

How to Fail as a Popstar
8 x 10 minutes

How to Fail as a Popstar will make its world premiere on CBC Gem on October 13, 2023.

The CBC Gem Original Series is produced by Sphere Media with the financial participation of TELUS Fund, the Bell Fund, and the Shaw Rocket Fund and the assistance of the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit.

Sphere Media holds worldwide distribution rights for the series.

How to Fail as a Popstar was filmed in Toronto and area.

The original stage production of *How to Fail as a Popstar* was commissioned and produced by Canadian Stage, Toronto, Ontario. The Stage production of *How to Fail as a Popstar* was written and created by Vivek Shraya and directed by Brendan Healy.

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CREDITS

Starring: Vivek Shraya as 'Present Day Vivek' and 'Dream Vivek'
Adrian Pavone as 'Adult Vivek'
Chris D'Silva as 'Teen Vivek'
Ayesha Mansur Gonsalves as 'Chandrika'
Nadine Bhabha as 'Sabrina'
Aayushma Sapkota as 'Teen Sabrina'
Eric Johnson as 'Matt G'
Arwen Humphreys as 'Mama Carla'

Creator: Vivek Shraya

Executive Producers: Elise Cousineau
Caroline Habib
Laura Perlmutter

Bruno Dubé
Jennifer Kawaja

Vanessa Matsui
Vivek Shraya

Producers: Laura Perlmutter
Stephen Raglow

Consulting Producers: JP Larocque
Courtney Walker

Written by: Vivek Shraya

Directed by: Vanessa Matsui (episodes 101-106, 108)
Vanessa Matsui & Vivek Shraya (episode 107)

Director of Photography: Gayle Ye

Casting by: Ashley Gray
Robin D Cook, csa

Music Supervisors: Victoria Beard
Jody Colero

Production Designer: Tijana Petrovic

Set Decorator: Lexi Cook

Costume Designer: Tala Kamea

Property Master: Ryan Tonkin

Key Hair & Makeup Artist: Fatema Hoque

Editor: Tiffany Beaudin
Pauline Decroix

Original Music by: Johnny Spence

Original Songs by: Vivek Shraya

SERIES LOGLINE

How To Fail as a Popstar is a coming-of-age series that tracks the journey of Vivek, a young queer brown boy from Edmonton as he tries (and fails) to achieve pop stardom – from the perspective of the now 40-something trans femme artist that boy became.

SHORT SERIES SYNOPSIS

Under 100-words:

What happens when a star isn't born? An adaptation of Vivek Shraya's hit play and subsequent book, *How To Fail as a Popstar* answers this question with hilarity, vulnerability, a healthy dose of imagination, and of course, music. The series tracks the journey of a young queer brown boy growing up in Edmonton trying to achieve pop stardom and what went *almost* right along the way – from the perspective of the now 40-something trans femme artist that boy became.

SERIES SYNOPSIS

What happens when a star isn't born? An adaptation of Vivek Shraya's hit play and subsequent book, *How To Fail as a Popstar* answers this question with hilarity, vulnerability, a healthy dose of imagination, and of course, music.

As a young queer brown boy growing up in Edmonton, Vivek never quite felt like he belonged. Until one cold morning in his mother's car, he heard a pop song and his life changed - he knew then he needed to be a popstar! Vivek's dream compelled him to keep working to it, through highs and lows – from his high school cafeteria's open mic and local mall singing competitions; to recording an album his producer's way, living with a moody (and inappropriate) manager, and finding creative ways to get his album heard – chasing the dream takes him from Edmonton to Toronto to Paris and back to Edmonton.

This is a story of longing to achieve a dream and what went wrong – and *almost* right! – along the way, as a creative dreamer grows and finds their voice, courage, and sense of self, told from the perspective of the now 40-something trans femme artist that boy became.

