

The Real-Life 'Glee' in Levittown, Pa.

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE

Harry S. Truman High School, set on a slight incline, is a monument to utility, neither inviting nor forbidding. Buffered on three sides by athletic fields, the school, in Levittown, Pa., rises to just one story. Its exterior is brick — not red but a dull yellow, the color of putty. Inside the front entrance, several trophy cases filled with pictures and other mementos commemorate mostly unsuccessful athletic teams, and a big bulletin board lists the colleges where the current seniors have been admitted. An energetic janitorial staff buffs the floors each afternoon to a high gloss. The classroom clocks tell the right time.

As school was ending one afternoon, I walked through the corridors to a far corner of the building and into the classroom of Lou Volpe, the school's drama director, who four decades ago was my English teacher. His room was furnished with old couches and living-room chairs, donated stuff that otherwise might have gone to Goodwill or landfills. The bookshelves, windowsills, radiators and all other flat surfaces were piled high with anthologies of plays, copies of scripts and videotapes of Broadway productions.

Several mobiles hung down from the ceiling, some low enough that a tall person would have to duck under them. As we talked, Volpe walked a circular route around the classroom, straightening and fluffing the upholstery on the couches and chairs, a ritual he performed numerous times a day, always in a clockwise direction.

It was distinctly his room, even without the huge banner that said, in red block letters, "Lou Is Back." The sign appeared out of nowhere some years ago — tacked up to the rear wall when Volpe arrived one morning — and he knew not to ask too much about its provenance, though word did eventually filter down that some students pilfered it from a local used-car lot where "Lou" was apparently one of the salesmen. "I really hope this other Lou doesn't miss it too much," he said with a mischievous grin when I asked him about it.

The room was beginning to fill up with students arriving to audition for the 2010 fall play. "Yo, Volp," a boy said as he walked past. Another boy breezed in and commented on what looked like a peace sign on his pants. "Yes," Volpe said. "I got these at Woodstock. I was there, you know." The student laughed, knowing that Volpe would never have been anywhere near the mud and chaos of Woodstock.

The more crowded the room got — meaning the more competition there would be for parts — the quieter it

became. The audition was for "Good Boys and True." It was a daring choice for a high school, but a typical one for Volpe — a searing drama in which the captain of a prep school's football team meets a girl working at a food court in a shopping mall and later that day films them, without her knowledge, having sex. The story moves forward in a series of painful unravelings: the school is scandalized, a family fractures, a gay relationship is revealed, a deep friendship between two boys rips apart. The drama, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, a versatile playwright and TV writer now working as a writer and producer for "Glee," is as much about class, privilege and power — subjects virtually unexplored in America's schools, and particularly relevant in Levittown — as it is about sex. Volpe would be the first to put it on a high-school stage.

Some 50 students waited in the classroom to compete for six parts — three female, three male. The dialogue included some talk of colleges, elite schools to which a couple of the characters have applied. One of them is Dartmouth, which the Truman students pronounced DART-mouth, to rhyme with "south." "It's DART-myth," Volpe pointed out a couple of times, but they kept making the same mistake. Oberlin College and Vassar were equally baffling.

The auditions moved quickly, except when Volpe slowed the pace with observations about the material. "The setting here is a private school, very privileged," he said. "I wanted you to see how the other half lives."

He made clear what it would take to win a role. "We're going to need to see how far you can go. We need to see the fire. If it's anger, if it's pain, you can't be afraid to go to that place. I'm not talking about shouting. I mean something you find deep inside."

Volpe and his students would set a goal: To be judged worthy of a "main stage" performance at the annual Thespian Festival, a prestigious high-school gathering that takes place each summer at the University of Nebraska. Truman High qualified four previous times. It was always an exhilarating experience for Volpe's students to travel to where they were regarded as stars, and nobody knew much about where they came from.

Bobby Ryan, a senior who was auditioning for "Good Boys," told me about going to Nebraska two years earlier when Truman performed "The Rimers of Eldritch," a Lanford Wilson drama set in a small Missouri town.

Who's your diction coach? a student from another school asked him after the show.

"What's a diction coach?" he replied.

