

Life

Actors, cheerleaders 'Bring It' on Broadway

In "Bring It On: The Musical," the high-stakes world of competitive cheerleading is intertwined with cutthroat high school politics.

BY ELYSA GARDNER

NEW YORK — Onstage at Broadway's St. James Theatre, where *Bring It On: The Musical* opens Wednesday, extravagantly athletic performers are rehearsing a "basket toss."

Two young women, each held up by a few people, are sent soaring above the stage, without benefit of the wires that sustain the actors playing Mary Poppins or Spider-Man a few blocks away. A moment later, they land gracefully back into their colleagues' cradled arms, and there is laughter and applause.

If you're a regular theatergoer and this feat doesn't suggest a familiar dance move, that's because it's not one. The basket toss is rather a staple of competitive cheerleading, the focus of *Bring It On*, which was inspired by the 2000 film of that name.

Like the movie, the new show focuses on high school cheerleaders with diverse backgrounds and dizzying chops. But the musical presents different characters and a new story, centering on a teen cheerleading whiz named Campbell (Taylor Louderman), whose world is turned upside down when she's transferred to a new high school with no squad.

"She ends up cheerleading again," director/choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler says during a break from the pre-show "stunt call," in which the cast runs through all the featured moves. "But she learns that life takes you on a circuitous journey and that what's most important is to enjoy that journey and appreciate friendship."

Blankenbuehler, who also will choreograph this fall's revival of *Annie*, earned a Tony Award for his work on *In the Heights*— whose Tony-winning creator/composer/lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda crafted original songs for *Bring It On* with Tony- and Pulitzer-winning *Next to Normal* composer Tom Kitt and lyricist Amanda Green.

But the theater veteran knew nothing about the focus of *Bring It On* when he started the project. "I went to an all-boys' high school in Cincinnati," says Blankenbuehler, 42. "We didn't even have a cheerleading squad."

So with a little help from Google and Facebook, Blankenbuehler tracked down an expert: Jessica Colombo, the effervescent 27-year-old who is the show's "cheer consultant." A former champion college cheerleader who spent nine years with the



Universal Cheerleading Association, Colombo "knew nothing about dance or musical theater," she says.

But the two schooled each other, and enlisted both cheerleaders and theater performers — more of the latter, Colombo says. "My job was to teach the singers and dancers and actors how to do the stunts safely and correctly, and to make them look like cheerleaders. Because how you move is very different than it is in the dance world."

Michael Mindlin, a 29-year-old dancer in the company, agrees. "There are a lot of (cheerleading) techniques that are counterintuitive to what I knew. Hips forward, shoulders shrugged, chest up — it's the opposite of what you'd do as a dancer. Not to mention that it's very scary the first time you chuck a girl 30 feet in the air."

Neil Haskell, 25, another theater pro (and *So You Think You Can Dance* alum) who plays Campbell's boyfriend, Steven, hadn't cheered before the show but had studied gymnastics, "so I had that tumbling aspect down." Still, he has encountered challenges. "Partnering in dance is different," Haskell says. "You know how to hold the girl and keep her on center. In cheerleading, you have to do that when she's above your head, to hold a girl steadily from the bottom of her foot and read her body that way."

Courtney Corbeille, 24, one of the women tossed in the air, is making her theater debut



Top: A scene from "Bring It On: The Musical" (Joan Marcus)
Above: "Cheer consultant" Jessica Colombo and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler helped bring the new Broadway musical 'Bring It On' to life. (Photo by Todd Plitt for USA TODAY)

in *Bring It On*. A cheerleader since age 6, Corbeille has studied ballet even longer.

"My ballet teacher just about died when I first told her I was going to start cheerleading," Corbeille says. "She thought I'd get hurt, that my technique would suffer. But she came to see the show last night, and she left me a voice mail saying that it was spectacular." ■



Watch an exclusive behind-the-scenes video of the musical's development at USATODAY.COM