Starring Shraya alongside Adrian Pavone (*Star Trek: Discovery*, *Grand Army*), and Chris D'Silva (*Slumberland*, *The Handmaid's Tale*) as Vivek at various stages of life. Written by Shraya, the comedy series is directed by Vanessa Matsui (*Son of a Critch*, *Midnight at the Paradise*) with Shraya co-directing one episode. The cast also includes Ayesha Mansur Gonsalves (*Sort Of*, *Y: The Last Man*, *Star Trek: Discovery*), Nadine Bhabha (*Letterkenny*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *Terror Train*), Arwen Humphreys (*Murdoch Mysteries*, *Run the Burbs*), Eric Johnson (*Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin*, *American Gods*, *Vikings*), Vanessa Matsui (*Ghost BFF*, *Letterkenny*, *Shadowhunters: The Mortal Instruments*), and introducing Aayushma Sapkota in her first role.

EPISODICS

Episode 101 “The Popstar”

Logline: In 1997 Edmonton, a pop song on the radio changes 15-year-old Vivek’s life!

Short Synopsis: In 1997 Edmonton, 15-year-old Vivek has never quite felt like he fit in but hearing a pop song leads to discovering his dream...and his voice.

Episode 102 “The Judge”

Logline: Like all pop icons, Vivek’s journey to superstardom starts at the mall!

Short Synopsis: In the quest to become a popstar, a young Vivek competes at an Edmonton mall in the Youth Talent Quest singing competition in 1997...and ‘98...and ‘99...and 2000; Vivek gets some unexpected advice and has a chance encounter.

Episode 103 “The Producer”

Logline: Vivek records an album!

Short Synopsis: Vivek’s dream of pop stardom comes with a hefty price and a struggle to articulate his vision while working with a hotshot producer.

Episode 104 “The Call”

Logline: Vivek gets a call from the big city!

Short Synopsis: Vivek’s debut album gets him his ticket out of Edmonton! But first he needs to find a way to tell his mom he’s moving to Toronto...

Episode 105 “The Manager”

Logline: Vivek lives in Toronto, almost!

Short Synopsis: Are Vivek’s new manager’s industry know-how, connections, and guidance worth living with her mercurial mood swings and abusive behaviour?

Episode 106 “The Sisters”

Logline: Vivek takes control!

Short Synopsis: After escaping Mama Carla in Mississauga, Vivek’s life with Sabrina in Toronto is going great while his music career is at a standstill. Questioning how to get it moving again, Vivek goes to Chandrika for advice.

Episode 107 “The Record Deal”

Logline: Vivek goes to Paris!

Short Synopsis: After the Tegan and Sara tour, Vivek’s music career has accelerated to Paris and a French record label in 2006 – but do their plans align with Vivek’s dream?

Episode 108 “The Failure”

Logline: On her birthday, Vivek reflects on her dream and failure.

Short Synopsis: Her 40th birthday leads Vivek, now a successful author and creative writing teacher in Edmonton, to reflect on her failure as a popstar.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Present Day Vivek (played by Vivek Shraya)

Vivek (40s) is a trans university professor living in Edmonton. She is glamorous and even successful by some measures but beneath her confidence is a deep mourning for her failed dream: to become a popstar. This failure causes her to be self-deprecating and insecure about who she is in the world and what she has to offer.

Teen Vivek (played by Chris D'Silva) / Adult Vivek (played by Adrian Pavone)

Vivek (mid teens-mid 20s) is a shy, queer brown boy who inadvertently falls in love with music through the music at his religious organization, and in junior high, where he learns that singing can make him more popular. He decides to become a popstar—which he pursues relentlessly by covering Alanis and NSYNC at West Edmonton Mall talent competitions, recording a ridiculously overpriced debut album, moving to Toronto, engaging the help of an abusive manager, and even signing a record deal with a boutique label in Paris. But despite his hard work and talent, Vivek is painfully forced to learn the truth about meritocracy as his dream never comes true.

Dream Vivek (played by Vivek Shraya)

Dream Vivek (ageless) is the realization of Vivek's teenage dreams. She is a global, angelic, cake-loving popstar, a brown Madonna, who dazzles in top to bottom gold. At all times, she is the driving force behind Teen / Adult Vivek's sometimes unpredictable and rash decisions.

Chandrika (played by Ayesha Mansur Gonsalves)

Chandrika (60s) is Vivek's opinionated and fashionable mom. She is religious and proud of her culture. Like many immigrant parents, she is concerned about Vivek's education. But she is also completely enchanted by Vivek's voice and finds herself going against her sense of responsibility as a parent by supporting Vivek's dreams in unexpected and beautiful ways.

