

# ON THE MARK

## ERIC FEIG DISCUSSES HOW HE AND HIS TEAM DIVVIED DUTIES TO BRING TOGETHER THE (VERY) FEEL-GOOD *THEATER CAMP*, EARNING EACH OF THEM THE P.G.A. MARK.

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

### Theater Camp

Erik Feig, p.g.a.

As a founding partner of Summit Entertainment, copresident of Lionsgate's Motion Picture Group, and CEO of Picturstart, Erik Feig has overseen the production of more than 100 films.

His experience spans such franchises as *Twilight*, *Step Up* and *The Hunger Games* to singular Oscar winners including *La La Land* and *The Hurt Locker*, not to mention scrappy indies that get a big bang for their buck like 2023's *Theater Camp*.

Feig got his start on the independent side, so *Theater Camp* was not so much a detour as it was a homecoming. And while the DIY nature of the production had a familiar feel, the outrageously smart and funny mockumentary was still a leap of faith, especially given that directors Molly Gordon and Nick Lieberman were at the helm for the first time, leading the way for the feature-length adaptation of a short film they'd put together with friends Noah Galvin and Ben Platt. Gordon, Galvin and Platt also star in the film alongside a sparkling troupe of young performers who (rightfully) steal the show.

In the end, *Theater Camp* was named a Top 10 Independent Film of 2023 by the National Board of Review and

received accolades at film festivals including Sundance, where it was awarded the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award: Ensemble. It was also nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. *Theater Camp* received the ReFrame Stamp, awarded to narrative and animated features that hire women or individuals of other underrepresented gender identities/expressions (including those who are nonbinary or gender nonconforming) in four out of eight key roles including writer, director, producer, lead, co-leads and department heads.

The story of a rundown drama camp betting its future on the talent of its students and instructors for one final on-stage masterpiece provides an easy comparison with the process of indie filmmaking, while the experience of watching *Theater Camp* is the best kind of inspiration to keep investing in the work one loves.

### HOW DID YOU FIRST DISCOVER THIS PROJECT? HOW DID IT RESONATE WITH THE TYPE OF WORK YOU'VE DEDICATED YOUR CAREER TO?

*Theater Camp* was first brought to my attention by Jessica Elbaum, whom I was working with on *Am I OK*, which also starred Molly Gordon. Jessica showed me the short that the four creators—Molly, Ben, Noah and Nick—had made and



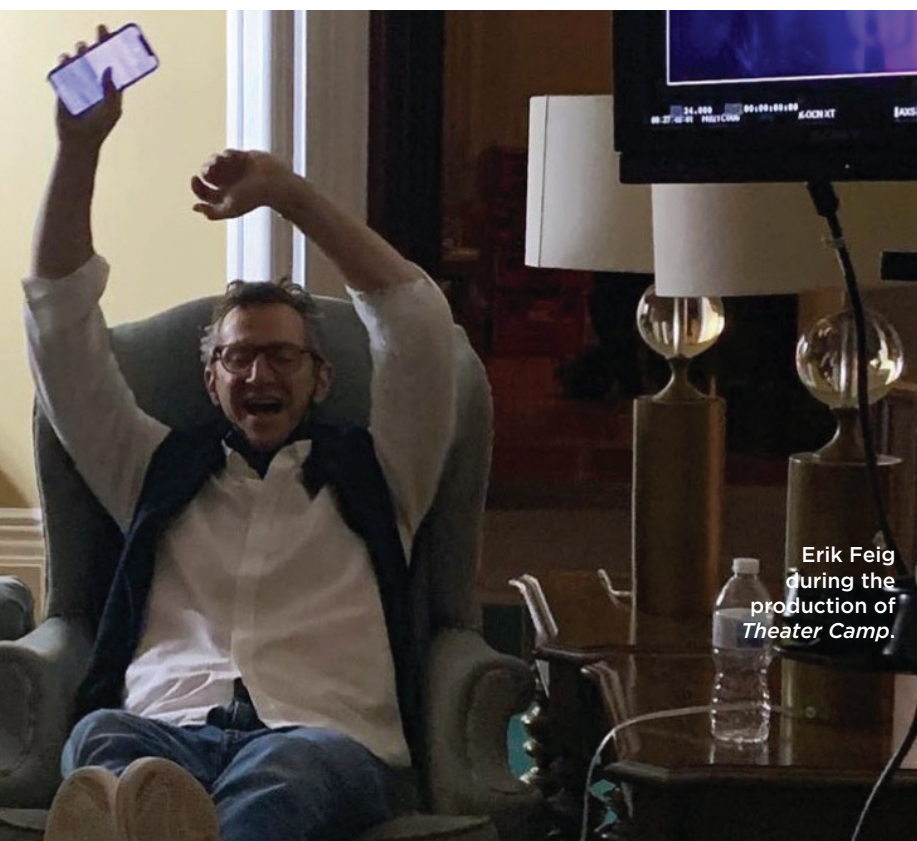
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COURTESY OF ERIC FEIG



Molly  
Gordon  
and Nick  
Lieberman  
on set.



