

One of six articles in a winning series by Ken Fuson of *The Sun*, Baltimore that won the non-deadline writing category of the 1998 ASNE Distinguished Writing Awards.

## *A Stage In Their Lives*

**Sunday June 1, 1997**

**Chapter I: What a show: love, fear, lost dreams, broken hearts. Here's your ticket to the making of a high school musical. The real action takes place offstage – in the drama known as growing up.**

Spellbound she sits, her mother on one side, her boyfriend on the other, as another young woman performs the role that will someday be hers.

Since she was little, Angie Guido has dreamed of standing on stage, playing the Puerto Rican girl who falls in love with the Polish boy named Tony.

Maria.

She will be Maria in *West Side Story*.

*Say it loud and there's music playing.*

"That's me, Mom," she said.

*Say it soft and it's almost like praying.*

It won't be long, Angie thinks as she delights in a touring company production of *West Side Story* at the Lyric Opera House in Baltimore. She and 20 members of the Drama Club from North County High School in Anne Arundel County attend the December show with a few parents. This is a prelude; there is expectant talk they will stage the same show for their spring musical.

Someday soon, Angie hopes, she will own the role that is rightfully hers. She has been a loyal drama club soldier, serving on committees, singing in the chorus when she yearned for a solo, watching lead roles slip away because she didn't look the part. But Maria is short, as she is, and dark, as she is, and more than that, Angie is a senior. This will be her last spring musical.

Her last chance to shine.

But on the very next night, in that very same theater, another girl from North County High sits spellbound, her mother on one side, her best friend on the other.

She, too, is captivated by the Puerto Rican girl with the pretty voice.

She, too, wonders: What if that were me?

Two months later, in the middle of February, two dozen students gather in a dark and cavernous auditorium at North County High School to plan the spring musical.

You don't know them. Not yet.

Find a seat – there, in the middle, close to the stage – and watch.

You will meet two girls. One will have her dream come true, the other won't, and the experience will change them both.

You will meet a boy who can't sing but refuses to quit trying.

You will meet another boy, the leading man, who falls for one of the leading ladies. But so will someone else.

You will meet a girl who wants to be a star, then chooses a new destiny.

Come to the practices. Laugh at their goofy jokes. Encourage them when they flub their lines.

Soon you will know them.

And you will know this:

The high school musical is a rite of passage that will shape – and reveal – the adults they will soon be.

And nothing ever produced on stage can possibly match the drama of growing up.

As he walks to the drama club meeting, Wayne Shipley is worried. He doesn't have a cast chosen. He doesn't have scripts ordered. He doesn't even know what show he's directing – and February is half gone. Opening night is less than eight weeks away.

The 900-seat auditorium roils with after-school mischief. A boy and girl snuggle. Two boys wage a pretend sword fight on stage. Other students animatedly relive the highlights of their just-completed one-act play festival.

"Hey, Ship!" a boy yells.

Mr. Shipley cuts an imposing figure as he stands before the drama club. At 53, he is tall, mostly bald, partial to blue jeans and cowboy boots. He has the strength and thickness of a former middle linebacker and two potent weapons: a gentle smile that calms the most paralyzing case of stage fright, and a terrorizing stare that automatically persuades teen-age boys this would be a smart time to shut up.

"We are behind schedule, which is obvious," he says before leaving. "Let's get with it, guys."

After 30 years of teaching, Mr. Shipley is retiring; this will be his last musical. The students, who adore him, know he has long dreamed of directing *West Side Story* but has always deemed it too challenging. This year,

It's the students who doubt. The touring company's powerful performance at the Lyric last December left many intimidated. How can they possibly do the

acting, singing and dancing demanded – especially when they are a week behind?

“Quiet, everybody.”

A senior walks to the front. She has a radiant smile and a faint limp.

“Quiet!”

Presenting Starr Lucas, 18, the drama club president and the reason Mr. Shipley feels safe leaving two dozen teen-agers alone in a dark auditorium.

“Starr was named appropriately,” he says.

Somehow this girl with the dark blond ponytail and ruby red lipstick became lost in a time warp. Starr is straight off the Berkeley campus, circa 1967: hip-hugging, bell-bottom blue jeans, tie-dyed shirts, a patch on her book bag that says WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS. She drives a blue Volkswagen Beetle with smiley face decals on the windows and says things like, “I’m waiting for a better generation.”

