

Tuesday June 3, 1997

A Stage in Their Lives

By Ken Fuson

Chapter III: Two acts. Fifteen scenes. Thirteen songs. 'Let's try to get through this without hating each other.'

They march in place, punching the air like prize-fighters, their feet slamming the stage to the pulsating disco beat.

Dressed in gym clothes, the cast of *West Side Story* begins tonight's first practice at North County High School in Anne Arundel County with an aerobic workout. They must get in shape for the dance numbers.

But foreboding has replaced the normal adrenalin rush.

Angie Guido is missing.

When another girl was cast as Maria, the lead role, Angie bolted school for the day and tearfully vowed to skip the spring musical. Friends pleaded with her to reconsider. If she's not here tonight, the director will replace her. Nobody wants that.

Five minutes pass ... the music pounds.

Ten minutes ... the students march.

Fifteen minutes ... and every head turns.

Toward the rear of the stage, slipping through a back door, Angie and her boyfriend walk in and find their places.

Everyone exhales.

TWO ACTS.

Fifteen scenes.

Thirteen songs.

Two months to go.

"You realize when opening night is?" Wayne Shipley, the director, asks the 40 students on stage. "Look at your calendar."

April 18 – and they are a week behind.

The days bleed into each other, a melange of practices, voice lessons and dance rehearsals.

"The music comes first, at the expense of everything else," Mr. Shipley says. "They don't realize how hard this is going to be."

The students are sprinting toward a faraway conclusion that tonight looks as gray and undefined as a Polaroid photograph at first snap.

WEEK ONE. THE MUSIC ROOM.

Wearing a blue Mickey Mouse T-shirt, Angela Brown, the 16-year-old junior who will play Maria, enters for her voice lesson with Neil Ewachiw, the show's music director.

Push the sound from your abdomen, he tells her. Try singing the word "tonight" as if it's pronounced "tuh-nut." It will open your throat.

A soaring soprano fills the room, stronger than the high C Angela reached during her vocal audition.

That was the voice of a little girl, pretty and fragile.

Mr. Ewachiw (pronounced e-WALK-q) now hears something different.

"It was huge," he recalls. "Just huge."

BRIAN FORTE, THE DEVIL-MAY-CARE senior cast as Tony, the leading man, finishes reading the *West Side Story* script. He turns to Anna Schoenfelder, who will play Anita.

"I get to die," he says excitedly.

"Brian, I don't want you to die," she replies.

"I want to. I've never died before."

She laughs, her smile framed by deep dimples. Brian describes Anna as nice, smart, easy to tease. "She makes you feel good about yourself."

They are pals.

"I have always liked Brian," Anna says. "He's different from all the other guys. He's really sweet. He's so open with his feelings."

They make a terrific couple – the leading man and the prettiest girl. They dated for a short time last year, then stopped. Both agreed they didn't want to risk harming their friendship.

Brian leaves for his vocal lesson. He's a baritone singing a tenor's role.

Could it be? Yes, it could.

Something's coming, something good ...

The notes are too high. Brian looks frustrated and surprised.

"This isn't going to be easy."

THE CAST IS COMPLETE.

Mr. Shipley finally finds enough boys to cast the Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang in *West Side Story*.

Pat Reynolds, a senior, will be Bernardo, the gang leader. Another senior, Eric Schoenbachler, will play Anxious – an appropriate name. This is Eric's first musical; he only tried out after some girls talked him into skipping lacrosse season.

"I used to have something against drama people,"

he says. "They're kind of obnoxious, frankly. Usually in school, you try not to be around them.

"The more I'm around them, the better friends I get to be, but I'll never be a drama person."

For the mambo dance, Eric is paired with Natalie Colley, a tall sophomore with hypnotically large eyes.

He and Natalie greet each other suspiciously. They complain about each other's dance technique. She calls for detente.

"Let's try to get through this without hating each other."

A few weeks later, sitting in the auditorium, Natalie rests her feet on Eric's shoulders. He ties her shoes together.

A week after that, they begin dating.

A week after that, Natalie confides to a girlfriend: "Eric is so cute. He wants to have four kids – and so do I!"

ANOTHER DAY. THE MUSIC ROOM.

"Did it really sound OK?" Angela Brown asks.

Do I sound like Maria?

"Trust me, if it sounds bad, I'll tell you," Mr. Ewachiw says. "It'll be very different for you. You can't be afraid of it. Imagine when a snake sheds its skin. It feels weird.

"The singing you've done all your life, it was good when you were young. Now you've got to grow up."

WEEK TWO.

The Jets stand to one side, the Sharks to the other. In the middle, Mr. Ewachiw leads them through the quintet. It's a difficult song with five different parts, the musical equivalent of a rumble.

"Are we going to the mall?" Mr. Ewachiw shouts. "Are we going to a retirement home? Are we going to a quilting bee? Ladies and gentleman, I would like to hear the Jets and the Sharks going to a rumble! I want the AT-TI-TUDE!"

The music begins. And ...

Nothing.

"It sounds like the Sharks are going to sit down with a box of Mallomars and watch 'Gilligan's Island,' " Mr. Ewachiw says.

He sings the parts as loud as he can, like an opera singer on steroids.

"Can you sing it louder than me? I DON'T THINK SO!"

Again, the music begins.

Again, nothing.

It's the musical equivalent of a train wreck. The boys are nervous, timid, self-conscious. This is a test for Mr. Ewachiw's overwhelming confidence.

"I feel like one of my biggest strengths is to take ability that is dreadful and raise it up to mediocrity," he says.

He challenges them:

"Sing it as loud as you can. This time with the right notes."

He goads:

"That was a lovely A. But what we need is a C."

He insults:

"Pitch is a location, it's not an area."

Nothing.

Stomachs have rumbled more menacingly than these guys.

THINK OF AN ASSEMBLY LINE. IN THE beginning weeks, stage-crew members construct sets after school. On stage, actors rehearse scenes. In a dressing room, two girls practice their lines. In a hallway, dancers stretch.

Mr. Shipley is the foreman. He says his job is to put pictures on the stage. The students do everything else.

But he's worried. The boys are goofing off too much. Actors don't know their lines. The dance sequence is a struggle. Musically – well, they'll need a miracle.

This is the reason the 53-year-old Mr. Shipley has avoided West Side Story during a 30-year teaching career that will end with his retirement this spring.

"I may not live through this," he says.

And he has yet to hear Eli Senter.

ANOTHER NIGHT. ON STAGE.

The performers will sing every number, one after another, so Mr. Shipley and Mr. Ewachiw can hear how much work needs to be done.

Junior Eli Senter – Riff – has the first song:

When you're a Jet,

You're a Jet all the way ...

Sitting in the auditorium, cast members cringe. This is dog-howling bad. Eli throws his fedora off the stage. His long hair, parted in the middle, frames his thin face like parenthetical brackets. He tries again. Horrible. He tosses his script off the stage. Again, he tries. Terrible. He fidgets with his shirt.

Nothing helps. He's so far off-key you would need a search party to find him. He's gulping air like a drowning man.

"I suck," Eli says, his face flush. "I sucked last week

and I'll suck two weeks from now."

When he's done, Brian Forte and Angela Brown – Tony and Maria – approach the stage for their duet in "Tonight."

Tonight, tonight

The world is wild and bright ...

Angela's voice is captivating. Students doing their homework look up in amazement. Where did this sound come from? The soaring soprano that filled the music room now fills the entire auditorium, up there in the glass-breaking stratosphere.