Teen Sabrina (played by Aayushma Sapkota) / Sabrina (played by Nadine Bhabha)

Sabrina (mid teens, mid 20s-40s) is an optimistic and "take no bs" magazine editor in Toronto. She has been best friends with Vivek since junior high school. She is one of the first people in Vivek's life to see and believe in Vivek's talent. She also never hesitates to tell it to him straight; she is his moral compass. She and Vivek develop an unconventional romantic relationship but this cracks when Vivek's ambition gets the better of him. Despite this, they continue to play a significant role in each others' lives as adults.

Matt G (played by Eric Johnson)

Matt G (early 30s) is the first music industry professional to discover Vivek (at a mall talent competition). A rockstar in his heyday, he's now Edmonton's go-to music producer. He knows Vivek is the next big thing and he also knows exactly what Vivek is going to need to get to the next level: a Matt G-produced album. Arguably well-intentioned, Matt G's ego and inability to listen steers Vivek away from himself.

Mama Carla (played by Arwen Humphreys)

Carla (late 30s) represents all the hottest names in the Canadian music industry and now wants to represent Vivek. She loves a leopard print and is seemingly well connected and loud in all the ways Vivek is not and thinks he needs. But sometimes this "loudness" ends up being more harmful for him than helpful.

PRODUCTION NOTES / Q&A

Shooting locations

Toronto (Christie Pits, Little Italy, Danforth, Humewood, Downtown Queen West), Mississauga (The Sheridan Centre, Radisson Hotel)

Shooting dates

January 17 - February 4, 2023

About the show

What is HOW TO FAIL AS A POPSTAR about?

VIVEK SHRAYA: *How To Fail As A Popstar* is about a young queer brown boy from Edmonton who falls in love with music and embarks upon an epic journey to become a popstar--but doesn't succeed! It's a story about owning one's failures.

VANESSA MATSUI: *How to Fail as a Popstar* is a short series based on Vivek Shraya's misadventures on her way to almost pop stardom, it really beautifully explores the waves that her career went on and why it didn't happen the way she had hoped.

Where did the story come from? Is this a true story?

VIVEK: The story is based on my own experience as a musician who has struggled in the Canadian music industry. I was working on a novel in 2017, also about the music industry, called *The Subtweet* and was reading a lot of music biographies at the time for research. I fell in love with this genre and wondered if I could write my own music biography, but I realized quickly that music biographies require one foundational element: success. So I started to wonder how and where I could tell an anti-success story and theatre immediately came to mind. In 2020, a few weeks before lockdown, I miraculously debuted *How To Fail As A Popstar* at Canadian Stage for twelve nights.

VANESSA: It's TV so you change things for dramatic purposes but the thematic core and key turning points are taken from Vivek's life. Working directly with Vivek and having her on set was such a blessing - I could interpret the story from my own lens but having her there to share her lived experience and answer questions about details I wouldn't know was extremely helpful.

What is different between the play and the series?

VIVEK: The biggest difference between the play and the series is that the play is a one person show, so all the characters are played by me, whereas in the series, we have amazing, talented actors bringing this story to life.

How does the show include and reflect diverse people?

VIVEK: I'm very proud of how BROWN this show is, and also brown in ways we haven't seen as much in media before--like featuring a queer and later, trans, protagonist or a fashionable mom who doesn't have her hair in a bun and isn't always wearing a sari. I also love that this show doesn't beat the audience over the head with identity labels or trauma the way "diverse stories" often have to. The protagonist is never shown being at odds with his and her identities, and these identities (ie queer, bi, trans) are barely named. At all times, Vivek is Vivek and the people in Vivek's life see and love Vivek for who Vivek is at that moment in time.

About failure

A major theme in the show is failure, is this story relatable because we all experience failure?

VIVEK: I think we all experience failure, but more importantly, we don't always allow ourselves or each other the room to acknowledge it. There is a strong cultural tendency to celebrate and even push for immediate resilience. One of the most bizarre reactions to the title of my play has been people listing my accolades or parroting my bio back to me, to prove to me that I haven't failed. And I do think there are good intentions at play but I also think we don't know how to create space for disappointment, for mourning--and that's what I wanted to create with this story.