A free spirit without the flightiness, Starr owns a crowded resume – class president four straight years; member of the National Honor Society for two years; president of the Thespians, the drama honor society, for three years. She calls herself the Drama Queen. This year, for the first time in her abundant high school career, Starr will not appear on stage, a prospect that both excites and saddens her. She will be the student director of the spring musical. If there is a spring musical.

“Let’s get to work,” Starr says. “What do we want to do?”

A Chorus Line?

No.

42nd Street?

No.

The Wizard of Oz?

“Oh, puh-leeze,” says Eli Senter, a junior. “If anyone votes for that, I will personally cut their throats.”

When Mr. Shipley feels playful, he affectionately refers to the drama club by another name – “Drama Geek Sissies.” It’s a pre-emptive strike. He knows many North County High students view theater types as loud, weird and effeminate.

Eli wears the Drama Geek Sissy label like a sailor’s tattoo. He is 17, 116 pounds (with clothes), all bony angles and pointed opinions. Never in Eli’s life has a drama teacher had to encourage him to project his voice.

Ask him about the drama club’s reputation among the rest of the student body, and he sneers, “I prefer

not to talk about the podunks and morons who don’t understand art or the theater.”

His high school sits like a factory atop a hill in the northern tip of Anne Arundel County, drawing students from Linthicum, Ferndale and Brooklyn Park.

Five minutes away, planes take off from Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

North County High is a blue-collar school in a suburban county; the neighborhood homes are older and middle-class, with basketball hoops in the driveways and swing sets in the back yards. Surrounding the school are four softball and baseball fields, a football field, a track and several practice fields. Generally, Mr. Shipley says, drama is tolerated as a fine alternative for those poor souls unblessed in athletics. Students who do both are exceptions.

The debate continues.

Seven Brides for Seven Brothers?

No.

“Can we go over *The Sound of Music*?” asks Alanna Clements, a senior.

Everyone groans.

“Wait a minute,” she protests. “There’s a lot of parts and not all of them sing. We could get little kids for the little-kid parts.”

“Little kids have parents and little kids’ parents suck,” Eli says.

Eli wins, Alanna loses. Next case.

“Let’s have a very serious talk about *West Side Story*,” Eli says. “I want to do this play. Mr. Shipley wants to do it.”

“*West Side Story* is too good for us to do poorly,” another boy says. “I think we would do it poorly. Our female to male ratio is about – “

“Twenty to one,” Michele Miller says.

Of the 1,700 students at North County, perhaps 70 have performed in a fall play, the one-acts or the spring musical. About 30 belong to the drama club, and most are girls. Girls head most of the committees. Girls do most of the organizational work. Girls raise most of the money.

But they don’t get most of the parts.

Michele Miller knows there are two great female roles in *West Side Story* – Maria and Anita – and not much else. Because so few boys try out, most land a decent role, while competition is fierce among the girls. Some relegated to the chorus would have a leading role if they were boys.

“If you can sing, you’ll be in it,” she says. “And everyone else isn’t going to get anything.”

A senior, Michele loves to act, but hates to sing.

She and several other girls prefer *Anything Goes*, the Cole Porter comedy set on a cruise ship.

The lines are drawn.

Eli: "There's a couple of really big scenes for girls in *West Side Story*."

Michele: "I can visualize a boat with more people on it than a gang."

Eli: "There's no happy medium here, Michele."

She flicks her hands in the air, dismissing him. "Let's just vote."

Their job this afternoon is to reduce the field to two. They vote in secret, writing on slips of notebook paper.

Starr sits on the floor and counts.

*Anything Goes* – 13.

*West Side Story* – 11.

*The Sound of Music* – 4.

Michele wins, Eli loses. Next case.

But Eli knows he will get another chance. The final decision will come next week, after the dreaded vocal audition. Just thinking about it pains him.

"I can't sing."

When she was 2, Angie Guido sat in the pediatrician's office and heard a familiar song playing over the Muzak system.

"That's Pavawatti," she announced.

The startled doctor looked at her mother.

"Did she say what I think she said?"

Angie has always loved music. Now Rosemary Guido shares her daughter's high hopes for the spring musical. Angie has talked about *West Side Story* since she was a freshman and heard that Mr. Shipley wanted to produce it.

"In her mind, she became Maria," Rosemary says.

