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

A Stage In Their Lives

Sunday June 1, 1997

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

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

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

She will be Maria in West Side Story.

Say it loud and there's music playing.

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

Say it soft and it's almost like praying.

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

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

Her last chance to shine.

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

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

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

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

You don't know them. Not yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon you will know them.

And you will know this:

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Ship!" a boy yells.

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

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

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

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

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

"Quiet, everybody."

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

"Quiet!"

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

"Starr was named appropriately," he says.

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

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

If there is a spring musical.

"Let's get to work," Starr says. "What do we want to do?"

A Chorus Line?

No.

42nd Street?

No.

The Wizard of Oz?

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

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

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

Ask him about the drama club's reputation among the rest of the student body, and he sneers, "I prefer not to talk about the podunks and morons who don't understand art or the theater."

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

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

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

The debate continues.

Seven Brides for Seven Brothers?

No.

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

Everyone groans.

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

"Little kids have parents and little kids' parents suck," Eli says.

Eli wins, Alanna loses. Next case.

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

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

"Twenty to one," Michele Miller says.

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

But they don't get most of the parts.

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

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

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

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

The lines are drawn.

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

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

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

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

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

Starr sits on the floor and counts.

Anything Goes – 13.

West Side Story – 11.

The Sound of Music – 4.

Michele wins, Eli loses. Next case.

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

"I can't sing."

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

"That's Pavawatti," she announced.

The startled doctor looked at her mother.

"Did she say what I think she said?"

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

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

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

Just one other girl: Angela Brown.

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

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

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

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

What if that were me?

Oh, yes, Angela Brown can just see it.

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

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

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

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

Ever the nice girl, Angela shakes her head.

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

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

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

I've got a sinus infection.

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

I think I'm sick.

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

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

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

director, and Neil Ewachiw, the musical director.

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Ewachiw is intrigued.

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

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

She does.

"Now a D major."

She gulps and sings.

Higher and higher, up the scale they go.

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

She sings.

"Now an F major."

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

"Thank you," Mr. Ewachiw says.

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

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

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

Has a high C.

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

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

"I suck," he says.

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

"I feel terrible," she says.

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

Mr. Ewachiw turns over Anna's audition sheet.

He draws a star.

It's Angie Guido's turn.

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

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

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

She closes her eyes.

Without me, this world will go on turning.

A world that's full of happiness

that I have never known.

"Thank you," Mr. Ewachiw says.

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

One boy is left.

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

"You can sit this one out."

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

The leading man.

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

No one else is even close.

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

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

Decision time.

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

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

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

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

"Why?" a girl asks.

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

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

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

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

There is silence. He owns the room.

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

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

Eli Senter leaps to his feet.

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

Each year, some 275 schools and community theaters in the country perform West Side Story. This year North County High will join them. The vote is almost unanimous.

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

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

She's crying for another reason.

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

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

"But she has another year," Angie says.

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

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

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

Brian Forte, of course, will be Tony.

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

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

Anna Schoenfelder will be Anita.

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

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

THE PLAYERS

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

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

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

him.
Angela Brown – From this demure girl comes an astonishing sound. Is it enough to make her a star?
Starr Lucas – She loves acting. She's the Drama Queen. So why has she taken herself out of the cast?

Monday June 2, 1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cast list is inside.

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

"I'm a Jet!" he shouts.

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

She looks.

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

Maria.

Friends hug and congratulate her. She is stunned.

More students arrive, clumping around the list, searching for their part.

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

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

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

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

One look.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She seeks the light," Mr. Shipley says.

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

"Mom," she said, "there's just not many parts for people who walk funny."

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

"I have cerebral palsy," Starr explains.

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

"I've always known there was a purpose for me," she says.

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

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

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

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

Starr sees it as logical.

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

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

He whirls.

"There's too few guys," he says loudly, as he says most things. "He can't not cast me."

Eli figures he will be one of the gang members, a Jet or a Shark, a role in which he can act and not sing.

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

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

"You're Riff," a boy tells Eli.

"Riff's cool," a girl says.

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

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

He becomes very still.

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

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

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

Sonny, the family dog, barks.

Rosemary looks outside. Angie and Mark approach the house.

Oh, no.

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

"That's it," Angie says. "I give up."

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

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

"Angie," her mother says, trying desperately to comfort her, "it just wasn't your time. It wasn't your time to shine."

Then Mrs. Guido calls the school.

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

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

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

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

Getting by.

"Hey," he jokes, hands turned up. "I'm a slacker."

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

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

Later, Mr. Shipley pulls Brian aside.

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

"You're going to have to get your ass in gear," he tells him.

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

"OK, Mr. Shipley," Brian replies.

Whatever.

Mr. Shipley stays away from the bulletin board.

"He hides," Starr says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Call Angie Guido's mother. She says you'll know why."

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

Angie, are you all right?

Angie, we want you back.

Angie, we love you.

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

"You've got to be in it," Michele says.

Angie is confused.

"I don't know. I don't know."

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

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

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

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

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

Good night, good night,
Sleep well and when you dream,
Dream of me.
Tonight.

She had dreamed of playing Maria. Now she will.

What happens when your dream comes true?

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 Rumblings. 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 actually 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 it is?" 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.

I*n 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.