

## Disney retools its 'School'

By ROBERT HOFER

Disney sent 14 staffers to the world premiere, matched by an equal number of execs from Music Theater Intl., who were joined by a smattering of casting directors from ABC and Nickelodeon.

It sounds like a suit-heavy Broadway opening, but this confab of legit-biz types actually took place many miles to the north in the Catskills, at a summer camp for theatrically inclined kids and teens.

On Aug. 18, Stagedoor Manor presented the first live perf of "High School Musical," which, if you are a reader without children, is an immensely popular TV tuner that aired earlier this year on the Disney Channel, selling 3 million-plus copies of its cast CD. (By com-

parison, "Wicked" looks to hit 1 million in CD sales at year's end.)

No critic traveled to Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., to review the show, but apparently it all went well. In the 2006-07 school year alone, more than 1,260 amateur productions will be mounted of the legit "High School Musical."

MTI won't compare those lofty numbers to other shows it reps, from "Aida" to "Annie," but suffice to say, 1,260 translates into a ton of amateur and stock rights sold. "In my 20 years at MTI, we've never quite experienced anything like this," says the org's prexy, Freddie Gershon.

Essentially, the Stagedoor presentation was a workshop. "Disney needed to see this on its feet before the show went out," says the camp's produc-

tion director, Konnie Kittrell. She had already worked with the Mouse and MTI on their Broadway Jr. version of "Aida," none of which quite prepared her for "High School Musical."

"These kids knew all the music even before we went into rehearsals," Kittrell recalls.

Almost all. Bryan Louiselle wrote two new songs, "Cellular Fusion" and "Counting on You," and David Simpatico tweaked Peter Barsocchini's original teleplay to make the property more theatrical.

"There's a great appetite for new titles out there," says Disney licensing VP Steve Fickinger. "This one is 'Grease' for the new generation."

Its story of putting on a show may be as old as Mickey and Judy singing in a barn, but fortunately the youngsters



**AMATEUR HOUR:** "High School Musical" makes the switch from tube to legit in a first staging at the Stagedoor Manor.

today don't know that. "The show has all those teenage themes, and it answers every one of them," says Kittrell.

Although no one is talking Broadway, the show receives its first Equity staging, at Atlanta's Fox Theater, in January.

"We wanted to let the show be a local market phenomenon," says Disney Theatrical VP David Schrader, "rather than creating the multimillion-dollar, jazzified version that comes to town and raises expectations."