Levittown's 17,000 homes, built in the early 1950s, sprawl over three Pennsylvania townships as well as a tiny jurisdiction called Tullytown Borough. The early residents

came mainly from one of two places: Philadelphia's crowded neighborhoods, as my parents did, or coal country in upstate Pennsylvania. People had yards, fruit trees, washers and dryers, more personal space than they had ever known.

As a kid, I heard stories about how much money men made at U.S. Steel and other nearby industrial giants, at what seemed like astronomical hourly rates. I didn't consider it bragging — I just think a lot of people were amazed to be so flush with cash. They bought second homes in the Poconos. Kept big R.V.s in their driveways.

Truman High is in Bristol Township, referred to as the lower end of Levittown — a designation that applies both geographically and demographically. The neighborhoods it draws from are still often called blue-collar, but that is an outdated description based on good union jobs now two decades gone. One day I drove one of Volpe's students home after a rehearsal. His commentary as we pulled up to his house sounded like lyrics from a Springsteen dirge. "That's the van that hasn't run since like the year 2000," he said. "And that's the boat we never put in the water anymore."

In the local lexicon, Truman High, in otherwise prosperous Bucks County, is "on the wrong side of Route 1." It's where you'd leave if you hit the lottery.

Volpe is one of those people who create astonishing success in the most unlikely of settings. Generations of his students heard him say, "If all we had was a bare stage with one light bulb, we could still do theater." And the thing is, they believed him.

As the community was going to pieces, Volpe built Truman's drama program into one of the best in America, and the school itself into something like a de facto high school for the performing arts. He and his assistant director, a student of his in the early '90s, taught nothing but theater — three levels of it, plus musical theater. A third teacher, also a former student, taught theater to ninth graders.

I sat in Volpe's classroom one day as his students began a lesson on "The Goat," by Edward Albee. Its content, he told them, was shocking (a man has sex with a goat), but beyond that, it was a "heartbreaking" play, an allegory about love and how it can be ruined, even when no one intends that. "Albee is what we call an absurdist playwright," he said. "He's probably America's greatest living playwright." A student interrupted him. "He wrote 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' right?"

"Yes, and that is a remarkable piece of theater," Volpe said. "But I have to tell you, 'The Goat' is not as famous a play as 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' but when I went to New York and saw this for the first time, I was knocked out by it. When I left the theater, I was just emotionally devastated in the way you are after you see something like that. I had to

walk around the corner and have a cocktail."

Everyone laughed. The first couple of times I saw Volpe start down a path like this, I would look out into a classroom, or at a cast sitting on the edge of a stage listening to him, and expect to see eyes glazing over. I could not imagine that teenagers anywhere — and certainly not here, where many of them were not that academically inclined — really wanted to listen to a man in his 60s rhapsodize about Edward Albee and the nature of love. But they did.

I asked Volpe once how he knew when he was connecting with students. His answer seemed like a credo any educator could use. "When the bell rings, I want them to feel like they wish the class wasn't over and they don't want to leave," he said. "If I see that, then I know we've had a great class."

When Volpe posted his casting choices for "Good Boys and True" on the wall outside his classroom, the three boys who won parts were Wayne Miletto, a would-be anchor of Truman's defensive line except that he had quit football for theater; Zach Philippi, an all-conference baseball player; and Bobby Ryan, a lacrosse player.

"We're gonna have a great time," Ryan, the clown in the group, said to the others on the first day they gathered as a cast. "We've got some chocolate flavor," he said, referring to Miletto, who is black. "We've got some Latin flavor," he continued, looking at Mariela Castillo, who was selected to play Philippi's mother. "Hey, Mariela, are you gonna bring in some of those great rice and beans your mom cooks?" Castillo was part of a salsa duo with her older sister and liked to say proudly that she is "100 percent Puerto Rican." She shot Ryan a wicked look. "I made those rice and beans. What do you think, I can't cook?"

Long before the television show "Glee" popularized the notion that a male athlete might participate in a school show — which even now is unusual in most high schools — Volpe was attracting them into his productions. It was a strength of his program. He could draw, as he put it, from "all corners of the building" — from every self-defined and self-limiting clique.

