



Louis Volpe, '69

A Home for 'Rent'

BY JANINE STEVENS, '07

THE FIRST FEW NOTES OF THE FAMILIAR SONG STRIKE chords with audiences. The lyrics captivate: “525,600 minutes. 525,000 moments so dear.” These sounds from the Broadway production *Rent* resonate from its home stage in New York and travel to stages across the country. Thanks to Louis Volpe, '69, this tale of love, friendship, and AIDS also has been performed at Harry S. Truman High School in Levittown, Pa., and will debut at high schools across the country.

Volpe, who obtained his bachelor's degree in English from La Salle, spent much of his summer of 2007 editing the mature production for its first high school translation. Having received an offer from licensing company Music Theater International to have a hand in the editing for the school edition, Volpe “jumped at the chance.” With the full support of Truman's principal and school board, Volpe brought the warm songs of *Rent* to the high school, known nationally for its musical theater program.

Students gave up their last month of summer vacation in August to start rehearsals, and three short months later, *Rent—School Edition* premiered in front of a sold-out theater. “I was scared to death. I was so nervous,” Volpe said. Volpe's nerves were justified, since in the audience on opening night sat the family of playwright Jonathan Larson, who died shortly before his show premiered on Broadway in 1996.

Following the final curtain, Jonathan Larson's father, who traveled by bus for the show with the New York producers, spoke of how he believed his son was in the room that night. “The emotion in the room was palpable,” Volpe said.

This was not Volpe's first experience translating a production for a high school assembly. Music Theater International approached Volpe in 2001 for the school debut of *Les Misérables*.

Volpe has taught at Truman for 39 years. As Chair of the Fine and Performing Arts Department, Volpe directs

Truman's fall and spring shows each year, in addition to teaching four theater classes a day.

“Over the years, I've always told my students that my objective is never to train actors. I am not a professional acting coach. I am a teacher,” Volpe said. “I've always looked at high school theater as educational theater. It's about the learning experience and how the students grow.”

During his first year walking the halls of Truman as an English teacher, Volpe's interests were aroused as he passed the auditorium during rehearsals, and he began to take time out to watch them. “I used to sit in and think, ‘I wouldn't do it that way’ as I watched the drama teacher,” Volpe said.

Less than a year later, Volpe would get his chance to do things his way. The drama coach had resigned, and instead of taking over the assistant's position, Volpe found himself taking the Head Director's chair.

For Volpe's first show, he chose the Greek play *Antigone*. “I staged this bizarre interpretation with costumes made out of trash bags and aluminum foil,” he said. Volpe recalled the memory of the sound of four people in the audience clapping after his first show.

He has come a long way since then. Shortly after taking over as Director, he began writing theater courses that the school board approved, and, soon thereafter, theater was offered as an elective.

Evidence of Volpe's accomplishments can be seen covering the walls of the Truman auditorium. Banners dating back to 1975 hold testament to the journey Volpe and Truman High School have taken, noting most recent awards for Best Play, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actress. “It's all very mini-Tony Awards,” Volpe said.

Look for the next Broadway smash to hit Truman High School, as Volpe plans to continue to astound audiences by challenging student thespians with both personal and theatrical growth.