

THE MORNING CALL

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THE INSPIRATION BEHIND NBC'S 'RISE': BUCKS DRAMA TEACHER WHO TURNED PROGRAM AT STRUGGLING SCHOOL INTO A POWERHOUSE



Lou Volpe, whose work as a theater teacher at Harry S. Truman High School in Levittown, Bucks County, is the inspiration for the new NBC drama 'Rise.' (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Margie Peterson Special to The Morning Call

The provocative rock musical “Spring Awakening” deals with issues ranging from teen pregnancy and abortion to suicide and repressed homosexuality. It ain’t “The Music Man,” where they’ve got Trouble with a capital “T” and that rhymes with “P” and that stands for pool.

So finding someone who would attempt to turn that show — loved by many for skewering adult hypocrisy and rigid societal expectations — into something high schoolers could perform would be no small feat. For that, Music Theater International,

the New York company that licenses such shows, turned to Lou Volpe, then theater director for Harry S. Truman High School in Levittown, Bucks County.

A pioneer of cutting-edge high school plays and musicals, Volpe had worked with MTI to produce pilot high school versions of “Les Miserables” in 2001 and “Rent” in 2007. In fall 2011, about 18 months before retiring after 44 years of teaching, Volpe took on “Spring Awakening” and directed a version for teens.

Michael Sokolove, a former student of Volpe’s, chronicled his teacher’s endeavors in his 2013 book “Drama High: The Incredible True Story of a Brilliant Teacher, a Struggling Town and the Magic of Theater.” The book is the inspiration for the new NBC television drama “Rise,” about a dedicated high school teacher who takes over the school’s lackluster theater department and galvanizes the school and the entire working-class town. It’s a bit like “Glee,” but more serious, as the students navigate the struggles of growing up. The show, which premiered March 13, is co-produced by Jeffrey Seller, lead producer of the hit Broadway musical “Hamilton.”

On April 14, Volpe, a Yardley resident, will be inducted into the Bucks County Playhouse Hall of Fame, joining the likes of actresses Angela Lansbury and [Shirley Jones](#) and librettist and theater producer Oscar Hammerstein. The sold-out event at the playhouse will include performances by some of Volpe’s former students and a screening of the first episode of “Rise.”



Josh Radnor as Lou Mazzuchelli and Rosie Perez as Tracey Wolfe in the NBC drama 'Rise,' about a struggling high school theater program. (VIRGINIA SHERWOOD/NBC / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Michaela Murphy, the Playhouse's director of education, said the theater's leadership wanted to recognize Volpe for his ability to transform lives through the arts.

"He's an extraordinary teacher and a real visionary as a drama teacher," Murphy said. "He not only galvanized the drama club and the individuals within that club but the school at large and really helped the entire school through the art of theater to see what's possible. And that, in turn, really changed the community."

In a telephone interview, Volpe said he's very pleased with the tribute.

"I was very honored and humbled at the same time because of some of the people who are already in it, like Angela Lansbury," he said. "Wow, that's pretty nice company."

This year, the playhouse is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its Student Theater Festival, which it hosts every spring for high schools in the region. On April 9-12 and April 16-19, students will participate in workshops on audition technique, Shakespearean acting and other aspects of drama. Some schools perform short plays that are judged. As a teacher, Volpe participated with his students and now teaches workshops and judges productions.

With his experience in putting on edgy productions, Volpe could teach a master class in how to stage controversial shows without raising the ire of parents, school boards and the community.

"You don't just dive into it," Volpe said. "You go to the school board, you talk about the play, you tell them what you would like to do. Every time I did a play that kind of pushed the envelope a little bit, I always had a big meeting with the parents. I listened to them and sometimes made adjustments."

In the case of "Spring Awakening" that meant there would be none of the nudity that was in the Broadway play. "That is just a line you do not cross," Volpe said. "Our show was 100 percent fully clothed."

It also meant that when the kids sang a song called "Totally Fxxxxd" they mimed the profanity. But the high school show included powerful scenes about teen suicide and kids struggling with their sexuality.

"You were able to deal with them and have your audience empathize with the characters," Volpe said. "It still was pushing the envelope, there's no question about it."



Amy Forsyth as Gwen Strickland and Josh Radnor as Lou Mazzuchelli in the NBC drama 'Rise.' (VIRGINIA SHERWOOD/NBC / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

While producing serious and controversial shows Volpe grew the high school theater program into a powerhouse.

