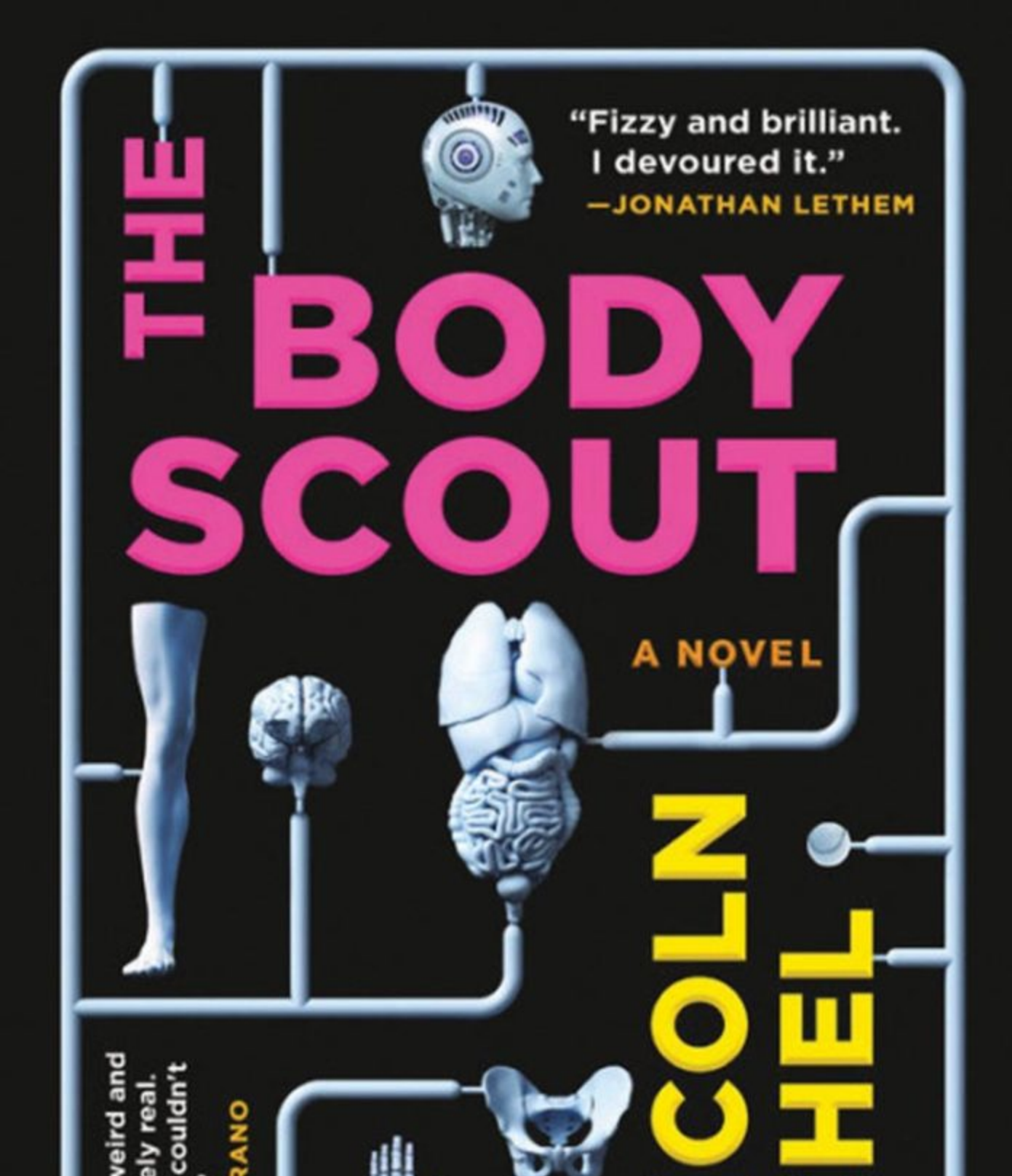


Cyberpunk Noir Sports Fiction, Anyone?