Everyone applauds when she finishes.

"That was awesome!" Brian says.

For Angie Guido, the senior who lost the part, and with it her dream of playing Maria, this is too much. She still pictures herself in this role, on this stage, basking in this applause.

She runs out of the auditorium in tears.

TWO ACTS.

Fifteen scenes.

Thirteen songs.

Five weeks to go.

Late one night, after another frustrating practice, Mr. Shipley escorts senior Starr Lucas, the student director, to her car. The parking lot is mostly empty; the brown-brick high school mostly dark. Down the hill, traffic is light on Baltimore-Annapolis Boulevard.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I think it's a mess," she says.

"Yeah, I know," he agrees. "But it's always a mess."

Starr smiles, shimmering in the streetlight. Pile on the jobs – president of the drama club, president of the Thespians, president of her senior class – but you can't crack the Drama Queen.

Nothing gets to her. Not anymore. Not since she was in sixth grade and doctors operated on her legs to relieve pressure on her knees. Starr has cerebral palsy.

She was placed in a cast from her hips to her toes, with a metal bar stretched between her knees to keep her legs spread wide. So wide she couldn't fit through the front door at home; her family had to haul her in sideways, like a sofa. She remained in bed, imprisoned in that cast, for six weeks.

"I don't think she thought life could get much worse," her mother, Phyllis, says.

So what if Mr. Shipley is nervous, and the show is in trouble, and her senior adviser is on her back, and she'll have to stay up until 1 a.m. to finish her homework?

She can handle it.

When she gets home from practice, a letter awaits her.

Dear Starr,

On behalf of Shenandoah University, it is my pleasure to inform you of your acceptance as a candidate for a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre ...

She has been waiting for this. The Winchester, Va., school has a conservatory where she can study theater. But the cost is an astronomical \$18,000 a year. Her father works for Giant Food Inc.; her mother cares for her sister and baby brother.

She'll need help to afford the tuition.

"I can't do anything about it, so why worry?" she says.

But she does.

ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK, LISA Rolman, a North County High teacher and the assistant director, escorts a few cast members to second-hand stores to shop for costumes.

Angie Guido joins one of the trips, but her heart isn't in it. Since losing the role of Maria, Angie has ridden an emotional see-saw – up one day, down the next. This isn't like her. Her friends are concerned.

"I don't like rehearsals," she says. "I don't feel like doing anything anymore. I feel like graduating and not watching other people do wonderful things. I don't even feel like going to school anymore."

She knows Angela Brown has a terrific voice, but it's hard to watch her.

"I guess she's better," Angie says.

Then she sighs, heavy with resignation.

"Yeah, she's better."

ANOTHER NIGHT. ON STAGE.

Brian Forte and Angela Brown practice the scene in which Tony and Maria first meet.

They hold hands.

"Uh-oh," a girl says. "Brian just violated the mandatory four-foot no-contact zone."

Angela Brown's boyfriend will arrive soon to give her a ride home. He graduated from North County High last year, and he might not appreciate seeing another boy holding hands with his sweetheart. He is the kind of boyfriend who saves napkins from restaurants he and Angela visit.

One night after practice, Brian pulls the boyfriend aside.

"I'm going to have to be in the play and be roman-

tic and close to her. Is that OK?"

Sure, the boyfriend says, then smiles nervously.

"It's just a play," he says.

He should relax. Brian has his eye on someone else.

BOYS.

They joke, they gawk, they jump on each other's backs. They flit around like fruit flies.

"It's so difficult to work with guys, because they won't stop talking," says junior Katie Collins, who plays Anybodys, the tomboy who wants to be a Jet. "When they don't understand something, they just keep talking."

Mr. Shipley is fed up.

Usually one or two student leaders emerge to police the ranks. That hasn't happened this year. He'll have to take charge.

"Every time you laugh at somebody or poke fun at somebody, look at the calendar and think about whose butts are on the line here," he says.

"Yours."

TWO ACTS.

Fifteen scenes.

Thirteen songs.

Four weeks to go.

This is the last practice before spring break in March. Tonight Mr. Shipley wants to see all of Act I on stage.

An hour and a half later, Mr. Ewachiw still is working with Eli Senter and the Jets on the opening song.

When you're a Jet ...

There is panic in Mr. Ewachiw's voice.

"This is a tune that for the last 40 years people have had in their heads," he says. "It's also the first song of the musical. I cannot share my gripping fear – "

"You don't have to share!" Eli interrupts, shouting. "I've got my own gripping fear!"

The brash facade is gone now. The normally confident Eli looks lost. Before he sings, he braces himself as if he's about to take a cannon ball to the gut. Then he opens his mouth and misses the cue.

"It sounds successively worse," he says. "It's proportional. The closer it gets, the less I can sing. I don't know why they gave me this role."

He got it because the teachers trust him. Nobody tries harder than Eli. Nobody practices more. Nobody else would suffer this much humiliation.

"He won't give up," Mr. Shipley says.

Besides, it's not as if Eli is the only singer struggling. Brian Forte's voice cracks in the upper reaches of his "Tonight" duet with Angela Brown.

"I'm not sure I can do this," he says.

Angela, too, is frustrated. What a roll she has been on – hitting the high C, getting cast as Maria, gaining confidence in her voice – but tonight she hurries off the stage, finds a seat by herself and frowns.

"Mr. Ewachiw kept cuing us too early," she says. "We skipped over tons of dialogue."

She is fearful. What good is it to play Maria – to realize your dream – if the final product is terrible? She has more at stake than she realized.

But on this, the last practice before spring break, there is one reason to hope, one song that looks and sounds exactly as it should.

All night, in the hallway, Ms. Rolman and a half-dozen girls worked on "America," the bouncy song in which one of the characters, a Puerto Rican girl named Rosalia, longs for her homeland and is teased by Anita and the others.

Rosalia: I like the city of San Juan.

Anita: I know a boat you can get on.

When it's over, Mr. Shipley is smiling.

"Consider that the show stopper, guys," he says.

Mr. Ewachiw also applauds. He compliments Anna Schoenfelder, the senior who plays Anita, then turns his attention to the other girl, the one who sang Rosalia's part.

"Very, very nice," he says, touching her arm.

For the first time in weeks, Angie Guido smiles.

THEY DESERVE A WEEKEND NIGHT off, a respite from the dreadful musical. They need to see a goofy movie like "Liar, Liar" and act like teen-agers again.

Twenty students head to the theater. Brian Forte and Anna Schoenfelder sit next to each other.

The leading man and the prettiest girl.

Could it be? Yes, it could.

Something's coming, something good ...

They don't hold hands, or even share a box of popcorn, but here in the theater Brian and Anna both feel it, an affection that goes beyond friendship. Just sitting here, without saying a word, both sense that their relationship is changing.

Brian: "I've always had extremely strong feelings for Anna. Always."

Anna: "Last year the friendship thing got in the way. This year it's different."

Could it be? Yes, it could.

Something's coming, something good ...

If only real life worked like this: Sing a song and fall in love.

But real life is different.

Sometimes you're not the only boy who falls for the prettiest girl.

Sometimes your best friend does, too.

Wednesday June 4, 1997

Chapter IV: Romantic Rumbings. Crisis of confidence. Teen-age angst. Other dramas unfold behind the curtain – putting a friendship to the test

On any other night, Brian Forte and his best friend would talk about anything – music, school, girls. Tonight they just stare straight ahead.