VANESSA: Yes. Absolutely. Who hasn't experienced failure? But what is interesting about the show is that it GOES THERE. Most biopics just gloss over the failure parts and in the end the hero gets what they want and triumphs. Without spoiling: That doesn't happen here. I think if people are being honest about how their dreams weren't quite realized or just how adulthood takes you into different directions, I think that this will resonate with a large audience.

What is your definition of failure?

VIVEK: Failure is having a goal or dream or task and not achieving it.

VANESSA: It's not learning the lesson that you could from the situation. I think I've really reframed failure in my own life and simply put: you're going to fail, that's part of life. If you're doing something that involves risk, you're going to jump and not always land, but I think the real failure, and it's cliché but true, would be to not even try.

About the music

What's your relationship to music?

VIVEK: Music is the love of my life. I'm not religious but music is how I experience "god"--that feeling of something more than me, bigger than me. I'm obviously biased but I think music is the greatest artform.

VANESSA: When I was a kid I went to so many concerts! I was seeing live shows twice a week, so now I feel like I've concerted myself out but I'll go to a concert if a friend invites me. But this show has been a nice way to bring music back into my life.

Some favourite songs from the cast include:

'90s Jams

None of Your Business - Salt-N-Pepa
Whatta Man - Salt-N-Pepa
Shoop - Salt-N-Pepa
Gangsta's Paradise - Coolio featuring L.V.
Finally - Cece Peniston

Songs to Sing in the Shower

Run to You - Whitney Houston
I Have Nothing - Whitney Houston
You Oughta Know - Alanis Morissette
Murder in High-Heels - Kiss
Bad Reputation - Joan Jett & the Blackhearts
Somebody to Love - Queen
Stronger - Britney Spears

Hype Up Songs

Run the World (Girls) - Beyoncé
You Oughta Know - Alanis Morissette
The Baddest - K/DA
Code Red - AC/DC
Can You Feel It - The Jackson 5
Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight) - ABBA
Higher - VINCINT featuring Alex Newell

CAST BIOS

Vivek Shraya | ‘Present Day Vivek’ and ‘Dream Vivek’

Vivek Shraya is an artist whose body of work crosses the boundaries of music, literature, visual art, theatre, TV, film, and fashion.

She is a Canadian Screen Award winner and a Polaris Music Prize nominee, and her best-selling book *I’m Afraid of Men* was heralded by Vanity Fair as “cultural rocket fuel.” She is also the founder of the award-winning publishing imprint VS. Books, which supports emerging BIPOC writers.

Vivek has been a brand ambassador for MAC Cosmetics and Pantene. She is a director on the board of the Tegan and Sara Foundation, and her CBC Gem Original Series, *How to Fail as a Popstar*, is launching this fall.

Adrian Pavone | ‘Adult Vivek’

Born and raised in Scarborough, Adrian hails from the world of student films and amateur theatre. The majority of their education was in Psychology and Performance arts at the University of Toronto. They currently train at LB Acting Studio.

Thank you to Monika, Dylan and Graham, Caroline, Laura, Vanessa, and of course, to Vivek.

Selected credits: *The Boys: GenV*, Amazon Studios (2023); *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Canadian Stage (2022); *Others*, OPC/Casey House (2022); *Last Supper*, Cosmic Hero Productions (2022); Netflix's *Grand Army* (2020); CBS' *Star Trek: Discovery* (2020); *Flood*, Canadian Film Centre (2019, TIFF, VIFF, FNC, Inside Out).

Chris D’Silva | ‘Teen Vivek’

Chris was always interested in acting from a young age, where he would volunteer in school plays and other community performances. As years went by, he continued by applying to different acting schools, while transitioning from stage performances into television and film. Once he got representation, Chris was in numerous commercials, films and tv series as well as roles in animation. Still focused on honing his skills and abilities, he continues taking different acting classes throughout Toronto, keeping his acting passion alive.

