

Like 'Glee,' only real

How a high school drama program inspires kids in a down-at-the-heels Philadelphia suburb

DRAMA HIGH: The Incredible True Story of a Brilliant Teacher, a Struggling Town, and the Magic of Theater, by Michael Sokolove. Riverhead, 352 pp., \$27.95.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

Harry S. Truman High School in Levittown, Pa., is a place where theater is so popular that star athletes were quitting their teams to go onstage 30 years before the plotline appeared on "Glee." Nowadays, when they travel to drama competitions, explains one student, "the girls from other schools are excited to see us because we're the only school that brings our straight guys."

"Drama High" is an account of this unusual program, told by its graduate Michael Sokolove, a journalist with three previous books and a byline familiar to readers of The New York Times Magazine. Sokolove reconnected with his alma mater when he gave a graduation speech in 2010 — then spent most of the next school year back on campus to report the story.

Levittown, a Philadelphia suburb, is a planned community built soon after Long Island's Levittown. In 1952 it was touted as "one of the great wonders of its day," but it has now fallen into social disarray. "And it's not like the people who live around here left and a bunch of poor people moved in," a student observes. "It's the exact same people. They just got poorer." Teen pregnancies, single parents, people with no jobs or multiple jobs that don't make ends meet are all common.

It wasn't this way when



The cast of "Good Boys and True," a highly charged drama performed at Harry Truman High in Levittown, Pa., from left: Courtney Meyer, Bobby Ryan, Mariela Castillo, Zach Philippi, Britney Harron and Wayne Miletto.



Lou Volpe, head of the drama program at Harry Truman

Sokolove went to school here in the 1970s, but there is one constant — drama teacher Lou Volpe, who began his influence on Sokolove's life with a comment on an English paper: "Has anyone ever told you that you're a good writer?" By the time of Sokolove's return, Volpe's program had garnered national attention, spawned

working actors and industry executives, and been a testing ground for high school versions of plays such as "Rent."

After the first chapter, which feels like a puff piece, Sokolove sucks us in quickly, as Volpe selects the cast members for his 2010 production of "Good Boys and True," an intense drama by the playwright Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. The play is set at a fancy prep school where a star athlete has been implicated in the making of a sex tape involving a townie girl. We follow this play from casting through production and on the quest to "go to Nebraska" — i.e., be selected for the main stage of the International Thespian Festival held there each summer. Like the other production covered in the book, "Spring Awakening," it could not be produced in most high schools due to content and language. But Volpe has silenced the doubters, placating them with the occasional "Godspell" and "High School Musical."

Sokolove's portraits of the student actors are the strongest element of the book. Zach

Philippi, a golden boy and athlete in real life, plays the main character in "Good Boys," whose motivation for making the tape is to dispel rumors about himself and his best friend, who is gay. This part is played by Zach's own best friend, Bobby Ryan, which doesn't inhibit the boys but enables them to blow the intensity onstage through the roof.

His mother is played by Mariela Castillo, a stunningly gifted actress who is in special education classes due to brain damage from childhood leukemia treatment. The coach is played by a husky African-American boy named Wayne Miletto, who retired from football in 10th grade to become one of the mainstays of Volpe's program.

The townie is played by Courtney Meyer, who hails from a cars-on-blocks neigh-

borhood called Croydon. She doesn't flinch at Volpe's apparent typecasting when he announces, "I see you as Cheryl Moody." She believes, as does Volpe, that she can get inside this character and make her more than "just a whore."

"Drama High" is a love letter to a brilliant educator and the crowd-pleasing tale of a quest for glory, but it's also an argument for arts education and a discussion of class. The author now lives in wealthy Bethesda, Md., and the time he spent covering this story brought out his feelings about his current home. "I still had a Philadelphia sensibility — maybe even a Levittown sensibility, as much as I would not have wanted to own up to it — something in my DNA, some congenital chip on my shoulder that probably goes back to my parents' working-class roots. So, yes, on some gut level, much about this slice of America where I found myself annoyed the hell out of me."

Truman High, though, he loves without reservation. Readers will, too.

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'Drama High'
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