There's too much to say, so they say nothing. Only the sound of a car stereo breaks the silence.

Finally, Brian lowers the volume.

"Things are getting pretty complex, aren't they?" he asks.

"Makes life more interesting, don't you think?" his friend replies.

That does it. All the pressure of the past five weeks – struggling through the spring musical, preparing for high school graduation, discovering that he and this friend have fallen for the same girl – finally erupts.

And Brian Forte, the happy-go-lucky leading man, reacts so strongly even he is surprised.

They're all losing it.

"NO!" he screams.

Opening night is one month away – April 18. And everyone involved in the production of *West Side Story* at North County High School knows they need at least three more months.

Several of the songs are shaky. The set remains unfinished. The big dance number is improving, but far from ready. And they still have several scenes to run through.

"Guys, this is in sorry shape right now," Wayne Shipley, the director, tells the Jets as they work the opening scene.

He hurries to the stage. The 53-year-old teacher is getting about four hours of sleep a night. After rehearsals end, he lingers in the auditorium, adjusting the lights, building the set, blocking scenes. The students notice the dark circles under his eyes.

"You guys don't know your lines," he says. "You can't do this show if you don't know the lines. I don't

see acting. I don't see anything.

"This show is not going on until this scene is ready.

"Take five."

His disappointment stings.

During the break, the Jets follow Eli Senter to the back of the auditorium to rehearse the scene Mr.

Shipley has just criticized.

"Come on, Katie," Eli says.

"I'm not coming," Katie Collins replies. "I know my lines."

"That's because you've only got seven lines in the whole thing!" Eli shouts. "Shaddup!"

Eli can't do it. That's the running joke at the Anne Arundel County school. Last winter, during the one-act plays, the 17-year-old Eli portrayed an impotent character who says, "I'm not physically capable of having sex." Since then, he hears a variation of the Eli-can't-do-it theme at least 10 times a day.

Usually, the wiry Eli laughs. He's comfortable with who he is – a poet, president of his church youth group, a former wrestler and a Boy Scout close to earning his Eagle Scout stripes. You can tease him; his feelings won't be hurt.

When Eli wins a statewide science-fiction writing contest for teen-agers, he appears at a Baltimore hotel to accept the award – two weeks early. He hears about it.

"I was misinformed," he says sheepishly.

This musical has him whipped. Eli's inability to sing Riff's part is affecting his acting. Normally a solid performer, Eli is flubbing lines, missing stage cues and – he believes – disappointing Mr. Shipley. That bothers him most of all.

As the Jets practice, a boy blows a whistle on stage.

"Don't do that unless you have a damn good reason," Eli yells at him.

"I'm practicing my part," the boy says innocently.

"Go home!" Eli shouts.

For the first time in his drama career, Eli doubts his ability. Maybe he really can't do it.

Stand here.

Sing this way.

Move over there.

Smile!

It's too much for Brian Forte, the senior who plays Tony in *West Side Story*. This is the third straight year he has been the leading man in the spring musical, but Tony is by far the most challenging role. He's a deep-voiced baritone singing a tenor's part.

“There’s a million things I have to remember,” he says. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life.”

Neil Ewachiw, the music director, teaches him to pronounce words differently. Sing tonight as tuh-nut. Sing someday and somewhere as some-deh and some-weh. The audience won’t know the difference, and it’s easier to reach the high notes.

When Brian gets on stage, tonight still sounds like tonight.

“-NUT!” Mr. Ewachiw yells.

“-night,” Brian sings.

“The only thing I ask of you is to give me everything I ask of you all the time,” Mr. Ewachiw says.

“Well, OK,” Brian replies sarcastically. “Piece of cake.”

Later, Brian approaches him.

“I just can’t accept the fact that you know my voice better than I do.”

“I’m 10 years older than you and I work with the same instrument,” Mr. Ewachiw (pronounced e-WALK-q) says. “I’ve had years of professional training. Some things you’re just going to have to trust me on.”

Brian drifts away, frustrated.

As Brian struggles, his best friend flourishes.

Junior Adam Mehok has embraced his role as a Jet since that night when Mr. Shipley explained his character.

“A-rab is just plain crazy.”

“All riiight!” Adam shouted, slapping hands with a friend.

Tall and lean, with a ponytail that hangs halfway down his back, the 17-year-old Adam is more class wit than class clown. “He’s the most right-brained person I’ve ever met,” Brian says. They became friends about a year ago and have been inseparable since.

One night, during a tense rehearsal, the Jets practice the scene in which they physically attack one of the Sharks’ girlfriends.

“This is sexual,” Mr. Shipley tells them. “It’s obscene. It’s not playing in a sandbox. Guys, you’re looking too much at her face.”

“I’m not,” Adam says, and Mr. Shipley joins the laughter.

Life is good.

And then it gets better.

Adam invites Anna Schoenfelder, the cute senior who plays Anita, to the junior prom. She says yes.

“I was feeling so high,” he says.

The crash will come later.

TWO WEEKS TO GO.

Starr Lucas, the senior who calls herself the Drama Queen, enters the nightly rehearsal on crutches.

“Every now and then, everything caves in for her,” Mr. Shipley says.

Starr has cerebral palsy. She’s serving as the student director instead of performing because she hopes to someday work in the theater and believes she will have more career options as a director than as an actress who limps.

Every night, she stays up until 2 a.m., finishing homework and her chores as senior class president. Before tonight’s rehearsal, she took a nap, “and when I woke up, it felt like my legs had snapped in two. It was the worst I have ever felt.”

She can handle it. Nothing gets to Starr. While everyone else loses their composure, she’s the ever-smiling rock.

“I’ve wanted to be Starr since I was a freshman,” says Sarah Huizinga, a junior cast member. “Starr’s perfect.”

Starr is still waiting to discover if she’ll receive enough financial help to study theater next fall at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Va. She has been accepted, but the \$18,000-a-year tuition is too steep for her family.

It would be cheaper to go to an in-state school, she says, but “I need a small campus because of my legs.”

A breakthrough.

After weeks of Mr. Ewachiw’s pleading and pushing, the Jets and the Sharks are beginning to sing their parts in the quintet – the song that leads to the dramatic rumble – as if they mean business.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I think that’s the first time I heard the right notes,” Mr. Ewachiw announces.

The cast cheers.

She said yes, but what does it mean?

Adam Mehok decides to find out. Late one night after rehearsal, he calls Anna Schoenfelder, the senior who agreed to be his date at the junior prom.

We’re just friends, Adam.

“It felt like the ground came out from under me,” he says.

Anna doesn’t tell him everything. She doesn’t tell him that the high-school boy she has romantic stirrings for is Brian Forte, Adam’s best friend.

The next night, riding home after musical practice, Brian turns to Adam.

“I think I know how you’re going to react to this, but I really like Anna.”

Adam sits silently.

“I didn’t know how to handle it,” he says later. “I didn’t handle it very well. I was trying to figure out where I stood and where I should stand and where I will stand tomorrow.”

When he gets home, Brian calls Anna. He needs to tell her how he feels; they have danced around the issue long enough. Anna will never forget the conversation.

“We have a problem,” Brian says.

“What?”

“Adam.”

“I know,” Anna says.

“We have a bigger problem.”

“What?”

“I really like you, too, Anna.”

Like the last lap in a track relay, the pace accelerates as the final week approaches.

Pieces of the set appear on stage as if by magic. The costume rack is getting full. Several of the scenes crackle – good to go, as the students put it. There are moments when Mr. Shipley believes the dance number will actually create a willing suspension of disbelief in the audience.