Volpe's marriage ended some years after I was his student, and he came out as gay to his family and close friends. (He remains close to his former wife, and they are soon to be grandparents.) As a high-school student in the early 1960s at the all-boys Father Judge High School in Philadelphia — in an environment where the weaker boys were taunted and sometimes physically bullied — Volpe felt protected by close friends who played on the school's football team and were his classmates in grade school. "I was accepted by them, and they would not allow me to be victimized," he told me. "They saved me, whereas other boys weren't saved."

As I watched him at work at Truman, I sometimes felt as

if he were giving those same kind of athletic boys a gift, a passport into the rest of their souls. “The only word I can use to describe it is ‘powerful,’ ” Philippi, who came into Truman theater two years after his friends Ryan and Miletto, told me. “I’ve danced onstage. I sang onstage. It totally changed me. There’s more parts of me than I realized before.”

High-school theater is, generally speaking, almost shockingly vanilla. Many of the most popular dramas and musicals performed each season date back more than half a century. “Arsenic and Old Lace,” “You Can’t Take It With You” and “Bye Bye Birdie” are perennials on the top 10 lists published by Dramatics magazine.

In the two years I spent observing Volpe, I sometimes wondered: Has he pushed it too far? Am I looking at the thing that is finally going to bring him down? He favored material that was on the “knife’s edge,” as he put it. But the community and school administration trusted him to stage the shows tastefully, and he encouraged his students to approach art as a way of fully embracing, and understanding, life. They were not yet adults, but in that middle stage, late adolescence, coming-of-age. They had seen enough — parents whose marriages blew apart, homes foreclosed on, family vehicles repossessed in the middle of the night, a popular classmate who committed suicide — to know that life is not a Disney movie.

“We deal with all the topics that out in the real world make people uncomfortable,” Courtney Meyer, a member of the “Good Boys” cast, told me one day. “That’s one of the big reasons to do theater, right?”

Meyer is smart and sardonic, a dazzling actress and sometimes lost soul whom Volpe and his assistant director, Tracey Krause, worried about when she was not under their watch. She lives in Croydon, a hamlet south of Levittown along the Delaware River, which is frequently the butt of jokes among students at Truman. I sometimes thought Croydon was put on this earth to make Levittowners feel marginally better about themselves.

“I live right near Croydon Pizza,” Meyer said as we talked one day. “You know it, right?” She laughed. “It’s our icon — Croydon Pizza, known around the world.” She was working at a restaurant called Georgine’s, where her mother and grandmother had waited on tables. “So I’m third-generation Georgine’s.”

Volpe almost never told an actor how to say a line and was rarely overt about stage direction. “You need to move more in this scene,” he would say. “I’m not going to tell you when, but you’ll feel it.” He told his students, “You have to find your character,” by which he meant they must imagine motivations, a back story and even a future for characters beyond what was written in the script.

He believed that Meyer thought her way through parts as well as any actor he had ever had. She approached her preparation as if she were writing fiction. “You have to think of who your character is, who her friends are, if she has a good relationship with her parents or not, what motivates her,” she told me. “Then everything you do onstage, the way you say your lines, how you move, is based on that.”

Meyer played the part of Cheryl Moody, the public-school girl working a dreary mall job who is secretly videotaped having sex with the prep-school quarterback. Philippi played the quarterback, Brandon Hardy, who takes advantage of Cheryl in large part because he can.

In building her character, Meyer told me that the most important thing was to make Cheryl’s motivation more than physical attraction: she was chasing a fantasy that had to do as much with Brandon’s gilded life as his sex appeal. She did not want to play the part as “just a slutty girl,” Meyer said. “There are millions of slutty girls. They’re not interesting.”

Volpe grew up in Philadelphia, attended its Catholic schools and, after graduating from La Salle University, began teaching at Truman (which then had a different name) when he was 21. To that point, he had no experience in theater. It is the great oddity of his career. He had never acted, never painted a set, never worked on a stage crew, never ushered or as much as sold a ticket. He loved the theater and talked about it with friends, but what he knew came from reading about it and sitting in the audience. In his second year of teaching, in 1970, he applied to become his high school’s assistant drama director; instead, he was appointed the drama director when the woman in the job left the faculty.