Like most of the students, Angie handicaps the competition. If *West Side Story* is picked, her friend Anna Schoenfelder will get a lead role – probably Anita. Mr. Shipley loves Anna. Everyone does. That leaves the role of Maria. Who else but Angie can play her?

Just one other girl: Angela Brown.

"Mom, she's got a beautiful voice," Angie says, "but I'm a senior."

All things being equal, Mr. Shipley favors the seniors. Angela Brown is a junior. She'll have next year to shine.

None of this matters if Angie Guido blows her vocal audition. She has chosen one of her favorite songs – "On My Own" from *Les Misérables*. She's sure she will nail it.

Just like Angie Guido, there's another girl who can see it all. The white dress. The school gym. The bridal shop. She envisions herself in the final scene, cradling Tony's lifeless body, pointing the gun at the gang members and asking, "How many can I kill, Chino? How many – and still have one bullet left for me?"

What if that were me?

Oh, yes, Angela Brown can just see it.

"If I could just have anything to do with that show I'd never have to have anything else to do with drama," she says.

Angela will tell her mother, maybe her best friend and boyfriend, but otherwise her dream of playing Maria stays locked and hidden. She will not call attention to herself; that's not her style. She is 16, a thin girl with long, straight black hair, brown eyes and a pale complexion. She is poised on the cusp between girlishness and womanhood. Most of her clothes have Mickey Mouse on them, she wears a Mickey Mouse watch, and there is a 5-foot painting of Mickey Mouse on her bedroom wall. She puts potato chips inside her sandwiches to make them crunchy. She goes to church every Sunday. She giggles.

She didn't know she could sing until her freshman year when she tried out for Oklahoma! Last year, she sang a solo in *City of Angels*. She loves the way she feels on stage, so special and alive, loves performing so much she can't describe it. It just feels . . . different.

Angela, you could be Maria, her friends say. It's between you and Angie Guido.

Ever the nice girl, Angela shakes her head.

"You don't want to get your hopes up because there are so many talented people," she says.

She will know soon enough. Vocal auditions are tomorrow night.

One by one, execution-style, the victims enter the classroom. They clutch sheets of music and wads of tissue.

I've got a sinus infection.

I have a sore throat. I can't go any higher.

I think I'm sick.

"We've all got the drama flu," one girl explains.

This is audition week. Student ability will be judged in three areas – acting, dancing and singing. How well they do determines what role they will get. The acting and dancing tryouts are fun, but most would rather find a fresh pimple on prom night than sing alone in public.

Tonight they will stand in an empty classroom and audition in front of Starr, Mr. Shipley, Lisa Rolman, a North County teacher and the show's assistant

director, and Neil Ewachiw, the musical director.

Mr. Ewachiw (pronounced e-WALK-q) terrifies them.

He is flamboyant, melodramatic, unpredictable. He speaks as if he is always performing. He will jump from his chair and sprint theatrically to the piano, clapping his hands furiously and shouting, "Sing that again!" During auditions, he will stop students in mid-note and ask them to imitate Elvis, or sing a Christmas carol.

"He's pompous," Eli Senter says, "but he knows his stuff."

Tonight, Mr. Ewachiw wants to hear range. He'll work on quality later.

Unlike the other students, Angela Brown looks forward to her audition. She sings "I Don't Know How to Love Him" from Jesus Christ Superstar in a breathy, pretty soprano.

Mr. Ewachiw is intrigued.

"Would you do me a favor, please? I would love to hear the National Anthem, and I'd like to hear it in a C major."

After she finishes, he asks her to sing the phrase, "And the rockets red glare."

She does.

"Now a D major."

She gulps and sings.

Higher and higher, up the scale they go.

"Could I hear it in an E major? I promise not to kill you."

She sings.

"Now an F major."

Angela takes a deep breath. From someplace deep within her, someplace locked and hidden, a sound comes forth, a sound she never has heard before, and her eyes widen in surprise and wonder.

"Thank you," Mr. Ewachiw says.

Her face red, Angela places a hand to her chest. She is breathing hard. She looks stunned, elated and frightened. The girl who walked into the audition is not the same girl who leaves. She has discovered something about herself.

"I didn't know I could do that."

Mr. Ewachiw flips over her audition sheet and scribbles a note:

Has a high C.