“We’ve almost got a show,” he says.

Mr. Shipley is all business now. He paces on stage, wearing his trademark cowboy boots, denim shirt and bluejeans, his work gloves waving hello from the back pocket. He always looks like he just finished rustling cattle.

“Characters, guys, characters,” he implores, and, slowly but noticeably, the students respond.

Angela Brown is not playing Maria anymore.

She is Maria.

Angela looks so young and innocent on stage in her Mickey Mouse shirt, but she sings with the confidence of someone much older.

“I’ve seen this show several times,” Mr. Shipley says, “and she’s the best Maria I’ve ever seen.”

Today they’ll work on the scene in which Tony and Maria first meet.

Brian and Angela meet at center stage and hold hands. She gently touches his face. They say their lines.

“There’s a kiss in there, isn’t there?” Mr. Shipley reminds them.

Angela and Brian gulp.

“Uh, what kind of kiss?” Brian asks, stalling.

A boy in the back: “The kind of kiss where you shove your tongue halfway down her throat.”

Mr. Shipley laughs so hard his face turns red.

Angela does not laugh. After rehearsal, she says, to no one in particular but loud enough to be heard, “That whole kissing thing – yuck!”

“Was is that bad?” Brian says, sounding hurt.

“I didn’t like that,” she says in her best little girl voice. She’s rehearsing. Undoubtedly Angela will use the same voice later, when she tells her jealous boyfriend what happened.

On a Sunday afternoon in April, Angie Guido pulls into the parking lot at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Glen Burnie.

She thinks her band is playing here. Angie, Brian Forte and some other friends formed a band they called Ground Zero. After growing tired of the name, they changed it to The Artists Formerly Known as Ground Zero.

But this is no gig.

“SURPRISE!”

Angie jumps. About 30 family members and high school friends are here to celebrate her 18th birthday.

The surprise is on Brian, too. His 18th birthday is fast approaching; the party is for both of them.

Angie is Angie again. She cried when the cast list was posted and she lost the role of Maria. Now it’s as if she has moved through the stages of grief – including shock and anger – to grudging acceptance.

“It was really hard for me,” she says. “I didn’t realize – whoa – how good Angela is. I was just so disappointed. I don’t want people thinking I was looking for a pity party.”

She was so close. When the cast list was compiled, Mr. Shipley first wrote down a different name for Maria:

Angela Guido.

Realizing his mistake, Mr. Shipley slowly traced over the capital “G,” transforming it into a capital “B,” and he did this with each letter until the name “Guido” became the name “Brown” and Angela Brown had the part instead.

So you can understand the pain in Angie Guido’s voice when she sings a sultry rendition of Who Will Save Your Soul? at her birthday party.

And you can understand why, when her friends and family reward her with applause, she smiles and says, “I feel really good right now.”

The spotlight is hers.

Adam Mehok sits by himself at Angie’s birthday party, saying little.

“What’s wrong with him?” a boy asks.

“It’s me,” Anna Schoenfelder says.

“Go talk to him.”

Since that night when Anna uttered the two words that have scarred many a teen-age soul – just friends – Adam quit talking to her.

Anna approaches him in the church parking lot. Adam says something funny, and Anna cries because she realizes how much she misses him. She holds out her hand – come back to the church with me. Maybe later, he says.

It’s confusing to Adam. One day Anna agrees to go with him to the junior prom. The next day he finds out that his best friend, Brian Forte, likes her, too. The day after that, he discovers that Anna likes Brian.

“I was basically destroyed by the whole thing,” he says.

After the birthday party, Brian gives Adam a ride home. It is then, during the awkward silence, that Brian reaches over and lowers the volume on the car stereo. It is then that Brian loses it.

“NO!” he screams.

He hates what’s going on. He pounds the steering wheel. He doesn’t want to lose Anna or Adam. He begins to cry.

Adam: “He just erupted. I was taken by the emotion. I really envy him for that.”

Brian: “I’ve always held my feelings back. For some reason, this time, I couldn’t. My feelings were just too strong.”

Instead of taking Adam home, Brian drives to Anna’s house. They need to talk about this. The three of them sit on her front porch.

“Brian was scaring me,” she says. “He was really upset. I didn’t know what he was going to say.”

The next night at practice, Brian sits in the second row of the theater, his legs dangling over a chair. He watches Anna as she sings on stage.

“Isn’t she wonderful?” he says. “I get goose bumps.”

He describes yesterday’s meeting with Anna and Adam as “the purest thing in the world” and says the experience “will go down in history as the weirdest day of my life.”

He and Anna are together. He and Adam still are friends.

“It’s amazing.”

In his nightmare, he falls off the stage.

A piece of the set collapses and smacks him in the head.

Instead of pretending, another cast member actu-

ally stabs him during the rumble.

And when he opens his mouth, nothing comes out.

Eli can’t do it?

Less than a week before opening night, he can’t even sleep.

Thursday June 5, 1997

Chapter V: On the eve of opening night, their nerves are shot. Their voices are cracking. And the trumpet section is under orders: No snickering.

Attention Cast of West Side Story

This is it, guys. The week we’ve all been waiting for. There’s no more time. Know your lines, know your cues, know the MAMBO. We are on in less than five days.

Sign posted on drama club bulletin board.

MONDAY

After school ends, senior Starr Lucas, the drama club president, stands near the North County High School entrance and talks to Keith Jeffcoat, who plays one of the Jets in West Side Story, the spring musical.

Keith is on crutches. His left ankle is in a brace.

“You’ve got to be ready,” Starr says.

“Mr. Shipley told me that if I’m not walking by Friday he’ll break both my kneecaps,” Keith replies.

Early Sunday, while he was delivering newspapers, Keith plucked a red tulip for his girlfriend. Jumping back into the truck, he tore ligaments in his ankle.

This is a problem. Keith plays Diesel, the biggest member of the Jets gang. He and one of the Sharks begin the fistfight that leads to the gang rumble. Wayne Shipley, the show’s director, choreographed the scene blow-by-blow. If Keith can’t walk, how can he fight?

“I’ll be there,” he vows.

Maybe they’re jinxed. Last week, Jason Morgan, who plays Chino, one of the Sharks, suffered a collapsed lung. He’s still recuperating at home.

“I may have to be Chino,” Starr jokes.

“You’re a goofball,” Keith tells her.

“I didn’t mess up my ankle,” she counters.

“You’re just jealous because that flower wasn’t for you,” he says.

“Ha!”

Starr heads outdoors, where ballplayers practice on the fields that surround the Anne Arundel County high school. She transforms her blue Volkswagen Beetle into a mobile billboard for the show, taping

West Side Story posters on the hood. She's going to drive the car in the local Little League parade this weekend.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it this week," she says. "A lot of people aren't cooperating. They don't understand."

They will tonight.

THE TAPED MUSIC PLAYS. PAT Reynolds and Eli Senter circle each other, knives brandished. Eli plunges forward, Pat counters and –

"You haven't gotten that right once," Mr. Shipley says, interrupting them. "Listen to the music. You're 12 bars early."

This is the rumble, the final scene in Act I, the dramatic high point of the entire musical. It's the scene in which the leaders of the Jets and the Sharks are killed.

Pat and Eli – the gang leaders – have rehearsed their fight for weeks, practicing fake kicks, an over-the-shoulder flip and an ankle trip. The problem is, they must coordinate their moves precisely so that the fatal blow is delivered at the exact moment the music roars to a crescendo.

