

is still the core of his identity, he says, and the cast of "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" is just another class of students. More important than making television, Riordan's priority is "to protect them, to foster their education and to do everything I can to be a mentor and, hopefully, even a friend to them."

As Riordan points out, it helps that Jeffries is wise beyond her years. "It got to me for the quickest second — literally, like 90 seconds," Jeffries says about the debacle. "But I know that no matter how many people are going to say bad things, it's never going to be true." She adds, "This sounds really weird, but I don't blame them — those people might not know how to adapt. Me? No matter who they put in it, I would love it either way. Because it's just a show; it's not like I fired someone."

Jeffries relished the opportunity to explore what it meant to be a Black Annabeth. Andrew McLeroy, who worked on set as an acting coach, printed out hundreds of images of Greek characters, inviting the actors to hold onto the pictures they resonated with. "Leah said, 'None of these people look like me,'" McLeroy recalls. So in their next session, he brought her an image of a dark-skinned woman with long black hair and flames in her eye sockets, wearing an intricate golden crown. "She went, 'Yeah. That's Athena. That's my mom.'"

From there, the kids were at liberty to have fun on set. "There's lots of things to do here in Vancouver. We go on hikes, and that counts as school," Scobell says. "Sometimes instead of going back to the classroom and doing math, the camera guys teach me about the lenses and let me try on the Steadicam harness, and that counts as school too."

For Jeffries, the highlight of the show has been its creator. "I love working with Mr. Rick. When he walks into the door, even though we're not related, it's like, 'Hi, Grandpa!'" she says, as Simhadri nods vigorously. McLeroy also stands out in her memory: "He has us throw these balls at each other either super hard — I promise you we don't hurt each other — or really soft. He would have us yell a line that's supposed to be whispered, or one time, he had me sing really, really high notes like Mariah Carey. That way, we won't get too used to how we're saying it."

Being three years older than his castmates, Simhadri wears his seniority well. When interviewed alongside Jeffries, he encourages her to speak first, and he leads with gratitude in his own answers, even if he can't help cracking jokes. Explaining why a scene where Grover meets with other satyrs was his favorite to shoot, he says, "Everyone had prosthetics on like I did. It was cool to know that other people had to feel what I felt. Not that it was a bad feeling."

The kids' first time getting back together after wrapping production is four months later, for a photo shoot in Los Angeles, where they fall right back into their giggly rhythm. The boys play the "Rocky" theme over the speakers more than once — Simhadri explains that they "discovered" the movies together in Vancouver. When it's Jeffries' turn to take some solos, she cues songs by SZA and Rihanna. Scobell flips his middle fingers up at the camera any time his mother isn't looking, while Simhadri roars with laughter and Jeffries rolls her eyes and grins.

It's as regular a childhood as you can ask for when you commit to growing up on a big-budget Disney set.

"I'm superstitious," Uncle Rick admits. "I don't think I really allowed myself to feel that the show was going to happen until we got the greenlight" — which came in January 2022, after about 18 months of development. Executives at Disney, however, couldn't have been more optimistic. "The North Star in the development process was to honor the books and Rick's vision," says Karey Burke, president of Disney's 20th Television. "And secondarily, to have the show live alongside the worlds created by our sister studios

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at Lucasfilm and Marvel. We really wanted to spare no expense to make sure that this series felt as big and imaginative."

Sources say that the budget for "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" falls between \$20 million and \$30 million per episode, which would put it on par with "The Mandalorian," the Pedro Pascal-led "Star Wars" series that premiered on Disney+ in 2019. (Disney declined to confirm these numbers.)

As with any streaming series, subscriber growth will be a major criterion determining ongoing investment in "Percy Jackson." This is Disney's first chance to launch a completely new franchise on its streamer, since the current most popular titles on Disney+ hail from franchises that predate the platform.

"But, honestly, the first marker is going to be the response of Rick's core fans," says Ayo Davis, president of Disney Branded Television. "We need to understand how it's resonating."

Fandom is a lucrative and predictive force in Hollywood, and that may be especially true in this scenario. "Percy Jackson" has something that "Star Wars," the Marvel Cinematic Universe and "Harry Potter" all lack: Uncle Rick. In other words, there's a direct and constant channel of online communication between creator and consumers. Rick uses his blog to ask fans for feedback, they post their thoughts on social media, he reads their messages and the cycle repeats. From a business perspective, that relationship is invaluable.

"This is the first time I've ever been in a development process where you're talking about fans," says Dan Shotz, who shows and executive produces "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" with Steinberg. "We wanted to protect the things that fans didn't get to see in the movies and wanted to experience from the books. At the same time, we need to separate it from that and say, 'Why is this story we want to tell?' Answering that question required the writers to make a few changes to the story, which can be touchy."

"I think it would have been harder if Rick wasn't the partner that he has been," Steinberg says, "in the sense of getting comfortable with the idea that we may have to break everything to put it back together again in a way that feels right."

For example, to further push the innate inclusivity of the "Percy Jackson" universe, which mythologizes neurodivergence and features canonically queer characters, Shotz and Steinberg wanted to explore disability. "Chiron, in the story, is in a wheelchair," Shotz says about Clytemnestra's character, whose chair in the books serves to conceal his horse body. "In lore, centaurs were warriors. So with our Chiron, the horse has a brace on his leg, a war injury, so that his disability isn't just a cover. It's something we're going to deal with in the future of the series. We don't even address it in the first season. Right now, it's just a detail."

If all goes according to plan, the writers will have plenty of options for when and where to explore Chiron's backstory.

"We want them all," Burke says of the books and counting that Riordan has published within the "Percy Jackson" universe, beyond the original five. "In spite of the movie experience that he had before, he's an expansive thinker about his work. He doesn't have a rigid interpretation of it. The other series that he's created that live in this world are all part of our universe that we can adapt."

On the topic of considerations across other levels of Disney, like merchandising and theme park potential, Burke smiles. "I will say that there's incredible support across the Walt Disney Co. for 'Percy,'" she says, and notes that Disneyland is already passing out "Percy Jackson"-branded candy bags for Halloween. "But Percy Jackson World at Disney World? I want the Imagineers on that right now."

For his part, Riordan tries to stay focused on the task at hand. "If nothing else were to happen but those five seasons, I would be delighted," he says with a contented sigh. "We're dealing with Uncle Rick here, after all."

He laughs about the nickname. "As I get older, it starts to feel a little weird. If you want to call me that, OK, but I'm not gonna put that on my business card." Then he continues, "But it is an honor. Someone told me yesterday that I was a father figure to a lot of kids out in the world. That's a huge responsibility. And I'll try not to let them down." ●

Interviews with Walker Scobell, Leah Sava Jeffries and Aryan Simhadri were conducted before the SAG-AFTRA strike began.

Photo: Robert Fickel/Disney, Justin P. Thomas/Disney



Aryan Simhadri

Age 17
From Los Angeles, Orange County, Calif.

Simhadri has starred in Disney projects such as the 2022 remake of "Cheaper by the Dozen" and the coming-of-age movie "Spin." "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" marks his first series regular role.

Though Simhadri grew up in the warmth of Southern California, shooting "Percy Jackson" made him fall in love with the Pacific Northwest. "I've been thinking about it, and I have more friends in Vancouver than I do in Los Angeles! If I go back to L.A., I'm upsetting my life here," he says. "I think of Vancouver as home now." But that too may change soon, as Simhadri is currently applying to colleges — studying drama, of course.

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