Only 10 boys signed up for the vocal audition, too few to perform West Side Story. What's more, the ones who try out are tentative and off-key. Mr. Ewachiw listens with the expression of a man forced to drink sour milk.

Eli Senter attempts the theme from Oklahoma!, but walks out shaking his head.

"I suck," he says.

Anna Schoenfelder enters, dabbing her red nose with a tissue.

"I feel terrible," she says.

The 17-year-old senior has what Mr. Shipley describes as "the best face for the theater I've ever seen." When the script calls for a femme fatale, Anna gets it – thick blond hair, big blue eyes and dimples you could hide a half dollar in. She also has a full, beautiful voice no cold can diminish.

Mr. Ewachiw turns over Anna's audition sheet.

He draws a star.

It's Angie Guido's turn.

This is it. Her chance to be Maria. Her song, "On My Own," is the heart-wrenching account of a woman's unrequited love.

Angie closes her eyes. She has a rich alto voice, and the words flow effortlessly. When Angie finishes, Mr. Ewachiw asks her to sing it again. Think about the words, Angie. What do they mean?

"There is no music," he says. "There are no notes. Only you."

She closes her eyes.

Without me, this world will go on turning.

A world that's full of happiness  
that I have never known.

"Thank you," Mr. Ewachiw says.

On the back of her audition form, he writes, "Smart. Good instrument. Grown a lot."

One boy is left.

Brian Forte is not like the others. He struts into the music room, wearing a baseball cap turned backward and lugging a guitar over his shoulder. He plops on a desk top, flings a leg over a chair and turns to the piano player.

"You can sit this one out."

Then he plays, "Life by the Drop" by Stevie Ray Vaughan, belting it out in a deep baritone, pounding the guitar. He's confident, relaxed, at home.

The leading man.

Brian is an 18-year-old senior with an FM radio voice, coal black hair and little-boy dimples. He changed the pronunciation of his last name from "Forty" to "For-tay" because, he says, "it sounds more musical." (His parents still use "Forty.") He has played the leading man in North County musicals the past two years and will again this spring.

No one else is even close.

"Thank you," Mr. Ewachiw says after the perfor-

mance is over. "You don't by any chance know 'Frosty the Snowman,' do you?"

Decision time.

Sixteen drama club members form a circle as light from a sunny Friday afternoon pours through the classroom windows. Mr. Shipley and Ms. Rolman, the teachers, remain in the back. As usual, Starr the Drama Queen is in charge.

"I'm getting the impression that some people are for a certain play because they think they'll get a better part," she says. "They're looking out more for themselves than the group. Be open, guys. Look at it for the club, not just for yourselves."

Once again, they debate *West Side Story* vs. *Anything Goes*. With everything else being equal, there is one enormous difference.

"If we do *Anything Goes*, we might not have a music director," Starr says.

"Why?" a girl asks.

"Because Mr. Ewachiw doesn't like the show, and he doesn't want to spend eight weeks of his life working on it," Ms. Rolman says.

Mr. Ewachiw enters late. Four years ago, he taught music at North County High, but was laid off after a year. Now he's getting a doctorate in vocal performance from Catholic University. He serves as musical director because he admires Mr. Shipley, enjoys the students and, as he puts it, "I'd rather work for the drama club than the Board of Ed."

He will help them do *Anything Goes*, if that's what they want, but first he teaches a history lesson.

"In 1957, there were two big musicals. One of the two took all of the awards and made all the money. The *Music Man*. The one that didn't was *West Side Story*. I never understood that. It says to me that the flavor of the day was fluff. My opinion is, as an artist, I want to do art. When it comes to musicals, it doesn't get any better than *West Side Story*."

There is silence. He owns the room.

"It was years ahead of its time. It's a story that's timeless. It's a story that's very timely to your lives. It speaks to us all, and it will for an awfully long time." Sitting under the blackboard, Angela Brown begins to cry.

"There's something else. This is Mr. Shipley's last year, and he's always wanted to do *West Side Story*. It's in your hands."

Eli Senter leaps to his feet.

"Raise your hands," he demands. "*West Side Story*. All in favor."

Each year, some 275 schools and community the-

aters in the country perform *West Side Story*. This year North County High will join them. The vote is almost unanimous.

Afterward, Michele Miller is in tears. She didn't vote. All of it – Starr's introduction, Mr. Ewachiw's speech, the emotional plea for Mr. Shipley – feels staged.