"Guys, you should be listening to this music," Mr. Shipley pleads. "There is no other agenda. What we're seeing just doesn't work. You don't realize the seriousness of your situation."

TONIGHT, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE cast members will sing each of West Side Story's 11 songs with the orchestra playing. Neil Ewachiw, the 27-year-old music director, has hired two dozen professional musicians; the drama club foots the bill.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you're on my clock now," Mr. Ewachiw (pronounced e-WALK-q) announces, tapping his baton on the metal stand.

Up first: Eli Senter, who plays Riff.

Eli snaps his fingers. The music begins. He looks at Mr. Ewachiw, gulps a deep breath and, as usual, misses the cue by a half-beat.

*Ah – When you're a Jet
you're a Jet all the way...*

But Eli trudges onward. By his vocal standards, this isn't horrible. He actually hits a few notes, and he almost nails the ending.

Orchestra members peek at the stage as Eli finishes. Mr. Ewachiw has reminded them not to laugh. Last year you could hear the trumpet players snicker.

Next comes Brian Forte, the senior who plays Tony, the leading man. In past musicals, this is the week

when the normally nonchalant Brian gets serious.

Tonight, though, something is wrong. Brian's voice cracks, he forgets lyrics, the high notes are impossible. He seems – this is a first – nervous.

"I don't know how to sing this part, Mr. Ewachiw," he says after one song.

"Don't yell at me for doing it wrong when you were doing it right."

"Mr. Ewach – "

"You were doing it right!"

When he slumps off stage, Brian no longer exudes the panache of the leading man. He's no longer the happy-go-lucky teen.

"I'm just feeling miserable," he says. "I'm feeling really horrible about the musical aspect of this musical. The mikes, the orchestra, the mood, myself not excluded. Everything is just very malingering."

Mr. Shipley corners him.

"What I saw was a little scary," he says.

MR. SHIPLEY SITS BY HIMSELF IN THE theater, jotting notes on a yellow legal pad.

After 30 years of teaching, this will be his last musical. At 53, he's retiring at the end of the school year.

"You know," he says, smiling wanly as the students struggle, "I think the thing I dislike most about musicals is the music."

Friends arrive to help. In addition to Mr. Ewachiw, a former North County teacher who returns each spring to work on the musical, Mr. Shipley relies on other adults. There's David Richardson – the kids call him Dave the Piano Guy – who plays at rehearsals. There's David Garman – Dave the Light Guy – a former student who helps with the theater lighting. And there's Mike Strehlen, who handles all the guns, knives and cigarettes used as props, enough weaponry to intimidate the boys from calling him Mike the Gun Guy.

"I couldn't do it without them," Mr. Shipley says.

Next on stage are Anna Schoenfelder and Angela Brown, whose characters – Anita and Maria – sing the last songs in the musical: "A Boy Like That" and "I Have a Love."

Shortly after they begin, a scream punctures their sweet duet:

"NOOOOOOOO!"

Something has irritated Garman as he works on the lights. His voice is so loud and surprising that Mr. Ewachiw stops the orchestra and turns around angrily.

“Please don’t do that,” he snaps. “This is my rehearsal.”

“It’s my rehearsal, too,” Garman says.

“I’m on the orchestra’s time clock,” Mr. Ewachiw says. “You’re wasting my time.”

The students watch, mesmerized. This is better than the rumble. Maybe the adults will duke it out.

Calm prevails. Typical last-week jitters, Mr. Shipley says later.

Flustered, Mr. Ewachiw tries to remember where the song was interrupted.

“Let’s just do it over,” he finally says.

It’s worth hearing again. This is the best song in the show. The harmonies – Anna’s alto and Angela’s soprano – mesh perfectly.

As the two girls finish, Mr. Ewachiw calls Brian Forte to the conductor’s stand.

“Look,” he says, pointing to his arm.

Goose bumps.

TUESDAY

SOME CAST MEMBERS ARE SPENDING so much time at school that their parents bring supper to them.

When Phyllis Lucas arrives, Starr unloads.

“Mom, I’m sick,” she says. “I’m running a fever. Shipley’s yelling at me because people aren’t here. The senior adviser is mad at me. I tried to take a nap on that mat over there, but I was interrupted seven times.”

Her face is flush, her forehead hot to the touch.

“I’m not responsible for people not being here,” she says.

“I know,” her mother says.

This is what Starr needs; somebody to listen. Here, at school, Starr is the mommy, even for the teachers. There’s a problem in the costume room. Talk to Starr. I need more tickets. Talk to Starr. I need to add something to the program. Talk to Starr.

Starr can handle it.

But not always.

Every night, she goes home and anxiously checks the mail. She’s waiting to learn if she will get enough financial help to go to Shenandoah University, a Virginia college where she can major in theater. The school is perfect: Because Starr has cerebral palsy, she needs a small campus to avoid weakening her legs. If she can’t afford to attend the college, she’s not sure what she will do.

“I have my moments,” she says, “but I keep them to myself.”

The other students don’t realize how difficult this show has been for her. For the first time, she’s directing instead of acting.

“She would love to be on that stage, dressed up and in makeup,” her mother says.

But she won’t even get a curtain call.

AN HOUR LATER, HER FACE STILL red, Starr addresses the cast in a classroom.

“Tonight what we’re doing is running the show from beginning to end, without the music,” she says.

“We will run this at speed,” Mr. Shipley adds. “If there are any train wrecks, figure out how to get out of them.”

There are no prompters in a Wayne Shipley production. If cues are missed, the students are expected to improvise their way around them. There is no curtain on his stage; he believes it detracts from the audience’s willingness to suspend its disbelief. If the script calls for a nightstick, then he wants a real nightstick, a wooden one, with a real leather handle, not some cheap-looking piece of plastic.

“All right, guys,” Starr says. “Let’s go. We’re doing this in two minutes.”

AFTERWARD, BACK IN THE CLASS-room, Mr. Shipley is upbeat.

“We were almost good,” he says. “But Riff got killed 12 bars before he was supposed to. I want the Jets and the Sharks here tomorrow at 5:30 to go over that fight scene.”

He looks around. The students are tired and apprehensive. Their expressions say, This is going on in three nights?

“We have a show,” Mr. Shipley reassures them. “But we have a lot that needs to be done.”

Starr climbs into her car and heads home. The West Side Story posters on the hood flap in the spring breeze.

She needs sleep.

They all do.

WEDNESDAY

TIME IS RUNNING OUT. DURING A free period in school, Mr. Shipley grabs Brian Forte and Angela Brown to work on their love scenes.

Maria’s balcony is finished. It is covered with spray-painted Styrofoam, but it looks like a brick facade. Mr. Shipley waited to finish the set until now; he knows it will send an excited buzz through the cast.

With Brian and Angela perched in the balcony, Mr. Shipley directs Brian. Wrap your arms around her as you sing. Sway with the music. Look happy, for crying out loud, you're in love.

*Tonight, tonight,
The world is wild and bright,
Going mad, shooting sparks into space.*

Mr. Shipley likes the way it looks. It will present a nice picture for the audience.

Brian, though, has a secret.

"When I'm singing to Maria, I'm thinking about Anna," he says. "When I'm cradling and kissing her, it's Anna."

Just last week, Brian and Anna Schoenfelder, who plays Anita, realized they liked each other as more than friends.