“Drama High” chronicles the staging of an intense play by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa called “Good Boys and True” about power, privilege and sex in an American high school. The production was chosen as one of a handful of plays to be performed on the main stage at the International Thespian Festival at [University of Nebraska](#) at Lincoln, the mecca for high school theater. It was the sixth time the school had received that honor.

Volpe’s experiments in theater were driven in part by his desire to broaden the horizons of students living in a struggling, insular community.

Levittown was created in the early 1950s as a planned community that accommodated the burgeoning, primarily white middle class in the post-World War II years. But the area suffered economically after the nearby U.S. Steel Fairless Works plant closed in the 1990s.

“Absolutely, I wanted to bring the world of the theater to a lot of kids who had never been to Philadelphia, let alone New York,” Volpe says. “I wanted them not only to see what was happening in the Greek times and Shakespearean times and the ’50s in the United States.

“It’s not just the big, happy musical. Yes, that’s part of it, but there’s also theater that makes you think. It pushes your buttons.”

Volpe had a remarkable career for a guy who had never acted or been involved with the theater before he started teaching English in Levittown in 1969. Volpe became assistant director for the high school plays and, when the director moved away, he filled the vacancy despite a lack of experience.

“It was a kind of baptism by fire, I had no idea what I was doing,” he says. “I got the job because no one else signed up for it. The early plays, I call them disasters and humiliations, but I learned a lot.”

He immersed himself in theater and took classes to learn more. As he gained knowledge, experience and confidence, Volpe petitioned the school board to be allowed to teach a theater class.

Over the next several decades, the school added more drama classes and Volpe became a full-time drama teacher. By the time he retired in 2013, the high school had three theater teachers.

Along the way, Volpe found talents in students they didn’t know they had. It was Volpe who first told “Drama High” author Sokolove, a jock in high school, that he was a good writer.

“I think that Lou is a great observer of other people and particularly his students and he had a great love for his students,” Sokolove says. “He saw this part of me that was undeveloped, that I ought to take more seriously, and from that moment on, I did.”



To write about Volpe for “Drama High,” Sokolove, who had worked for the Philadelphia Daily News and Philadelphia Inquirer before becoming a New York Times Magazine contributor, returned regularly to his hometown of Levittown. For nearly 2½ years he

sat in on Volpe's classes, rehearsals and shows and interviewed current and former students.

It was "Hamilton" producer Seller who invited Volpe and Sokolove to New York City to talk about making a television show based on the book.

"It just took off from there," Volpe says. "Sometimes I can't believe the producer of 'Hamilton' asked me to come to New York ... it's amazing."

When Jason Katims, executive producer and showrunner of the show "Friday Night Lights," was chosen to write "Rise," Volpe was over the moon because he says "Friday Night Lights" is his all-time favorite TV show.

"He flew in from Los Angeles and we had an incredible conversation at my house," Volpe says. Katims told him up front that while "Rise" would be inspired by Volpe, the main character would be a straight, married man with three kids. Volpe is gay.

Some critics have accused Katims of "straightwashing" the main character, but Volpe defends Katims and the show.

"I have done some interviews, especially with The Advocate, which is the LGBTQ magazine, and they asked me about that," Volpe says. "And I said I can't agree with you because when Jason came to see me, he said to me, 'Lou, it is not going to be exactly like your life. I'm going to write it from my point of view. This is not going to be a series that is based on the book. It's going to be a series that is inspired by the book.' So I knew from the very beginning.

"Would I have loved to have seen Lou be a gay high school drama director? Of course, 'cause then it would have been me. But I wasn't writing the show. To be honest with you, I don't know many straight men who are musical theater directors. Most of the time, they are either women or gay men."

Volpe and Sokolove have spent some time on the "Rise" set, meeting the cast and doing a bit of consulting. Both said they're very impressed with the show.

"It's very clearly fictionalized as I knew it would be, as I knew it had to be," Sokolove says. "But I think it has the DNA and the soul of the book and the town and of many of the characters."

Volpe says the main character, Lou Mazzuchelli, played by Josh Radnor — best known for playing Ted Mosby on the TV series "How I Met Your Mother" — is portrayed as a hardworking teacher who really cares about his students, just as he was.

The outpouring from his former students after "Drama High" was published and since "Rise" started airing has been gratifying. Some think they see themselves in the show.

"I'll get, 'I know that character is me,'" Volpe chuckles.

