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Robe SuperSpikies have Heads in the Game

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The pacey, quick-witted, all-action entertainment of Disney+'s hugely popular High School Musical: The Musical: The Series (HSMTMTS) returned to TV screens for a much-anticipated third season, with producers Skot Bright and Zack Lowenstein asking Hisham Abed to join the production team as director of photography (DoP).

Shot over four months in the spring, 12 x Robe SuperSpikie moving lights were specified by Hisham and the producers to help provide flexible and efficient solutions for lighting 'permanent' sets in the Burbank, California, studio where the season was recorded in addition to assorted locations in and around Los Angeles.

The Season 3 narrative is set at Camp Shallow Lake, a sleepaway camp in California, as theatre kids the Wildcats and fellow campers are primed for an unforgettable summer ripe with romance, curfew-less nights and a taste of the great outdoors. With a high-stakes production of Frozen on the horizon AND a drama-filled "docu-series" of the production, the Wildcats show who is "best in snow" without leaving anyone out in the cold!

Skot and Zack have worked together on several previous projects. Skot's history in music and rock 'n' roll touring production and Zack's background in television make a great synergy and they are known as a class industry double act!

Skot underlined the importance of moving lights to a production like this as "essential" to producing the requisite looks and atmospherics needed for the comedy-fantasy-musical genre with "multiple dynamics and some magical touches needed to capture the mood and flow".

Hisham has cut some of his DoP teeth in reality television where clever lighting reinforces the authenticity of the genre without making it staged or contrived. It was exactly that aesthetic they wanted for the 'mockumentary' / docu-comedy style of Season 3.

When it came to choosing actual fixtures, “We needed something small, lightweight, powerful and versatile that fit our budget,” explained Skot, although the final pick was left to Hisham who added, “The lights needed to be quick and easy to set up and program to help us keep pace with the hectic rehearsal and shoot schedule.”

Following a demo of the SuperSpikie by Robe North America’s western regional sales manager Adam Camp, Hisham decided on renting 12 units for the duration of the shooting period which covered the eight Season 3 episodes.

The fixtures were used for various studio sets, mainly the Theatre / Barn and the Void and were part of approximately 70 or 80 fixtures in total utilized for each set.

The ‘mockumentary’ style was characterized by the edginess of multiple Steadicam and hand-held cameras – restless, exciting, and dramatic – and informed by Hisham’s lighting background, these immaculately framed but slightly raw images have become a signature of this season.

The challenge for Hisham was dealing with creating the diversity of looks needed whilst simultaneously prepping and rigging the next shots. Being a musical production as well as a TV show, actors and singers were constantly rehearsing, recording tracks and filming.

“Luckily all of us on this production were adrenaline junkies who thrive when constantly working and finding answers to new daily and hourly challenges,” elucidated Hisham referring to the frenetic pace!

“These SuperSpikies were another weapon in the arsenal” stated Hisham, impressed after the demo, “and were perfect for all our needs.”

The Theatre was the main set on which the SuperSpikies were used, which was right at the heart of the musical summer camp being attended by the cast at Shallow Lake.

The action also included a myriad of backstage shots and scenes in addition to the onstage performances which averaged two full production musical numbers per episode, so the lights were very often in shot for the final cut and had to look good for their own onscreen parts!

“They were an invaluable visual resource that helped us keep the action going, perfect for boosting lighting quickly in a specific or a general area and hugely better and more practical than having someone climb up and down a ladder!” stated Hisham.

He loves the shape, intensity and patterns thrown by the SuperSpikie's multi-colored flower effects, while the good tungsten emulation enabled them to also be effective keys. "A fixture able to switch between classic light characteristics and more contemporary theatrical effects is "a massive asset" concluded Hisham.

For one musical number needing a certain gobo effect they utilized a Robe MegaPointe which is a favorite of Hisham's who has used Robe in his work for several years. He thinks the manufacturer pushes the boundaries with innovation and in producing useful and highly practical fixtures.

Working closely with Hisham on lighting this "High School Musical: The Musical: The Series" season were gaffer Damon Dulas and programmer Wally Sylvia, who have worked together for over 10 years.

The main technical challenges involved organizing the time efficiently to program the musical numbers, each of which was a mini-production in its own right, and the constant coordination required between the choreographers and the various directors which rotated throughout the season.

In spite of the exacting nature of this production, Skot, Zack and Hisham all reckon it was one of the most fun and imaginative environments in which they have worked, collaborating with many nice and highly talented people all passionate about their craft and disciplines, creating a series reflecting Disney+'s well-known and exceptionally high production values.

Photo Credit: Hisham Abed, Anne Marie Fox