"The stuff that I tell Anna sounds like song lyrics," Brian says. "I know it's hokey, but that's how I feel."

DURING A CLASS, A FRIEND NOTICES Anna's face. She is pale.

Anna has hardly eaten since lunch the day before; she says there wasn't enough time.

"Are you OK?" the friend asks.

"I feel like I'm going to fall over," she says.

The friend escorts her to the health room. They find an orange and some soup.

AFTER SCHOOL, SEVERAL CAST MEMBERS head to their refuge, the Honey Bee Diner in Glen Burnie.

"Hey, look," Brian Forte says.

He turns his eyelids inside out.

Angie Guido groans, then laughs.

She has mostly recovered from her disappointment over not getting the role of Maria. She has a key part in two songs – "America" and "I Feel Pretty." She sings them well, but without much joy. Like everyone else, the drudgery of rehearsing is wearing her out.

"I'm ready to graduate."

TONIGHT IS DRESS REHEARSAL WITH the orchestra, the last scheduled practice before opening night on Friday. Mr. Shipley wants to give the cast Thursday off.

Jason Morgan is back. A collapsed lung kept him out of school nearly a week. He says he should get through the show, even if it happens again.

"I'll ignore it," he says. "I won't die from it right away."

In a classroom, Mr. Shipley addresses his troops.

"Listen, guys, there is no –"

"Other agenda!" a half-dozen students shout in unison.

"Let's do it," he tells them.

Mr. Ewachiw pulls Brian Forte aside.

"High notes can smell fear," he says. "Don't be afraid of them. It doesn't have to be loud, just comfortable."

THE OPENING ACT IS RUGGED.

During the song "Cool," sung by the Jets, two members of the Sharks gang mistakenly strut on the set while Eli is singing. They look around, then walk out.

In the back of the theater, Mr. Shipley nearly tosses his legal pad.

"If I ever do another high school play, I hope somebody castrates me and dumps the body in the Atlantic Ocean."

INTERMISSION. IT'S ALREADY PAST 9 p.m., the time they usually stop.

"We're not going anywhere yet," Starr tells them.

"Call home if you have to. We're having an early night tomorrow so I don't want to hear any complaints."

The students are exhausted, their faces drawn, their bodies slumped.

Mr. Shipley reviews his Act I notes.

"The Jets song, frankly, sucks raw eggs," he says.

"We're going to work on it tomorrow so it's credible. Plan to be here until we nail it."

He turns to the Jets' girlfriends.

"I'm not getting any characters from you," he says.

"Eli has this great line – got a rocket in my pocket – and you just sit there. Ladies, what would you do if you heard that?"

"I'd laugh if Eli said it," one girl says, and the room erupts.

Mr. Shipley holds a hand in the air.

"Guys, this show has a real chance of being fantastic, it really does, but it's going to take every ounce of concentration that you have."

He wants to go over the opening number again tomorrow. And the fight scene. And a couple other things.

So much for having Thursday off.

THURSDAY

THE NORMAL AFTER-SCHOOL ENERGY is

sapped.

“I’m just so rushed,” says Rob Mackin, a sophomore who plays one of the Jets. “I have school to worry about. I don’t see my parents enough. I have track practice. I’ve gotten four hours of sleep every night for the past three weeks.”

Anna Schoenfelder still looks tired.

“I came to school late today,” she says. “My Dad told me I had to stay home and sleep.”

FIRST JASON’S LUNG COLLAPSED.

Then Keith hurt his ankle.

Then Anna nearly passed out.

Now this.

“I’m in pain today,” says Angela Brown, who plays Maria. “My throat hurts.”

MR. SHIPLEY WORKS ON THE OPENING scene. He has put in several sight gags – the Jets play keep-away with an apple; one of the Sharks swings on a rope from the balcony; there are some tumbles – and he wants to make sure they click.

He stalks the stage, urging the students to stay in character. He’s getting less sleep than anyone but looks the most energized.

“It’s crunch time,” he says. “That’s half the fun.”

They finish the scene.

“That’s good enough,” one boy says.

Mr. Shipley corrects him.

“It’s never good enough.”

IN THE MUSIC ROOM. MR. EWACHIW works with Brian and Angela one final time on their wedding duet, “One Hand, One Heart.”

Don’t sing so loud, he tells Brian. Just be soft and gentle. Think about the words.

“You’re doing a very good job for us as far as the technical stuff is concerned,” Mr. Ewachiw says. “You’re not singing it the way I want to hear it, or the way I would sing it. You know why? I don’t think you’ve ever been in love like this before.

“The first time I heard this song after I got engaged, I nearly wept. I think that’s what’s missing. That absolute conviction. It’s just a matter of feeling what you’re saying.”

This is a setup. Mr. Ewachiw knows about the romance between Brian and Anna. Without saying it specifically, Mr. Ewachiw is asking Brian to sing to Anna.

Brian nods.

Then Mr. Ewachiw turns to Angela. She wears a shirt with Mickey Mouse on it. He has heard about her sore throat.

“Rest your voice tonight,” he says. “Don’t talk, whisper. Wear a patch that says: I’m on voice rest. You’ve got a big job tomorrow.”

Angela nods. Her throat still hurts.

ELI SENTER IS THE LAST TO LEAVE.

“You look fabulous up there,” Mr. Ewachiw tells him.

“Why?” Eli says, disbelieving.

Mr. Shipley answers. “You’re just” – he pauses – “Riff.”

Another pause.

“Even without a rocket in your pocket. Go get some sleep, ace.”

Eli falls asleep reading his West Side Story script. It’s the first thing he sees when he awakens on Friday morning. And with it comes the heart-pounding and frightening and magnificent realization:

This is opening night.

Friday June 6, 1997

Chapter VI: Opening Night! The Curtain Rises, And Our High-School Actors Step Boldly Into The Spotlight, Into A Pure Moment They Will Have Forever

Wayne Shipley looks at the clock.

1:55 p.m.

The school bell rings. Most of the students flood the halls of North County High School and scamper outdoors to begin this April weekend, but a few race to the auditorium.

This is opening night.

At 7:30 p.m., the orchestra will begin playing the overture to West Side Story, and 40 cast members who have been working at an exhausting clip for the past two months will finally have their moment on stage.

But not yet.

There’s too much to do.

Mr. Shipley, the director, surveys the auditorium. Some of the sets still need final touches. He must review scene changes with the stage crew. He wants to practice the opening scene and the rumble one more time. He needs to make sure the key actors know where to stand so the spotlight hits them.

“This is the thrash,” he says. “Everybody loves the

thrash.”

“What time is it?” Eli Senter asks.

2:45 p.m.

The 17-year-old Eli has reached some metaphysical state where testosterone and adrenaline converge.

He’s wired, bounding across the stage, singing lines from the musical.

And there’s nothing for me but Maria...

Eli plays Riff, the leader of the Jets. He will sing the first song in the entire show, a prospect that has given him nightmares. But he’s too jumpy to worry.

Every sight that I see is Maria...

Lisa Rolman, a North County High teacher and the assistant director, grabs him. They head to a grocery store to buy produce for a fruit and vegetable stand that’s used in the opening scene.

Ms. Rolman knows Eli needs to get out of the auditorium for an hour or so. She does, too. She’s almost as hyper as he is.

Last year, on the afternoon before opening night, Ms. Rolman and Eli worked off their pre-show jitters by reupholstering a couch.

“I want to get you something for dinner,” she tells Mr. Shipley.