Ayesha Mansur Gonsalves | ‘Chandrika’

Ayesha Mansur Gonsalves is a Canadian actress, born and raised in Toronto. She started her professional career as a dancer, training at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center in New York City. After years of performing and creating in both Toronto and New York, Ayesha graduated with a film degree from the City University of New York, Brooklyn College, after which she turned her attention to the craft of acting. She’s been on screens in the US and Canada ever since. She just wrapped the third season of HBO Max/CBC Gem’s award-winning comedy, *Sort Of*, and is set to recur in the third season of Syfy/USA Network’s *Chucky*. Other recurring roles include Sarita Stark in CTV/CW’s *The Spencer Sisters*, Priya Khan in FX’s *Y: The Last Man* and Dr. Adya Livingston in Nat Geo’s *The Hot Zone*. Select guest star roles include *Star Trek Discovery*, *Kim’s Convenience*, *Private Eyes*, and *Designated Survivor*. Select film credits: *Tammy’s Always Dying* starring Felicity Huffman, Brandon Cronenberg’s *Possessor*, and *Don’t Hang Up* starring Wendell Pierce and Lauren Holly. Ayesha is currently in writing mode with her sitcom, *Disagreeable*, based on her loving yet irritable family, *Hendo Eavestroughs*, a web-series where she plays four different women working in an eavestrough call centre, and a multi-disciplinary one-woman show, *Eight Million Stories*. Stay tuned.

Nadine Bhabha | ‘Sabrina’

Nadine Bhabha is an award-winning actor, writer, producer, and poet from Toronto. She recurred on (and wrote for) Canada’s beloved sketch series *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. She also recurs on the hit Crave/Hulu comedy series *Letterkenny* and appeared on *Run The Burbs* and *Hudson & Rex*. She was recently nominated for a Canadian Screen Award for her work in the CBC Gem comedy series *The Communist’s Daughter* and can be seen in the Tubi horror films *Terror Train* and *Terror Train 2*.

Aayushma Sapkota | ‘Teen Sabrina’

Aayushma Sapkota is a 17 year old actress based in Toronto. Her family immigrated to Canada from Nepal in 2010, where she quickly picked up English & French as second languages. She just graduated from her High School AP Program and will be attending the University of Waterloo, where she will major in Mathematics. Aayushma aspires to be both an actress and a software engineer. She was also involved in her high school band, “Interlude”, where she sang and played piano. She is self-taught in guitar, loves watching K Dramas, and is deathly afraid of squirrels!

Eric Johnson | ‘Matt G’

Eric currently stars in the hit HBO Max series *PRETTY LITTLE LIARS: ORIGINAL SIN*. He can next be seen in the Amazon feature *A MILLION MILES AWAY*, opposite Michael Peña and Rose Salazar, which will be released September 15th, 2023. He was last seen in season 3 of Neil Gaiman’s Starz series *AMERICAN GODS*, the History Channel series *VIKINGS*, the Audience Network series *CONDOR*, as well as the feature film *CLIFTON HILL*, which premiered at TIFF 2019. Previously, Eric starred in Universal’s smash hit *FIFTY SHADES FREED* and *FIFTY SHADES DARKER*, for director James Foley, opposite Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan, the TNT / Anonymous Content / Paramount TV series *THE ALIENIST* opposite Daniel Bruhl, Dakota Fanning, and Luke Evans. Past credits include Cinemax’s critically acclaimed series *THE KNICK* for director Steven Soderbergh, *THE GIRLFRIEND EXPERIENCE* opposite Riley Keough, and BBC’s critically acclaimed series *ORPHAN BLACK* opposite Tatiana Maslany.

Arwen Humphreys | ‘Mama Carla’

Arwen Humphreys is a Canadian television actress. Born and raised in Toronto, Arwen has been active in the arts for almost thirty years.

In the late 1990s, Arwen was a staple in the Toronto Comedy Scene. Highlights include performances at *Midnight Howl at The Second City*, *Clinton’s Pirate Video Cabaret*, and as a regular player with *All Canadian Theatresports*.

Arwen is best known for playing Margaret Brackenreid on the iconic Canadian series *Murdoch Mysteries* (CBC), which is currently in production for its seventeenth season. She is also a recurring character on the hit TV Series *Run The Burbs* (CBC, CW) and recently took a murderous turn in *The Plot to Kill My Mother* (Lifetime).

Over the last year, Arwen has been developing a new Medical Drama, *Revolution Med*. She is currently in the process of pitching the show with her co creator and looks forward to bringing that world to life.

