

TEASER

EXT. COTTON FIELD (1863) - DAY

A beautiful day in the American South. Cotton motes FLOAT in the air. Groups of SLAVES work the fields.

With only the distant buzz of INSECTS as accompaniment, the slaves SING as they toil away.

SLAVES

*Wade in the water...
Wade in the water, children...
Wade in the water...
God's gonna trouble the water...*

Their song is interrupted by a BUGLE's sharp report. A doe-eyed SLAVE GIRL frowns in confusion at her MOTHER.

SLAVE GIRL

What's dat, momma?

Momma squints at movement in the distance... then gasps with shock and wonder. It's the UNION ARMY! It's freedom! Led by an AMERICAN FLAG!

MOTHER

Dat's Lincoln's boys, chile!

In ecstatic, almost religious celebration, the slaves throw cotton into the air like confetti.

SLAVES

Thank you, Missuh Lincoln, we free!

ABIGAIL (O.S.)

Not!

INT. HISTORY CLASS (1996) - DAY

A high school history class, a few miles outside of New York City, a few years before the end of the 20th Century.

Eyes rolling so hard she might break them, ABIGAIL FREEMANTLE-HOFFMAN (16, Black) openly scoffs from the last row. Abigail always says what she thinks. She never stabs anyone in the back -- if she's right, she'll happily stab you in the front.

MRS. CLARK (early 60s, White), a teacher who should have retired by now, shoots daggers with her eyes. She's been reading aloud from a TEXTBOOK with UNCLE SAM on the cover.

Watching their battle is NELSON FISHER (16, Black). Nelson's an unapologetic nerd whose sarcasm masks a sweet, awkward teenage boy. He leans in towards his best friend to warn her. His lips barely move as he quietly speaks; a polite, teacher-facing smile frozen on his face.

NELSON

Abs, what are you doing?

ABIGAIL

Putting an end to this bullshit.

(louder)

Mrs. Clark, that's not true.

MRS. CLARK

Did the esteemed publishers of "These United States: A Guide To Our Great Nation's Past" forget to include one Abigail Freemantle-Hoffman in the list of authors?

ABIGAIL

The esteemed publishers are full of shit.

The class titters. Mrs. Clark lets out a long-suffering sigh.

MRS. CLARK

Oh? In which ways? Specifically.

Abigail doesn't waste any time.

INT. OVAL OFFICE (1863) - DAY

QUILL in hand, ABRAHAM LINCOLN edits the EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION. He mutters, he scratches out lines.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

No. No. Hmm, maybe? No.

ABIGAIL (V.O.)

Lincoln didn't give a shit about freeing the slaves, not really.

Lincoln signs the paper with a grand flourish. He leans back and plays with the brim of his top hat.

MARY TODD LINCOLN peeks in through the doorway.

MARY TODD LINCOLN

(suggestively)

Oh, Abraham?

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
Coming, dear.

Abe looks directly into CAMERA and waggles his eyebrows.

INT. ART STUDIO (1940) - DAY

A man dressed as UNCLE SAM poses for an EFFEMINATE ARTIST painting the famous "I WANT YOU!" poster.

EFFEMINATE ARTIST
Stern face, yaaaaas! Point that
star-spangled finger, yaaaaas!

MRS. CLARK (V.O.)
(warning)
Abigail...

ABIGAIL (V.O.)
"Uncle Sam" is just a--

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM (1996) - DAY

Mrs. Clark stands directly in front of Abigail's desk.

MRS. CLARK
I think it's time for you to leave.

ABIGAIL
And I think you're a typical White
lady whose guilt blinds her from
the fucking truth.

Mrs. Clark gasps. If she were wearing pearls, she'd be clutching them.

Nelson watches in awe as Abigail grabs her bag and stomps out of the room. She SLAMS the door behind her.

The class erupts into chaos.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

INT. MOUNTAINSIDE HIGH SCHOOL - MAIN HALLWAY - DAY

A typical upper-middle-class suburban high school hallway, so crowded with students headed to last period, it's a wonder anyone can get through.

But somehow, MARVIN "M&M" MWANGI (16, Black) manages to navigate the chaos without looking up from a handful of SHEET MUSIC. Nelson's other best friend, Marvin's your classic over-achiever who never met a rule he didn't blindly follow. Or a trivia game he couldn't win.