Erik Feig  
during the  
production of  
*Theater Camp*.

asked what I thought of turning it into a feature. I thought it was so funny but also inspiring and feel-good. I really wanted to do a comedy with adults behaving like children and children behaving like adults, and this was perfect.

**WHAT WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT YOUR WORKLOAD OR PROCESS WITH *THEATER CAMP* COMPARED TO YOUR OTHER PROJECTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WITH BIGGER BUDGETS?**

*Theater Camp* was a different development process because we knew from the inception that it would be only loosely scripted, so development was a bit fuzzier. We created plot milestones and moments and discussed opportunities for character conflict or growth, but the script was more of a scriptment.

For me personally, not having a musical



COURTESY OF SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES



The young cast of *Theater Camp*.

theater background and also never having gone to summer camp, it was really important that there be an outsider character to help the audience access this otherwise insular world. We also thought it could be a great opportunity for a comedic foil. Creating the character of Troy was that perfect solution.

We also knew we wanted to end the movie with a big performance. Coming up with something that was good for the theatrical audience, good for the plot needs of “saving the camp,” but also kind of hilariously over the top, was a unique and fun challenge. Julia Hammer, who works with me at Picturestart, introduced the four creators to an old friend of hers, a composer named Marc Sonnenblick, and it was a perfect and easy fit.

We had the added challenge of working with lots of children and their limited hours, trying to mount a production within a production, and finding a camp

we could actually take over during the most popular time of summer. There were some interesting challenges!

**YOU, JULIA HAMMER, AND JESSICA ELBAUM ALL RECEIVED THE P.G.A. MARK FOR THIS FILM. HOW DID YOU DIVVY UP RESPONSIBILITIES?**

We all got along so well. Julia and I work together day to day, so that was seamless. Jessica and I had known each other for years and had just finished another film successfully. There was so much work to go around that dividing it up was easy, but we would have really frequent Zooms to go over the to-dos of the moment. Then we would all dive into our respective responsibilities. We all trusted one another, so it felt great to know the immense workload could be divided.

**DESPITE THE RICHNESS OF YOUR EXPERTISE IN**

**BOTH THE INDIE AND STUDIO SECTORS, DID YOU COME UP AGAINST ANY CHALLENGES DURING THEATER CAMP'S DEVELOPMENT OR PRODUCTION THAT WERE DIFFERENT FROM COMPLICATIONS YOU'D TACKLED IN THE PAST? WAS THERE A SPECIFIC OBSTACLE THAT YOU'RE PROUD OF HELPING THE PROJECT OVERCOME IN A UNIQUE OR UNIQUELY PERSISTENT WAY?**

Well, it was pretty ambitious to cast over Zoom young kids who could actually, sing, dance and improvise. And to have faith in their ability to go off book, as we never had a script longer than 65 pages. And to put on a show within a show with just a few days of prep. Perhaps this was more modest compared to shutting down a freeway for *La La Land* or all our dance sequences in the *Step Up* movies, but



Molly Gordon and Ben Platt in *Theater Camp*.

COURTESY OF SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

our resources were definitely more limited, so it was pretty hard!

And then, of course, we were also financing it, so sweating bullets about that, trying to manage the cash flow and hoping that COVID didn't break out among the kid performers because we literally couldn't afford to shut down or recast!

There were a lot of people working on this film, and very often that can result in committee think or internal politics. But the bond with the creators was so strong and the trust among the producers so solid that we never had that. Knowing that you are working on a dream project for the filmmakers and having the responsibility to deliver for them was empowering and inspirational.

### WERE THERE ANY PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

### OR TECHNIQUES THAT YOU EMPLOYED FOR *THEATER CAMP* THAT YOU HADN'T USED BEFORE?

There was a moment where we thought about making the film the summer prior. But once that window quickly passed, we had almost a year to think about the film. We did not have the financial resources to bring on any department heads, but we did have the opportunity to talk to the creators and the rest of the producing team about the film and make sure we were all aligned and seeing the same film. That was invaluable.

### WHAT ABOUT *THEATER CAMP* ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF A PRODUCER?

I love its can-do spirit, and the fact that the movie is funny and pokes fun at this world but is never mean and is actually

uplifting and optimistic without being treacly. I always tear up in the finale, and seeing it with an audience is still a great joy for me. ■

*Certification via the Producers Mark (represented by p.g.a.) indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions in a decision-making capacity on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at [producersguildawards.com](http://producersguildawards.com).*