His first play was “Antigone,” which he decided to do “very modern.” The set was all white. He costumed the actors in green plastic trash bags. Their armor was sculptured out of aluminum foil. “I couldn’t tell you what made me do it that way,” Volpe says. “When it was over, people did that thing where they clap, but very slowly. No one would look at me.”

He attended productions at other local high schools and made friends and mentors of their drama directors. He took classes at Philadelphia-area colleges and attended an intensive summer-theater program at Northwestern in Chicago. Volpe obviously had innate talents related to theater — an ear for language, a feel for pacing and for calibration of emotional pitch. But they were untapped and entirely untrained. “I knew what I wanted to do on the stage, but I didn’t really know how to get there,” he says. “I had to learn balance, harmony, order, design, composition. I had to learn that all good theater is a process, and you must go through it totally or an element will be missed somewhere, and the end result will be nothing more than mediocre.”

As Volpe learned, and his work became more ambitious, executives at Music Theater International, which licenses shows, took notice. “Acting is all about the choices that you make in the moment,” John Prignano, M.T.I.’s senior operations officer, told me. He had seen Truman’s shows at festivals. “I thought, Someone is really teaching them to trust their choices, and whoever that is, I want to work with him.”

Plays that get into the bloodstream of high-school theater are lucrative sources of revenue for their creators and heirs; M.T.I. began to count on Volpe to pilot challenging material to see if it could be adapted for high-school actors and audiences. In 2007, he was asked to direct a high-school version of “Rent.” Three hundred students, nearly one out of every five at Truman, auditioned for parts. In 2011, Volpe put on a high-school pilot of another Tony-Award-winning musical at Truman, the edgy “Spring Awakening.”

In 2001, he staged “Les Misérables,” the show produced by Cameron Mackintosh, the billionaire Broadway and West End impresario. On closing night, Mackintosh, a co-owner of M.T.I., traveled by limousine from Manhattan to Levittown for the performance and watched from one of the wood-plank seats in Truman’s ancient auditorium.

After it was over, everybody figured Mackintosh would get in his limo and high-tail it back to New York, but he stayed for the cast party in the cafeteria. The cast could hardly believe it. No one, in their experience, chose to come to Truman. And here they had put on a show, and the most powerful man on Broadway was celebrating with them, shaking their hands, telling everyone that they had been “brilliant, just brilliant!”

Volpe watched rehearsals from a seat eight rows back in the theater, with what everyone called the Book of Tears on his lap — a journal in which he made notes for the cast. The play begins with the character of Brandon leading a tour for new students of the prep school. He cannot immediately make himself detestable, but something in his manner — a sneer beneath his smile, a hint of corrosive self-regard — must project trouble ahead.

“You’re a good person, Zach,” Volpe said as the six cast members sat on the edge of the stage. “You know that. Everyone loves you. You love yourself.” After the laughter at this little dig stopped, Volpe continued. “It’s going to take time, I know it will, but you have to find the evil in this character. I know that’s a strong word, but think about what he has done.”

The family portrayed in the play is wealthy, but Truman’s theater program did not have the money to purchase high-end furniture for the set, and no Truman parents would have any in their homes to lend. The living-room set consisted of Ikea pieces bought for the play.

“Zach, would you eat a pear?” Volpe asked at one rehearsal, during a scene in which Brandon eats an apple he takes from a fruit bowl. Volpe thought a pear seemed more “upper class” and also less likely to make a loud crunch into the microphone.

Volpe’s attention gravitated to a prop he didn’t like, a trophy sitting on the football coach’s desk. It was too big. “Whose idea was that?” he asked.

“Yours,” said Tracey Krause, his assistant director.

As opening night neared, Volpe seemed to lose his car keys every other day. He misplaced his reading glasses. Flashing her middle finger at various cast members became Courtney Meyer’s primary mode of communication. Everyone was a little stressed, and it did not help that one actor in the six-person cast, Mariela Castillo, was floundering.