“Just grilled cheese,” he replies. “That won’t kill me.”

As Ms. Rolman and Eli depart, Angela Brown arrives.

This is the night her dream comes true. Last December, Angela watched a touring company performance of West Side Story at the Lyric Opera House in Baltimore and fell in love with the part of Maria.

“It’s not just like I’m acting like another person,” she says. “You feel like another person.”

She carries a dress, humming to herself. Her throat hurt so much the previous day that she was told to quit talking.

“It’s better,” she says. “I didn’t talk all night.”

In fact, the healing power of opening night is astonishing. Students who looked ready to faint the day before now bounce into the theater.

Angela skips down a hall.

“What time is it?” she asks.

3:17 p.m.

Starr Lucas, the student director, the 18-year-old senior who calls herself the Drama Queen, arrives, lugging a chair. She has taken all the chairs and several old Coca-Cola signs from her parents’ kitchen to use as props.

“My Dad’s asleep,” she tells Mr. Shipley. “Boy, is he going to be surprised when he wakes up.”

Starr wears a silver jacket and black slacks. She’s almost fluorescent.

“I got the money,” she whispers.

No wonder she’s so happy. Last night, when she returned home from the final musical rehearsal, Starr learned that she had qualified for almost \$10,000 in financial aid to attend Shenandoah University, a Virginia college where she will study theater. This is what she has been waiting for: The campus is small enough that Starr, who has cerebral palsy, can walk around without weakening her legs.

“That’s fantastic,” Mr. Shipley says, patting her back. Four hours to go.

FILL YOUR HEAD WITH HAIR,

Long beautiful hair...

The dressing room rocks with taped music.

Josh Gembicki, who plays Doc, is first on the hair schedule. He wears a bald cap. A girl flattens his hair by soaking it in laundry soap.

A freshman boy brings in a bucket of fried chicken and a cooler of soda pop.

“My Dad couldn’t be here tonight, but he wanted to do something, so he bought this,” he says.

In another corner, Anna Schoenfelder brushes her formerly blond hair. She has dyed it black to play Anita in the musical.

She shivers.

“I just thought about it,” she says. “We’re going on!”

Ms. Rolman and Eli return from the grocery store, carrying sacks loaded with fruit and vegetables.

“Don’t eat the props!” Eli yells.

He jumps in the air. He snaps his fingers. He practices the mambo dance.

Mr. Shipley watches him. This is why he loves the theater. This is why it will be so hard to retire after these shows are over.

“You can’t walk away from this without experiencing something you’re not going to experience anywhere else,” he says. “There’s no other experience like this in education. Everything else is about competition.

“You take a kid like Eli. He has all this energy, all this aggression, and he channels it into something creative.

“Eli’s heroic, really.”

He looks at his watch.

4:20 p.m.

“Come with me,” Neil Ewachiw, the music director, tells Brian Forte. “I want you to hear something.”

They head outdoors, to Mr. Ewachiw’s car, where he has a tape of West Side Story songs. He wants Brian – who plays Tony, the leading man – to hear the song, “Tonight.”

“Right here,” he says. “Listen.”

Tuh-nut...

“Hear that?” Mr. Ewachiw says.

Brian grins. For weeks Mr. Ewachiw (pronounced e-WALK-q) has pleaded with him to sing the word tonight as if it sounds like tuh-nut. Doing so will make it easier to sing the high notes. Now here’s the proof.

“It’s still not natural,” Brian says.

“All you have to do is just do it.”

Angela Brown is still humming Maria’s songs.

“I feel like bouncing off the walls,” she says, adjusting a white headband. “I’m getting so excited I can’t stand it.”

4:55 p.m.

The makeup room is full. Angie Guido puts lipstick on Mark Miller, one of the Jets.

They have been dating for more than a year. Two months ago, Angie and Mark left school for the day after Angie lost the role of Maria. They were going to skip the musical, then reconsidered. That feels like a million years ago.

“I can’t work with people like this!” Angie jokes. “These actors’ egos!”

In the hallway, Keith Jeffcoat limps. His left ankle is purple – he tore ligaments last weekend – but he’s ready. Maybe too ready.

“I’ll tell you the truth,” he says conspiratorially. “I pick up more girls in make-up.”

Two boys sprint the length of the hallway, leap and slam into each other’s chests.

“Guys are really scary,” Angie Guido says.

On stage, Eli Senter jumps on another boy’s back.

Starr enters the makeup room at 5:45 p.m. There are two huge lipstick kiss marks on her cheek. She leaves them there all night.

“Anybody seen Pat?” she asks.

Pat Reynolds is late. He plays Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks gang.

Starr sighs. “If I laid down to take a nap, I’d never wake up.”

Cast members roam the hall between the stage and the hair and makeup rooms. Brian Forte rummages through the costume rack.

“Anybody seen my tennis shoes?”

In the auditorium, Mr. Shipley vacuums the stage.

6:30 p.m.

An hour to go. Orchestra members arrive.

Pat Reynolds is still missing.

“Where could he be?” Starr asks. “He knows he’s supposed to be here.”

A few minutes later, to everyone’s relief, Pat storms into the makeup room. Apparently his ride never showed.

“Where have you been?” somebody asks.

“Obviously, I wasn’t here,” he snaps.

Angie Guido quickly applies his make-up.

“You look very good,” she says. “Very Spanish.”

“Yeah, a Spanish transvestite.”

At 7:15 p.m., a crowd mingles in the school. A line forms at the ticket table and stretches down the hall.

“Usually, right now, I feel so nervous,” Anna Schoenfelder says. “I don’t even feel nervous.”

A beat.

“I don’t think that’s a good thing.”

Another beat.

“I’m nervous now.”

Starr’s voice fills the hallway.

“To the green room!”

This is what the cast calls the classroom where they gather before and after the show.

They squirm in their chairs.

Eli taps his foot.

Angela hums another of Maria’s songs.

In my eyes, in my world...

“Quiet, guys!” Starr says. “We have a full lobby out there.”

A roar.

The teachers enter at 7:24 p.m.

“We have one of the best opening nights I have ever seen,” Mr. Shipley says.

Another roar.

“It’s been a semi-hoot,” he says. “I’ve never been so tired and so energized at the same time. Let’s get in a circle.”

The cast members form a giant circle and hold hands.

“Thirty seconds,” Mr. Shipley says.

They close their eyes. The room is silent. Somebody’s lucky charm – a Beanie Baby – tumbles to the floor.

“Go have some fun,” Mr. Shipley says.

Off they go.

"I need the Jets!" Eli shouts. "WHERE ARE ALL THE JETS?"

The overture begins.

The stage lights come on.

Forty years after it opened on Broadway, West Side Story comes to North County High School in Anne Arundel County.

Alone, on stage, stands Eli Senter.

He snaps his fingers. He looks at Mr. Ewachiw for his cue, takes an enormous gulp of air, opens his mouth wide and –

*When you're a Jet,
you're a Jet all the way...*

Let the record show that at 7:49 p.m. on April 18, 1997, Eli Senter does it.

He hits the note that has eluded him for two months.

He actually sings.

Like an expectant father in a hospital waiting room, Mr. Shipley paces the back of the theater, his arms folded, grinning.

It is not a perfect opening night.

Angela Brown's microphone goes on the fritz during one of Maria's scenes. The buzzing makes it sound like she's surrounded by locusts; her soaring soprano is mostly lost during the quintet.

The lights come on too late during the big dance number.

A police siren sounds too soon.