"I think we were manipulated," she says. "We were manipulated. It's ridiculous for this drama club, with so many girls, to do a play with two girls in it."

She's crying for another reason.

"Somebody is going to be very upset when that cast list comes up. And both of them are my friends."

Angie Guido overhears her. Everyone knows the only person standing between her and the role of Maria is Angela Brown.

"But she has another year," Angie says.

"That's not going to make a difference," Michele says. "This is Mr. Shipley's last year. It's not going to matter if you're a senior."

"It makes a difference to me," Angie says. "A huge difference."

After the students leave, the teachers and Starr cast the four lead roles – Tony, Bernardo, Anita and Maria.

Brian Forte, of course, will be Tony.

"There's no question about that," Mr. Shipley says.

Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks gang, is a problem. Nobody stands out. They'll recruit some more boys.

Anna Schoenfelder will be Anita.

"She will be great," Mr. Ewachiw says.

Casting Maria is just as easy. When the choice is finally made, there is no discussion about who has her heart set on the role, or who will be crushed with disappointment, or who has dreamed of playing Maria since that December night when she saw it on stage. Only one question matters: Who can do it best? Mr. Shipley writes the winner's name on a piece of paper.

## THE PLAYERS

Angie Guido – She has a vision of herself in the starring role. But wait: Another girl stands in the way.

Brian Forte – Smooth and confident, he's always the leading man. Will he get his comeuppance this time?

Eli Senter – All bony angles and pointed opinions, he fights for his favorite show. The decision will haunt

him.

Angela Brown – From this demure girl comes an astonishing sound. Is it enough to make her a star?

Starr Lucas – She loves acting. She's the Drama Queen. So why has she taken herself out of the cast?

## **Monday June 2, 1997**

### **Chapter II: Dreams hang by a thread as the cast list is posted. 'Who will I be?' they wonder – a timely question about life itself, not just a high school musical.**

Angie Guido skips breakfast. She's too nervous. The list will be posted today.

First thing this morning, Angie will walk into North County High School and turn left at the main office, then right at the guidance center. She will come to the intersection of two shiny hallways and pause at a bulletin board reserved for drama club news.

She will look for her name on the cast list for West Side Story, the spring musical. Only one role matters: Maria.

"If I don't get it, I'm coming home," she says.

"Call first," her mother replies as Angie heads out. "Break a leg."

Shortly before 7 a.m. on this February school day, Starr Lucas, a senior and the drama club president, begins her trip to the bulletin board, gripping a folder as if it contains state secrets.

The cast list is inside.

Maneuvering through a maze of hallways and classrooms, Starr swivels as she walks – there's a problem with her legs – but she must hurry. When that first bell rings, 40 cast members are going to make a frantic dash to the bulletin board.

Brent McMullen, an apple-cheeked freshman, arrives first.

"I'm a Jet!" he shouts.

Angela Brown, a 16-year-old junior, is in the next wave, bursting with anticipation. She has been excited since the vocal audition when she sang a high C for the first time. This morning, she couldn't wait for school to start, gulping a strawberry Pop Tart and rushing out the door.

She looks.

"Ohmigosh," she whispers to herself. "Ohmigosh. Ohmigosh."

Maria.

Friends hug and congratulate her. She is stunned.

More students arrive, clumping around the list,

searching for their part.

"Who the hell's Snowboy?" a freshman asks.

"I'm Action!" sophomore Rob Mackin announces. Then he pauses, perplexed, his voice a mumble. "Whoever that is."

"I'm old," says Lorraine Eakin, a junior who is cast as a teacher. "They always make me old. They say it's because I look mature."

The students look down the hall. Here comes Angie Guido. Everyone knows how much she wants the role of Maria.

One look.

Instantly she collapses into the arms of a girlfriend and begins to sob.

Students turn their heads, unsure how to react. Angela Brown slips down another hallway, out of sight. Friends touch her gently, mouthing "Congratulations." Thanks, she whispers awkwardly.

"I've got to call my Mom," she tells a friend. Starr, the drama club president, approaches Angie Guido.

You have a great part – Rosalia, Maria's friend – and you will sing in several songs. You're our vice president. We need you.

"I'm not doing this," Angie says.