Castillo had by far the most challenging role as the mother of Philippi’s character, a 45-year-old upper-middle-class doctor. Volpe considered Castillo a “triple threat” — an accomplished singer, dancer and actor. “It doesn’t hurt,” he added, “that she’s absolutely gorgeous.”

But Castillo could not hit the right emotional pitch. When her anger should have boiled over, Volpe found her too restrained. “Less is more,” he often told his actors, but she seemed to have taken that too much to heart. Her mastery of the role actually appeared to be declining. She was saying lines without conviction and weakening the performances of everyone in her scenes.

“Mariela, I’m not going to get real down on you,” he said one day as he gave notes to the cast. “You’re already down on yourself. When you’re on, nobody’s better. When you’re off, everybody’s better. You already know that about yourself. And right now, you’re not good. Everybody’s better.”

Volpe was not done. “Some actors can show up at 7 p.m., dress, walk up onstage and pull it off. And some have to get here at 5:30 and sit quietly and think and close everything out. Mariela, you’re in that second category. So whatever’s going on in your life — your boyfriend, your fight with your mom, your senior project, the book you’re reading — you’ve got to put that aside for now, all of it.”

I had naïvely assumed that Volpe’s actors would be among the top students at their middling high school, high achievers across the board. They were thespians! Immersed in theater. They could hold forth on Edward Albee and Adam Rapp. They knew the difference between August Wilson and Lanford Wilson. So I figured that they would excel in the classroom.

But Truman Drama was like a laboratory for the concept of multiple intelligences, the idea that people learn in different ways and that a person's ability in one sphere does not always predict performance in another. For Volpe's students, engagement in theater tapped into their souls and spirits. It excited the parts of their brains that relate to language, movement and musicality. Some were among Truman's top academic performers. Many were not.

Among the six in the "Good Boys" cast, Castillo was in a category of her own. She could not even take a theater class until her senior year because her schedule was loaded with remedial courses. Her learning issues had a known cause: chemotherapy, administered in high doses, to treat childhood leukemia (diagnosed when she was 3). But in theater, she had the ability to store and access large amounts of information in a way that often eluded her in other subjects. "I'm not supposed to be able to remember things, but I found out that when I'm doing a play, I can memorize dialogue," Castillo told me. "In theater, everything is staged and organized. It goes in order and fits together. I've seen how Mr. Volpe is so brilliant at that, and it's helped me organize my life in the same way."

Volpe was, of course, aware of Castillo's learning issues. "But I don't pay any attention to that side of her, because I don't ever see it," he said. "It doesn't color my relationship with her in any way. Maybe I could be faulted for that. But I have never given her any accommodations or expected less of her, even in class, and I don't think I should. With me, she is absolutely brilliant. She is one of the best actresses we've ever had here."

The rest of the cast, sitting on the edge of the stage, seemed braced as he addressed Castillo that day. "I know how good you can be," Volpe said. "I just need you to get there."

Castillo nodded. "I'll try, Mr. Volpe," she said quietly.

Castillo was staring straight ahead, right at Volpe. She didn't offer a defense or, though she looked upset, cry. I never saw anyone cry at a Truman rehearsal. It was a point of pride. The program was not for babies. Castillo would spend several nights in her room at home, practicing her lines and trying to find the right pitch. "He's the teacher and I'm the learner," she said. "I have to consume everything he says and try to do what he's asking."

The Levittown of my youth, and of Volpe's early years teaching there, was the quintessential American suburb before the rise of video games, cable TV, the Internet. It had no Main Street or downtown, no culture, not a single thing of visual interest. As a teenager, I spent summer nights coasting around on my bicycle with friends, often well past midnight, miles in every direction. We told ourselves we were looking to meet girls, but I think we were trying to get somewhere that didn't look like everywhere else. We were

not coming back to this town, any of us, once we left.

In the midst of this suburban void, I encountered Volpe. It was 1972. I was 16, and he was my 11th-grade English teacher. He was in his mid-20s and starting his career, but he wasn't one of those hippie teachers who talked about the Vietnam War, whole grains and yogurt. I don't recall thinking of him as especially young, even in relation to other teachers. He seemed fully an adult. His jet-black hair was stylish, but not too long.