During the dramatic rumble, one of the Sharks can't open a gate; the audience laughs as he and the gang members crawl through a hole in the fence instead.

The lights come on too soon before Act II. Angela Brown, Angie Guido and several of the Shark girls improvise on stage for several awkward minutes while the orchestra plays the second-act overture.

As Brian Forte – Tony – sneaks out of Maria's window after their love scene, he accidentally kicks down the curtain. The audience laughs.

When Tony is shot in the dramatic final scene, the gun is so loud everyone in the audience jumps, then laughs again.

And none of it matters.

They are the best they have ever been.

"Great job, guys," Mr. Shipley says in the green room. "We have some technical things to take care of for tomorrow night, but it was lovely. The audience

said it all. Go see your folks."

"Wait!" Mr. Ewachiw says. "I have an announcement."

Slowly, he puts his hands together and begins to applaud.

"Where's Anna?" Brian Forte says in the hall. "Have you seen Anna?"

He looks frantic. The carefree Brian has been replaced by an urgent young man. Suddenly he realizes that it's almost over. He's a senior. He has less than a month before this safe harbor called high school is gone. He has fallen for Anna Schoenfelder, and she with him, and now Brian understands that some things in life deserve to be taken seriously.

"I've got to get revved up for tomorrow night," he says. "Then I've got to get revved up for the rest of my life. I need to find Anna."

The hallway is a mob scene – parents, friends, roses, balloons.

When Brian finds Anna Schoenfelder, he hugs her tightly.

Holding on.

Angela Brown needs to find someone as well.

During the song, "I Feel Pretty," Angela's eyes gave away her panic. It's the look singers get when they suddenly realize they can't remember the lyrics.

Angie Guido, one of the girls in the chorus, sensed the problem. So Angie – the girl who desperately wanted to play Maria, who sobbed when the cast list was posted, who nearly quit the show in anger – helped the girl who won the role instead of her.

Her back turned to the audience, Angie looked at Angela and mouthed the words, "I feel charming."

That's all Angela needed.

I feel charming,

Oh, so charming –

It's alarming how charming I feel...

She didn't miss a beat.

Now, in the hallway, the girls find each other.

"Thank you so much," Angela says.

The next morning, a Saturday, Angela Brown sings the National Anthem at the opening of the Brooklyn Park Little League. Starr Lucas drives her blue Volkswagen Beetle, the one covered with West Side Story posters, in the parade.

"That was good," Starr says of opening night. "But we can do even better."

And so they do.

It begins, again, in the green room.

“I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this show,” the 53-year-old Mr. Shipley says on his last night as the director of a high school musical. He’s retiring this year. “It is a perfect cast. I find very little in life that is perfect, but this comes close.”

Mr. Ewachiw is next.

“Last night never happened,” he says. “Tony and Maria have never met. Riff and Bernardo are still alive. You have to do it again and you have to be at the top of your game.”

The orchestra begins.

The stage lights come on.

Magic.

Eli Senter hits his cue. Brian Forte sings tonight as tuh-nut. The dance number sparkles. The rumble works; Riff gets killed just as the music reaches a crescendo. Angela Brown has a new microphone – and the voice of Maria leaps from the stage, so strong and powerful the audience gasps. Brian wraps his arms around her in “Tonight,” and they sway to the words.

Tonight, tonight,

The world is wild and bright...

Cast members are improvising, performing stunts they never have tried before. The audience feeds on their energy. When Brian and Angela finish singing, the audience is not just applauding. It’s cheering like a football crowd.

One of the Jets – Adam Mehok – steals the “Gee, Officer Krupke!” number when he wraps a handkerchief around his head and sings like an old woman. The audience interrupts the song with applause.

Not long ago, Adam and his best friend, Brian Forte, fell for the same girl. Brian won, and Adam was crushed. He needs this victorious moment.

“I nearly stopped singing – ‘Wait, we’re not through yet,’” he says later.

Look at Angie Guido. The girl who longed to play Maria commands the stage in the “America” song. She sings the same line twice, but the audience is too enchanted with her scene and her voice to notice.

And listen as Angela Brown and Anna Schoenfelder harmonize during the final duet.

When loves comes so strong,

There is no right or wrong,

Your love is your life!

Goose bumps galore. The audience cheers before the two girls finish.

During the show’s final scene, after the gun is fired and Maria cradles Tony’s lifeless body, a small child in the rear of the auditorium turns to her mother.

“Was that real?”

The audience stands and cheers as the curtain call begins.

Last night, Starr Lucas remained backstage. Directors, even student directors, don’t make curtain calls. But this is different. This is her last high school musical.

Beaming, shining, Starr walks on stage, heading straight for the spotlight. Then she and the cast members point to Maria’s balcony, where a boy unfurls a banner with this message:

A Bow For Shipley.

The tears begin on stage and escalate in the green room. The cast members can’t stop crying. They hug and cry and hug some more. The boys who aren’t crying are spitting out one-liners as fast as they can to keep from crying.

Eli stands in the middle, his face a puddle.

All the girls – Angie, Angela and Anna – are bawling.

“You have just experienced a pure moment,” Ms. Rolman tells them. “It’s infrequently in life that you can say, ‘On this day, I did my very best,’ but you can say that tonight.”

Each of the seniors receives a red rose, a North County High tradition.

“We have one more senior tonight,” Starr says.

She hands Mr. Shipley his rose.

Mr. Shipley – the old cowboy – maintains his composure. His moment comes later, when the room is mostly empty. The piano player, David Richardson – Dave the Piano Guy – comes to say goodbye.

“I was sitting there, listening to that last duet, thinking how I will never have an experience quite like this again in my life,” he says. “I just sat back and enjoyed it.”

A willing suspension of disbelief ...

Mr. Shipley blinks back the tears.

After the show, Angela Brown hands Mr. Ewachiw a thank-you card.

I don’t know how you did it, but you’re right – my voice has completely changed. Today at a Little League opening day ceremony I sang the National Anthem and people actually cried!

Mr. Ewachiw cradles her face in both hands and

kisses the top of her head.

A junior, Angela will have another year to see where this voice can take her. But tonight is for basking.

She races to the auditorium.

“Wait for me!”

You can't take a cast photograph of West Side Story without Maria.

As Angela hurries to the stage, her arms overflowing with roses, balloons and congratulatory notes, a Mickey Mouse balloon floats gently to the theater floor.

She doesn't even notice.

Later that night, after tearing apart the set, the cast celebrates at an ice-cream shop that remains open just for them.

Let's leave them here, giddy and triumphant – the fedora-topped Eli Senter nuzzling his girlfriend; Brian Forte and Anna Schoenfelder flirting with each other; Angie Guido laughing as her boyfriend clutches a rose in his teeth; the shimmering Starr Lucas digging into a mountainous ice-cream sundae; and Angela Brown wearing the exultant expression of a young woman who has discovered this wonderful gift – a voice so pretty people cry when they hear it.

Years from now, Angela will happen upon a copy of the West Side Story program from the 1997 spring musical, and the memories will wash over her .. the first time she hit the high C ... seeing her name next to Maria's on the cast list ... watching Eli persevere ... Angie's help ... the duet with Anna ... Starr's curtain call ... Mr. Shipley's final show.

The program will have faded, but if Angela closes her eyes – if she's willing to suspend her disbelief for just a moment – she will feel it again, all of it, every instant of that stage when the girl she was became the woman she is, two glorious nights when the world was wild and bright and time stood forever still.