kenny Ortega (2006, 2007, 2009: Disney Channel).
3. Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-49.
4. Amanda Putnam, "Mean Ladies: Transgendered Villains in Disney Films," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu, (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2012), 147-162.
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