February 4, 2022





The Body Scout by Lincoln Michel

If the genetically modified pig heart transplanted into a Maryland man in January—an instance of “xenotransplantation,” or the transplanting of organs across different species—had been a mechanical one (such as a hip or knee replacement), we’d be squarely in the realm of *The Body Scout*, an impressive debut novel published in September by Western Albemarle High School (WAHS) graduate Lincoln Michel and named one of the 10 Best Science Fiction and Fantasy novels of 2021 by the New York Times. Set about 100 years in the future, the novel’s underlying premise is that technology is slowly replacing humanity—a possibility endorsed by the philosophy of transhumanism. In the future dystopian world Michel creates, weak or diseased organs and limbs are routinely replaced, or “upgraded,” with improved organ implants, grafts, bionic replacements, and other “enhancements”—at a hefty price, of course.

Protagonist Kobo, a former player for the Cyborg League and current scout for the Future League Baseball (FLB), is known as an “oiler” due to his bionic arm and eye. His sometime girlfriend, “Deadeye” Dolores Zamora, wears cybernetic goggles to compensate for her deafness—goggles that lip read for her, provide access to her workplace, and record everything she sees for later playback or zooming. “I still liked to think baseball was a game of technique and talent, not chemistry and cash... for biopharm teams (a typically sly pun conflating ‘farm team’ with ‘pharmaceutical’), players were

the blocks of marble. The drugs sculpted them into stars," he reflects. But these drugs and upgrades can also kill you. After witnessing the gruesome death of his adoptive brother during a Monsanto Mets baseball game on live TV, he sets out to find the murderer, sending him on a series of madcap adventures involving flooded New York subway hideouts, a Janus club where his scuba suit allows him to occupy another's body, and illegal, underground cloning labs. Along the way he becomes involved with the rebel Edenists, who "simply believe men are supposed to live in the vessel they are born into." He finds more deep-seated corruption than he ever imagined, surviving violent attempts to stop him. Familial love and devotion win out as Kobo risks everything to solve the mystery of what or who killed his brother.

Michel's wildly imaginative dystopia carries current trends to the utmost extreme, with flying cars, ubiquitous screens, genetically modified—or even drone models of—wildlife, and cyborgs (humans with bionic parts) as common as robots. Survivors of the Apex Zika pandemic live in "cloud condos" above the dense smog of half-underwater Manhattan, where seagull drones deliver to your table the lab-created restaurant food you ordered from a holographic image on your plate, and "zootech" mosquitoes are used as weapons. Everything from parks to sports teams is owned and named for a corporate sponsor, Neanderthals have been cloned to once again walk among us, and "the first test-tube president" Newman controls the Department of Human Limits. This is a world that none of us would want to live in, but which is so believable it makes your skin crawl.

Author Lincoln Michel. Photo: Adalena Kavanagh.

What sets this book apart is its brilliant writing—"her look slid into me like a splinter"—and delightfully irreverent satire. "The league had banned drone surrogates a couple seasons ago with the No Heartbeat No Seat policy," we are told. A Growth Cola ad advises, "The climate has changed. Your body

should too." Anti-Maxxer (a parody of both anti-vaxxer and anti-masker) cults stage protests against the mortal sin of upgrading, and SoCal separatists are suspected of terrorism. With shades of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932)—Kobo chain smokes "eraser" cigarettes to numb his emotions—and the Terry Gilliam's black comedy film *Brazil* (1985), *The Body Scout* is a masterful amalgam of mystery, sports, sci-fi, and horror—or as the Brooklyn Rail put it, "a mashup of cyberpunk, noir detective novel, and literary fiction centered on the premise of what it means to be human"—all wrapped up in a wickedly satiric package reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut. Michel's inventive writing, biting satire, and clever neologisms—like "skystabber," "creepeasy," and "dewdropper"—make the book fun to read in spite of its abundance of violence. Bomb magazine dubbed it "sci-fi noir"; I admit that neither scifi nor noir are genres I typically enjoy, but if you do, you are sure to love this brilliant romp through both.