When I look back now on what first drew me to Volpe, I think it was that I loved to hear him talk. Sentences and whole paragraphs seemed to flow extemporaneously, organically. He seemed literary, to the extent we knew what that was, but not spellbound by his own voice. As naturally as his words poured forth, they stopped, and he asked what we thought.

I still remember the simple question he asked me not long after I started in his class. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a good writer?" I had turned in a paper on Herman Melville's "Billy Budd," a work I did not particularly like and definitely didn't understand, but I tried to make some original point, God knows what, and Volpe applauded my effort. And in fact, no one had ever said anything about my writing. I was an athlete, interested mainly (or solely) in whatever sport was in season.

One thing I discovered when researching a book on Volpe and Truman's theater program was that nearly everyone I talked to had the same experience I did with him. They felt that at a certain moment, he knew them better than they knew themselves. That is what gifted, intuitive teachers do. What they say doesn't have to be that profound — just well timed and well aimed. Their words go to a place that no other teacher, and no parent, has touched.

"He took me on," says Elizabeth Cuthrell, who was two years behind me in high school and is now a well-regarded screenwriter and independent film producer in New York. Her home life was turbulent when she was in high school, and she considers Volpe both a mentor and a savior. "From 10th to 12th grades, he recited to me a mantra about how I could do anything. The recitation wasn't literal, but it was in the subtext of every interaction we had. He praised my writing, my acting, my dancing. He laughed at my jokes."

What I found when I came back to spend time with Volpe, some 40 years after being his student, was that he was, at once, a fully modern man but also, in some old-fashioned sense, a schoolteacher — one whose long tenure and accomplishments gave him an unusual degree of freedom in his classroom and drama program. He never expounded on education theory or reform. His theater courses were not Advanced Placement offerings (there is no such thing as A.P. Theater), and the curriculum was of his own devising.

In a more affluent community, with students gunning for admissions to highly selective colleges, parents might not have been eager for their children to take one of his classes — let alone all four of them. They would want to know: What credentials were they gaining? Where would it lead them?

Even though he didn't speak in the idiom of the movement, much of what I observed in Volpe's theater program could fit comfortably within the muscular language of education reform — with its emphasis on problem solving, standards, "racing to the top" and accountability. Theater is part of the "arts," an airy term, but the time his students spent with him was actually the least theoretical part of their day. With each production, they set an incredibly high goal and went about building something.

At a rehearsal one day, he told his cast, "You have become so good that every mistake you make has a spotlight on it." That seemed to me such an economical yet elegant way of giving praise while making a demand.

"Volp, we're gonna bring the heat!" Zach Philippi said as the cast arrived for opening night at Truman. Moments into Act 1, there is a scene in which he and Bobby Ryan take their shirts off as they dress for a gym class. They are nicely built boys, lean and strong. The auditorium was not quite filled to capacity — as at many high schools, only the musicals at Truman fully sell out — but when the shirts came off, the noise level made the theater seem packed. The girls in the seats hooted and giggled. The boys whistled.

The actors froze like professionals until the noise subsided. Ryan would recall thinking: "They have to know that the rest of our clothes aren't coming off, right? Even at Truman we can't do that."

Castillo was magnificent on opening night — "a different actress," Volpe said, from the one who struggled in the preceding weeks. She had held little meetings with herself. Pep talks. She needed to perform at a level that would satisfy her director's high expectations — and her own.

Volpe was thrilled with how the cast performed. He had been trying in recent weeks to tamp down their hopes of being chosen for a main stage selection at the theater festival. "This is not a Nebraska play. It's too much on the edge of the knife for Middle America," he said to them one day, by which he meant that no matter how high the quality of their performance, the adjudicators who make the selections for the Thespian Festival would find the material too disquieting. But everyone knew he wanted to take "Good Boys" to Nebraska as much as they did. If he could get it there, the kids in the audience would love it; some of their teachers would hate it. It would be a sensation.

A week before Thanksgiving, Truman would perform

"Good Boys" at the state theater festival in Connellsville, in western Pennsylvania. That is where the show would be judged.