Arwen was thrilled to be cast in *How to Fail as a Popstar* and can’t wait for you all to meet Mama Carla.

FILMMAKER BIOS

Vivek Shraya | Series Creator / Executive Producer / Writer / Co-director (episode 107) / Original Songs by

Vivek Shraya is an artist whose body of work crosses the boundaries of music, literature, visual art, theatre, TV, film, and fashion.

She is a Canadian Screen Award winner and a Polaris Music Prize nominee, and her best-selling book *I'm Afraid of Men* was heralded by Vanity Fair as “cultural rocket fuel.” She is also the founder of the award-winning publishing imprint VS. Books, which supports emerging BIPOC writers.

Vivek has been a brand ambassador for MAC Cosmetics and Pantene. She is a director on the board of the Tegan and Sara Foundation, and her CBC Gem Original Series, *How to Fail as a Popstar*, is launching this fall.

Vanessa Matsui | Director / Executive Producer

Vanessa Matsui is a director-actor-writer and *Midnight At The Paradise* is her debut feature which has just been acquired by Paramount+. She is alumnae of the Sundance New Voices Lab where she developed the second season of her critically acclaimed hit web series *Ghost BFF*, which she created, wrote, directed for, and starred in. Over two seasons, *Ghost BFF* was nominated for six Canadian Screen Awards including Best Digital Series and two nominations for Vanessa as an actor, it screened at festivals globally where it has won multiple awards including Best Web Series at the LA International Femme Film Festival. She is currently serving as Executive Producer and series director for Sphere Media's new series *How To Fail As A Pop Star* created by Vivek Shraya. She is also a guest director for *Son Of A Critch* (CBC, Paramount UK).

COMPANY BOILERPLATES

ABOUT SPHERE MEDIA

Sphere Media is one of Canada's preeminent scripted content companies. In current release in English Scripted is the half hour Peabody winning dramedy *Sort Of* (CBC/HBO Max), recently awarded the Rogers Prize for Excellence in Canadian Content at the 2023 Rockie Awards and is the winner of 10 Canadian Screen Awards. The show was cited by Vanity Fair, The Hollywood Reporter, and Rolling Stone magazine as one of the top TV shows in 2021 and 2022. It has been nominated for two GLAAD Media Awards and in 2022 won Program of the Year at the Rockie Awards, the MIPCOM Diversify TV Award for scripted representation of LGBTQ+ and the C21 International Comedy-Drama Award. Also in release is 1920s period drama *The Porter* (CBC/BET+) which was winner of 12 of its 19 Canadian Screen Award nominations, two-time nominated in the Independent Spirit Awards, and nominated for a Primetime Emmy award. Sphere Media has also produced award-winning feature films and documentaries, most recently the feature length documentary *One Of Ours* (CBC/AMC), winner of the DGC Special Jury Prize for Canadian Feature Documentary, 2021 Hot Docs Special Jury Prize as well as the Ron Tibbett Excellence in Filmmaking Award at Indie Memphis Film Festival. Other television credits include *Trickster* (CBC/Sky/Sundance-AMC), named one of Variety's top 25 dramas at MIPCOM 2020 and one of TBI's top 10 hot picks; 4 seasons of the critically acclaimed *Cardinal* (Bell Media/BBC2 & 4/Hulu/Canal+) and International Emmy Award nominee *19-2* (Bell Media). Sphere Media is currently in production with the 3rd season of *Sort Of*, the 4th season of *Transplant* and *The Sticky*, a limited half hour series with Blumhouse and Amazon. Sphere also continues to produce feature films.

About CBC/Radio-Canada

CBC/Radio-Canada is Canada's national public broadcaster. Through our mandate to inform, enlighten and entertain, we play a central role in strengthening Canadian culture. As Canada's trusted news source, we offer a uniquely Canadian perspective on news, current affairs and world affairs. Our distinctively homegrown entertainment programming draws audiences from across the country. Deeply rooted in communities, CBC/Radio-Canada offers diverse content in English, French and eight Indigenous languages. We also deliver content in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Punjabi and Tagalog, as well as both official languages, through Radio Canada International (RCI). We are leading the transformation to meet the needs of Canadians in a digital world.