"I had some fantastic teachers at WAHS," says Michel, who graduated in 2001. "All of my English teachers, but especially my philosophy teacher, Mrs. Marshall, introduced me to authors and thinkers who have been important to me. Italo Calvino and Franz Kafka really opened my mind to the possibilities of fiction and made me want to be a writer." Kobo's name is inspired by Kobo Abe (1924-1993), a Japanese author and playwright whose absurdist, surrealist fiction included *The Woman in the Dunes*, published in 1962 and adapted to film in 1964.

After earning a BA at George Washington University and an MFA in fiction writing at Columbia University, he now lives in Brooklyn and teaches at Columbia as well as Sarah Lawrence College. "I teach speculative fiction courses that look at the different modes and methods of horror fiction, science fiction, fabulism, etc." He began work on *The Body Scout* in 2017. "It was finished and sent to editors a month before COVID hit in early 2020, so the fact that it takes place in a world ravaged by pandemics is just one of those strange science fiction coincidences."

When asked what genre his work falls into, Michel replied, "Before I even had a title for the novel, I wrote 'science fiction noir baseball thriller novel' at the top of my notebook. So, I guess I always conceived of it as a mashup of genres. I think it's a really exciting time to be writing work that crosses the border between so-called 'literary fiction' and 'genre fiction.' When I was younger, there was a sense these were separate worlds with nothing to say to each other. Thankfully, a lot of writers before me spent time kicking out bricks in the wall between genre fiction and literary fiction, and I think most younger students don't worry about these distinctions. These days, writers like Kelly Link and Carmen Maria Machado compete for the Pulitzer and National Book Award."

On the subject of transhumanism, he pointed out that when it comes to new technologies, "the question always comes down to who the technology is implemented by, who controls it, and what power structures are shaping it. In the novel, I wanted to present a range of ideological and personal reactions to new technologies, and to emphasize that technology can be liberating and oppressive simultaneously, depending on the power structures in place."

Michel's debut story collection, *Upright Beasts*, was published by Coffee House Press in 2015. His fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *NOON*, *Pushcart Prize* anthology, and elsewhere. His essays and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, *The Guardian*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Vice*, among others. Michel will present at this year's Virginia Festival of the Book as part of a panel on speculative fiction on Saturday, March 19, at noon on Zoom, joining Ryka Aoki (*Light from Uncommon Stars*) and Micaiah Johnson (*The Space Between Worlds*). He is currently working on a second novel. To learn more visit lincolnmichel.com.

Super Trouper Spring Musical at Western

May 9, 2022



In an end-of-show plot twist, Sam and Donna sing "I Do!" as the wedding party looks on. Sitting in front: Jackson Davis (Pepper), Cec Wilson (Eddie), Aneesa Chandra (Lisa), and Maya Thomas (Ali). Middle row (left to right) Jacob Walton (Harry), Ian Murphy (Bill), Jack Malin (Sam), Elke Beaumont (Donna), Natacha Jacques (Tanya), Lilly Clark (Rosie), Ella Barber, Kylee Hughes. Back row (left to right) Jake Beard, Birdy O-Connell, Molly Carfagno, Trudy Brement, and Audrey Scialla. Alan Harr is on the higher platform in back. Photo: WAHS Drama.