Bobby Ryan's character is gay, and Zach Philippi's, at least outwardly, is not, but the two best friends have been sexually intimate. Near the end of the second act, in the play's denouement, they have a falling out over Philippi's betrayal of the girl and the lies he's told. Ryan and Philippi played the scene at a high volume at first, but it got progressively quieter.

In previous performances, Ryan stood face to face with Philippi. At the state festival, he walked behind him, put his arms around him and stroked his chest. He leaned forward and whispered his lines with his lips right up against Philippi's ear: "Never talk to me again. Never call me. Never seek me out. If we see each other — anywhere, on the street, in passing — don't stop. Don't say hi. Don't wave. Don't say anything."

He had not told Philippi he would do it that way. He had not known himself.

Each school performing a full-length play was to be critiqued afterward by drama directors from other Pennsylvania high schools. The comments are considered a bit of constructive feedback from the outside. (The adjudicators for the Thespian Festival in Nebraska were also in the house, but their verdict would arrive at Truman by mail, several weeks later.)

The directors who came backstage to talk to the Truman cast clutched the forms on which they were supposed to have formulated comments on the various aspects of the production from both dramatic and technical perspectives — blocking, diction, set, lighting, sound, wardrobe, props and so on. As Volpe introduced the directors, the kids quieted down, waiting to hear what they had done well, where they could improve.

Two of the directors immediately apologized. Their forms were blank. The exercise seemed too small for what they wanted to communicate. "I'm sorry, I started to write a few things down, but it just seemed so stupid to continue," Andrea Lee Roney, the drama director at North Penn High School, outside Philadelphia, explained. "You know what you did. You know how remarkable it was. There were 900 kids out there who just grew up a little bit. All I can say is thank you."

The final night of the festival there was an awards ceremony, which included the naming of an all-star cast. No production could have more than one actor honored. The last name called was Truman's honoree — Mariela Castillo. As she walked to the stage to accept her honor, she felt, she said, "like a movie star getting her Academy Award."

The cast members in “Good Boys” were all seniors and close friends, deeply bonded even before this show. Two of them won parts in “Rent” as freshmen. As Bobby Ryan put it, they had been through everything together — “good stuff, bad stuff, relationships that got started and didn’t end too good. You name it, and we’ve survived it.”

Volpe, who would retire in 2013, considered them one of the finest classes of actors he had ever directed, a special group that comes along no more than once a decade. He had chosen “Good Boys” with them in mind. “When I look back on my career, on my 43 years of teaching, I will say this is the best work I have ever done,” Volpe told the cast. “The very best work. You know me, all of you know me well, and you know I would never say that if I didn’t mean it.”

Truman students were acutely aware of how they were regarded locally. Those who played sports sometimes felt that athletes from neighboring high schools looked down on them. Philippi kept talking about what it would mean to be selected to the Thespian Festival. “They say we’re known in the nation, which is insane, to think you’re a part of that,” he said. “Because in Bucks County, we’re not known for anything good, just negative things.”

Volpe promised the kids he wouldn’t open the letter from the organizers of the Nebraska festival without them present. They would find out when he did. Three days before the start of Christmas break, he had a feeling as he

walked to the main office after lunch to check his mailbox. Sure enough, the envelope from the Educational Theatre Association was in his slot, mailed from its Cincinnati headquarters.

Volpe texted the cast and crew, and when the bell rang at the end of the next period, they all came running to his classroom. He showed them the envelope, unsealed it and pulled out the letter. It began, “Dear Louis,” and was followed by a one-word sentence: “Congratulations!”

They all began to scream and shout and hug one another. They threw their arms around Volpe. Philippi, the most openly emotional among them, had tears rolling down his cheeks.

They were going to Nebraska.

Michael Sokolove is a contributing writer for the magazine. His latest book, from which this article is adapted, is “Drama High,” out this month from Riverhead.

Buy the entire book or download to your Kindle: <https://www.amazon.com/Drama-High-Incredible-Brilliant-Struggling/dp/1594488223>

This book inspired (loosely) the one-season NBC TV series, *Rise*, which you can read about here:
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6487416/>
