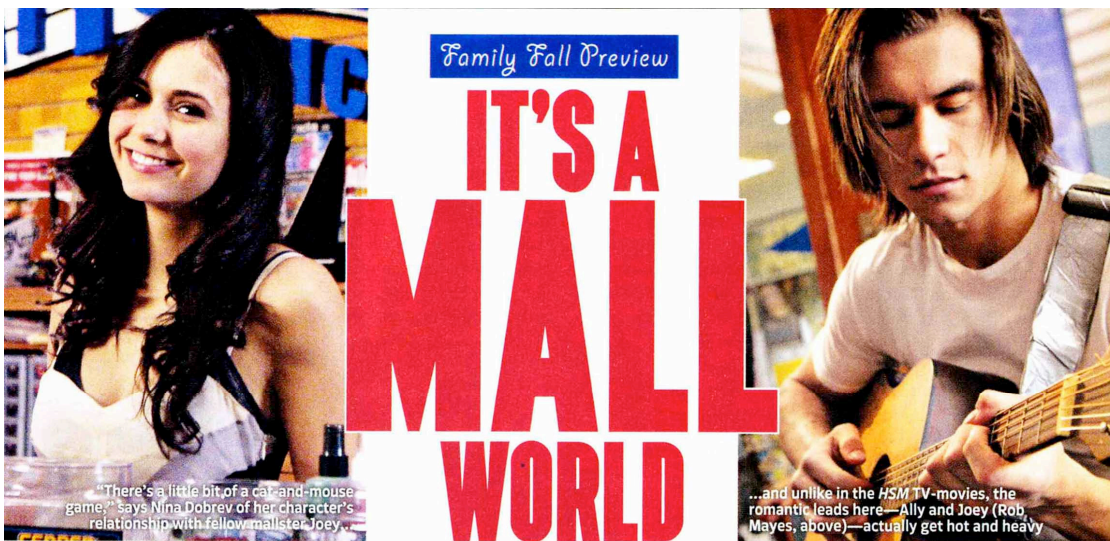




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HSM withdrawal? MTV's *The American Mall* will give you something to sing about

BY DAVID A. KEEPS

Late at night, in the atrium of a shopping center in Ohio, Ally Shepard picks out a tune at the piano. Talented but not altogether confident, soulfully pretty though hardly a man-trap, she's a singer-songwriter who just can't get the lyrics right. Until she hears a sweet but strong male voice crooning exactly the words her song needs. What is this? *High School Musical 4: Phantom of the Galleria?*

Close, but not quite. Brought to you by the team behind Disney Channel's smash franchise, this is MTV's *The American Mall*, a slightly more grown-up singing and dancing excursion into the heart of late-adolescent dreams and dramas.

"*High School Musical* was designed as a trilogy for [those last] years of high school," says *Mall* producer Bill Borden on the film's set in Utah. "This movie takes place the summer after graduation. It's about a girl facing love problems and living up to expectations."

She also has another problem: bad, rich girl Madison (played by *The O.C.*'s Autumn Reeser). "Madison's dad owns the mall," Reeser says. "And she is opening a boutique for the thinnest, richest people in town. And she gets whatever she wants."

What Madison most desires is to put Ally (*Degrassi: The Next Generation*'s Nina Dobrev) and her mom's music store out of business. Oh, and she wouldn't mind getting her claws into Joey (singer-songwriter Rob Mayes), the hunky mall janitor who finishes Ally's songs.

Though the rock and

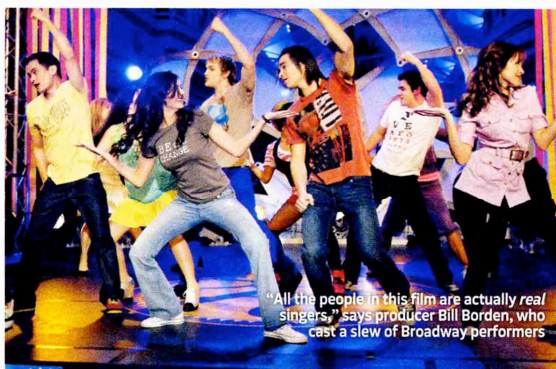
fashion industries, as well as teen angst and consumerism, are gently skewered, Borden insists *The American Mall* "is actually a musical in the classical tradition." That means goopy ballads, PG-rated Pussycat Dolls-style jams, self-esteem-raising pop anthems and splashy dance numbers. Adds choreographer Bonnie Story, "We use the food court, escalators, mannequins and everything else you'd find in a mall [as our stage]."

The cast is largely new faces, though fans of *So You Think You Can Dance* may also recognize Season 3 finalist Neil Haskell, who makes his acting debut in *Mall* as Drew, "the biggest slacker of all." Nickelodeon viewers will spot *Unfabulous*' Bianca Collins, who plays boy-crazy Mia and admits she's a mallrat. "I always remember that scene in 'Clueless' when the only thing Cher can do to cheer herself up is go shopping. It's sad but true: There's nothing like finding a good deal on the right pair of shoes to make sad feelings go away."

For other cast members, like Bulgarian-born Dobrev, the mall isn't all that. "Kids today buy everything, and we're not necessarily happier for it. This movie reflects the materialism of our generation." Oh, lighten up, says Borden, who calls

The American Mall a modern romance: "It's boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets his act together and maybe gets the girl back. But the real message is this: You don't have to be someone's boyfriend or girlfriend to be your own person."

THE AMERICAN MALL
Monday, 8/11, 9/8c, MTV



"All the people in this film are actually real singers," says producer Bill Borden, who cast a slew of Broadway performers