Marvin sings to himself as he maneuvers around jocks, geeks, and other assorted denizens of high school in the mid 1990s.

MARVIN

(sings)

To dream the impossible dream...

In front of the computer lab, Nelson's having a friendly chat with the computer teacher, MR. SCHWARTZ (40s, White) when he notices his friend walk by.

NELSON

(to Marvin)

Dude!

Nelson jogs a bit to catch up.

NELSON (CONT'D)

Dude! Abigail went off on Mrs. Clark earlier!

MARVIN

To fight the unbeatable foe...

NELSON

Uhm, hello? Space Station Regula One, this is Enterprise calling, please respond.

MARVIN

To bear with unbearable sorrow...

NELSON

(scoffs)

I'm surprised Fletcher's looking for castrati.

MARVIN

I'm surprised you even know -- oh,
right, it's gym that you skip.

(sings)

To run...

QUICK FLASH - NELSON SKIPS GYM

- In a HIGH SCHOOL GYM, as an intense basketball game is played, Nelson hands the TEACHER a FAKE DOCTOR'S NOTE (signed by one "DR. LEONARD H. MCCOY").

BACK TO SCENE

NELSON

You're gonna miss your newly-minted-
Drum-Major best friend lead the
first rehearsal of the tightest ass
halftime show in a decade, and for
what, for wearing a costume and
singing like a little bi--

MARVIN

...where the brave dare not go...

NELSON

Are you gonna be in pep band for
the Davids thing? We're playing
Sousa. You love Sousa.

MARVIN

This is my quest!

NELSON

I bet your Dad doesn't know about
this. You keeping it a secret? Have
your balls finally dropped? You
gotta get new underwear now, or...

MARVIN

To follow that star!

STAIRWELL

Deep in their own vacant little world, JEN and JODIE (free,
White, and 16; twin mean girls) block the stairwell doorway.

And Marvin's about to run right into them.

NELSON

Dude, watch...

Collision. Sheet music flies everywhere.

NELSON (CONT'D)

...out.

Marvin realizes who he just ran into. Marvin is verklempt.

MARVIN

I, uhh, I...

Jen and Jodie roll their eyes and mean-girl-walk down the stairs. As soon as they're out of sight, Marvin lets out a sigh from deep within his teenage-hormone-ravaged soul.

MARVIN (CONT'D)

Cheese and rice.

Nelson helps Marvin collect the music from the floor.

NELSON

Coulda been worse.

MARVIN

I can't possibly imagine how.

NELSON

Coulda been like when Lamar got addicted to Vivarin and we staged that intervention at EPCOT.

Marvin careens down the stairs.

MARVIN

Cya later.

NELSON

Coulda been like when Paulie got caught in the back of the bus with a National Geographic and a box of tissue!

PAULIE (16, male, any ethnicity) happens to walk by at the worst possible moment.

PAUL

What the hell, Nelson?!

NELSON

Sorry.

(yells after Marvin)
Break a leg, dude!

INT./EXT. LARRY'S CAR (MOVING) - DAY

A midlife-crisis-colored SPORTS CAR with New York TAGS drives through Mountainside's bucolic streets.

Behind the wheel is LARRY BEVINS (50s, White). A veteran of many a political brawl, and no stranger to dirty tricks, Larry's got a mouth that would make a sailor blush and a mind as sharp as a tack.

A cigarette dangling from his lips, Larry barks into a huge CELL PHONE. The car is full of smoke.

LARRY

John. John. John. She's the best thing to happen to the Party since Jesse fuckin' Jackson.

The car passes cute little buildings. There's a cafe with a crowd straight out of the United Nations. There's a Red Cross, a YMCA, a food bank. There are churches, temples, mosques. There's even a park for the Wiccans.

LARRY (CONT'D)

Pastor's kid. High school principal. Personal relationships from here to Trenton. And she's cleaner than your mother's pucker, so you don't have -- ok, you'll max out? Great. Give Laurie my best.

Larry parks in front of MOUNTAINSIDE HIGH SCHOOL, a handsome brick building that blends in well with its suburban surroundings. He hops out of the car, tosses his still-lit cigarette to the ground, and heads inside.