When Angie's boyfriend, Mark Miller, arrives, she buries her head in his coat. Her face is puffy, her green eyes now red-rimmed and full of tears. A senior, she has worked four years to play a role like Maria. This isn't fair. Mark eventually escorts her down the hall, away from the bulletin board, and out the school doors.

Starr watches, feeling equal measures of empathy, concern and irritation. Wayne Shipley, the drama club sponsor, tells the students repeatedly that every role is crucial, from the stage crew sweeper to the leading lady. They are a team. Angie should know that.

Besides, she's not the only girl who lost her dream.

Four years ago, when she was a freshman, Starr Lucas announced to her family that her destiny was decided:

"You're going to see me on Broadway. I'm going to be a star. I don't even have to change my name."

Starr was a born performer, taking dance lessons since she was 4 and acting in church skits. In high school, she heard Mr. Shipley explain the magic of the theater: The idea is to paint a picture so realistic that the audience experiences a willing suspension of disbelief. Do it well enough, and you can make time stand still.

Starr was hooked. She appeared in 14 consecutive plays, one-acts and musicals. She started calling herself the Drama Queen.

“She seeks the light,” Mr. Shipley says.

But Starr rarely landed a starring role. She learned it’s not enough to have blond hair and ruby red lips and a movie-star smile.

“Mom,” she said, “there’s just not many parts for people who walk funny.”

She’ll talk about it. She doesn’t mind.

“I have cerebral palsy,” Starr explains.

She smiles, a radiant smile, almost angelic, as if this nervous system disorder is a gift from the heavens. She smiles, almost laughing, as she explains how her leg muscles tighten, causing the hitch in her walk. “I have no oomph,” she says. She smiles again, sanguine, as she says the condition could stay the same or worsen. She could, in fact, need a wheelchair someday. This, too, merits a smile.

“I’ve always known there was a purpose for me,” she says.

So the Drama Queen selected a new kingdom. Instead of seeing her name in lights, Starr now sees herself in the shadows, behind the curtains. She will direct. She plans to major in theater in college next year and has applied to three schools. She’s waiting to hear back.

When she tells Mr. Shipley her new dream, he proposes a deal – she can help direct, but that means she will not have an acting role.

How can a young woman who seeks the light willingly put herself in the dark?

“She tossed and she turned,” says her mother, Phyllis Lucas. “Then she said, ‘If this is the direction my life is going to take, then I have to do this.’”

Starr sees it as logical.

“You can still direct in a wheelchair,” she says, beaming.

Wearing a trench coat and his trademark fedora – he owns a half dozen – Eli Senter, a skinny 17-year-old junior, heads toward the cast list. Somebody jokes that he’s not on it.

He whirls.

“There’s too few guys,” he says loudly, as he says most things. “He can’t not cast me.” Eli figures he will be one of the gang members, a Jet or a Shark, a role in which he can act and not sing.

“I’ve never sang before,” he says. “If I had a choice, I wouldn’t. For the audience’s sake.”

He looks at the cast list. His name is at the top.

“You’re Riff,” a boy tells Eli.

“Riff’s cool,” a girl says.

It’s not until later that Eli realizes that Riff is the leader of the Jets gang; that Riff sings the first song of the entire show; that Riff sings three songs.

When he learns this, Eli does something entirely out of character.

He becomes very still.

When the phone doesn’t ring, Rosemary Guido assumes the news is good. Finally, daughter Angie has gotten a break.

Always, it seems, Angie is the second choice.

When she was 3 years old, Angie wanted to be Mary in the Christmas pageant at nursery school. Another girl was selected; Angie wore a donkey suit. Come show time, she squeezed between Joseph and Mary and plopped in front of the manger, stealing the scene.

This is different. Rosemary never has seen her daughter want something so much. It’s as if Angie will judge her high school years – maybe her entire life – based on what she finds out this morning.

Sonny, the family dog, barks.

Rosemary looks outside. Angie and Mark approach the house.

Oh, no.

Angie looks shocked, as if somebody died. Her mother hugs her. They cry.

“That’s it,” Angie says. “I give up.”

After she composes herself, Angie is adamant. She is not returning to school today so people can stare at her. She might as well stamp DONKEY on her forehead.

And there is no way she is getting on that stage and watching another girl perform her role. They can do the musical without her. Boyfriend Mark, cast as a Jet, feels the same.