The AMERICAN FLAG flutters in the breeze.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

CLARINET in hand, Nelson watches the marching band get in position for rehearsal with the band director, MR. EGAN (50s, White). Nelson's other hand makes subtle conducting motions.

MR. EGAN

Run the show, then take em through the Sousa. Ready?

NELSON

Mr. Egan, I was born ready.

Nelson takes a dramatic breath. He slowly raises the clarinet to his mouth. Over in the flute section, Abigail gives him a THUMBS-UP.

Nelson plays CONCERT PITCH... and it's noticeably wrong.

Mr. Egan flinches. Back in the drum line, loud cackles from KEON (17, Black, cool city kid stuck in the 'burbs).

KEON
Damn, he sharp, ain't he?

Ouch. Scattered GIGGLES ripple across the field.

QUICK FLASHES - NELSON'S RETORTS

- A much cooler version of Nelson tries out a rejoinder:

NELSON
That's not what your Mom said last night.

- Nah. He tries again:

NELSON (CONT'D)
That's not what your Grandma said last night.

- Nope. One more time, with a CROTCH-GRAB making it art:

NELSON (CONT'D)
The only thing sharp is my di--

BACK TO SCENE

In reality, normal-kid Nelson just frowns, embarrassed. He ignores a death glare from Abigail.

He plays again, properly this time. The band tunes up.

Mr. Egan takes the clarinet and hands Nelson a CONDUCTOR'S BATON. As Nelson touches it, we hear ANGELS SINGING.

And Nelson leads the marching band in rehearsing the tightest-ass halftime show in a decade.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

A bare stage. A single MICROPHONE.

LOUD FOOTSTEPS as BOBBY (12-14, White, nerdy, nervous) shuffles to stage center. LOUD FEEDBACK as Bobby leans into the mic.

BOBBY
Bobby. Bobby Pace.

A PIANIST snickers; in the first row, a skeptical MR. FLETCHER (50s, White, stereotypical drama teacher) peers at Bobby through Broadway-themed eyeglasses.

MR. FLETCHER
And the part you're auditioning
for, Bobbybobbypace?

BOBBY
(mispronounces)
Don Quixote.

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Watching from backstage, a confident Marvin tries not to snicker at "quicks-oat," because c'mon.

DON QUIXOTE (70s, Spanish, tilts at windmills) blinks into existence next to him, wild white hair under a BASIN. Don gives Marvin a fatherly pat on the back.

DON QUIXOTE
Worry not, my young squire. Thou
shalt emerge triumphant from this
glorious quest.

INT. AUDITORIUM - CONTINUOUS

The pianist PLAYS ("The Impossible Dream," Man of La Mancha). And Bobby SINGS with a perfect baritone. He's brilliant.

BOBBY
To dream the impossible dream...

The pianist is shocked. Mr. Fletcher is shocked.

FROM BACKSTAGE

Marvin is shocked.

DON QUIXOTE
Thou art fucked.

BOBBY
To fight the unbeatable foe...

A FEW MINUTES LATER

Marvin's turn on stage.

MARVIN
 (correct pronunciation)
 Marvin Mwangi. I'm auditioning for
 Don Quixote.

The pianist PLAYS the first few notes... and Mr. Fletcher waves for them to stop.

MR. FLETCHER
 (to Marvin)
 Maybe try something else?

MARVIN
 But the poster said --

MR. FLETCHER
 Maybe Sarafina? Old Man River? The
 Wiz? Bring In Da Noise?

MARVIN
 Bring in the what?

Marvin glances backstage. Don Quixote is gone. But Jen and Jodie are there, giggling at him.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
 (mutters)
 Cheese and rice.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

DR. ESTHER VIOLA DAVIDS, Mountainside High's principal, studies her reflection in the mirror. Short Afro. No-nonsense eyeglasses. A couple wrinkles, but Black don't crack; she's in her late 50s, looks a decade younger. She believes the ends always justify the means, and she prides herself on always being prepared.

She practices different types of smiles. Best friend. Motherly. Kindly high school principal. Mayoral.

She fixes her lipstick. Checks her teeth for errant bits.

INT. ESTHER'S OFFICE - SAME

This ain't your typical high school principal's office. Not only is it impeccably designed, it's proof positive that Esther is better than you could ever be.