“Angie,” her mother says, trying desperately to comfort her, “it just wasn’t your time. It wasn’t your time to shine.”

Then Mrs. Guido calls the school.

Just before first period begins, Brian Forte ambles down the hall, toward the drama club bulletin board, not a care in the world.

A senior, Brian has landed the lead role in the past two North County High musicals. He may, in fact, be the only boy in a school of 1,700 students who can sing the right note on command.

Brian presents the clean-cut good looks of a Boy Scout, the deep-throated voice of a baseball announcer and the devil-may-care soul of a beatnik. Friends say he’s one of the most talented students but seldom pushes himself. He would rather sit in the Honey Bee Diner

in Glen Burnie, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, reading Kurt Vonnegut.

Getting by.

“Hey,” he jokes, hands turned up. “I’m a slacker.”

Music is his passion. He told his father last year that he might move to New York City after graduation and play his guitar in the subway for spare change. Now he doesn’t know. Maybe he’ll go to a community college, maybe not. Something will pop up.

As Brian chats, friends notice he hasn’t even peeked at the cast list. He laughs, glances over and resumes talking. His expression remains pure nonchalance. So he will be Tony in *West Side Story*. So he will be the leading man for the third straight year. So . . . ho-hum.

Later, Mr. Shipley pulls Brian aside.

Brian, he says, this will be the hardest show you’ve ever done. This can’t be like the other years. You can’t wait until the last week and then let your talent bail you out.

“You’re going to have to get your ass in gear,” he tells him.

The boyish grin. The what-me-worry slouch. The reassuring pat on the arm.

“OK, Mr. Shipley,” Brian replies.

Whatever.

Mr. Shipley stays away from the bulletin board.

“He hides,” Starr says.

He has plenty to do. While the students ponder their roles, Mr. Shipley wonders how they will be ready in time for the April 18-19 shows. He has yet to cast Bernardo and the other Sharks. He will do that tomorrow night, at the first practice.

This isn’t the way he prefers to operate, but if Mr. Shipley has learned anything in 30 years of teaching, it’s how to adjust.

“High school theater is more about high school than the theater,” he says.

This will be Mr. Shipley’s last show. At 53, he’s retiring at the end of the school year. “I’m tired,” he says. He has other hobbies – drag racing stock cars, raising horses, helping run Actors Company Theatre, which produces community shows. But for the next two months he will focus so much on *West Side Story* that his wife rarely will see him.

Mr. Shipley has taught at the school since Andover and Brooklyn Park schools merged seven years ago (he taught in Andover before). He helped design the 900-seat auditorium; he considers it one of the nicest theaters in Anne Arundel County.

He remains oblivious to the daily dramas of high school life. He does not know who just broke up, or who got invited to the junior prom, or who had her heart set on playing Maria. His teaching philosophy is time-tested: This, too, shall pass.

So Mr. Shipley is surprised when he walks into the principal’s office and a secretary hands him a pink message slip:

“Call Angie Guido’s mother. She says you’ll know why.”

Angie and Mark skip school all day, watching movies at her house. The phone rings constantly.

Angie, are you all right?

Angie, we want you back.

Angie, we love you.

That night, while Angie works at Blockbuster Video, fellow seniors Michele Miller and Anna Schoenfelder visit.

“You’ve got to be in it,” Michele says.

Angie is confused.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Just the week before, Michele had cried when the drama club selected *West Side Story* as the spring musical over *Anything Goes*. How quickly she has recovered from that disappointment.

“I’m fine,” says Michele, who is cast as one of the Jet’s girlfriends, a minor role. “I just wanted a part.” It’s different for Angie. She has invested everything – her hopes, her pride – in this role. Couldn’t they have lowered Maria’s high notes to match her alto voice? Now Angie will finish high school without singing a solo. Don’t they understand? This shall not pass quickly.

But it must. The word is out: If Angie skips the first practice tomorrow night, she will lose the part.

Mr. Shipley tries three times to return her mother’s phone call. He never hears back.

First thing after school, Angela Brown heads to the Marley Station Mall and buys the *West Side Story* CD. All night long, over and over, she listens to it, savoring lyrics that seem written just for her:

*Good night, good night,*

*Sleep well and when you dream,*

*Dream of me.*

*Tonight.*

She had dreamed of playing Maria. Now she will.

What happens when your dream comes true?