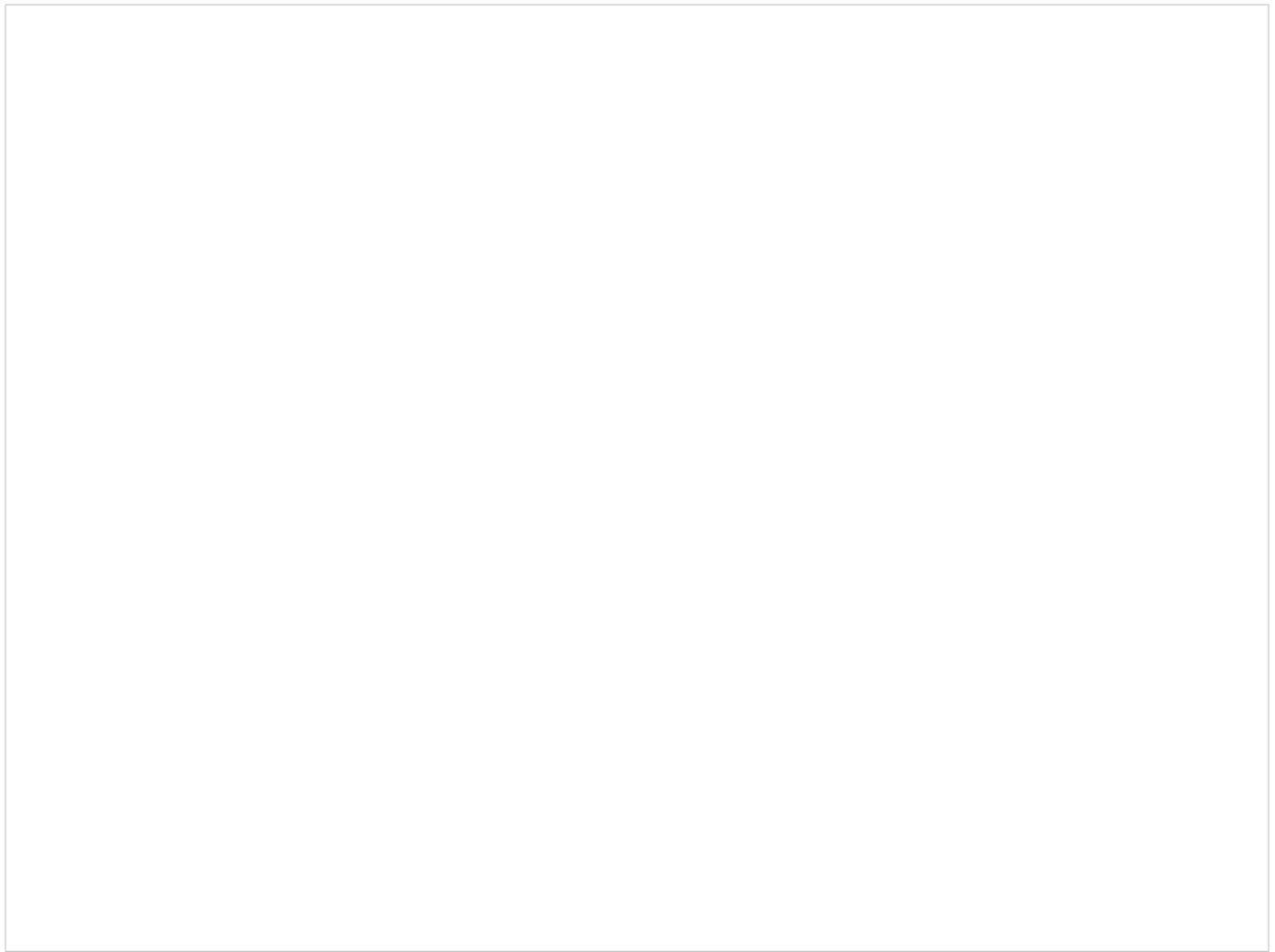
It is difficult to describe the pure joy and hilarity that pervaded the Western Albemarle High School (WAHS) auditorium on Saturday night, April 23, as a 75+ student cast, crew, and orchestra performed the raucous jukebox musical "Mamma Mia!" to a packed audience. We were spellbound as one fabulous ABBA song after another was performed by the supremely talented leads and a chorus so huge it filled every corner of the stage. Since her

arrival at WAHS 12 years ago, Director Caitlin Pitts has built a deep, professional-level drama program and developed the talents of many fortunate students. Along with Vocal Director Abby Smith, Orchestral Director Elizabeth Vaughn with help from Anna Clark, Assistant Director Casey Lockledge, and a dedicated sound and lighting crew led by Kip Chatterson and Denny Barberio, the WAHS Theatre Ensemble put on yet another outstanding production, with each year's spring musical outdoing the one before. "Mamma Mia!" was a big show with a big cast, who rose to the occasion with unquestionable success. There was a celebratory mood among the students as they returned to the stage they love in front of a full audience at last.



Sophie (Maddie Krause) sings "Honey, Honey" to her best friends Lisa (Aneesa Chandra) and Ali (Maya Thomas) as she reads her mother's diary and learns that she has three possible dads.

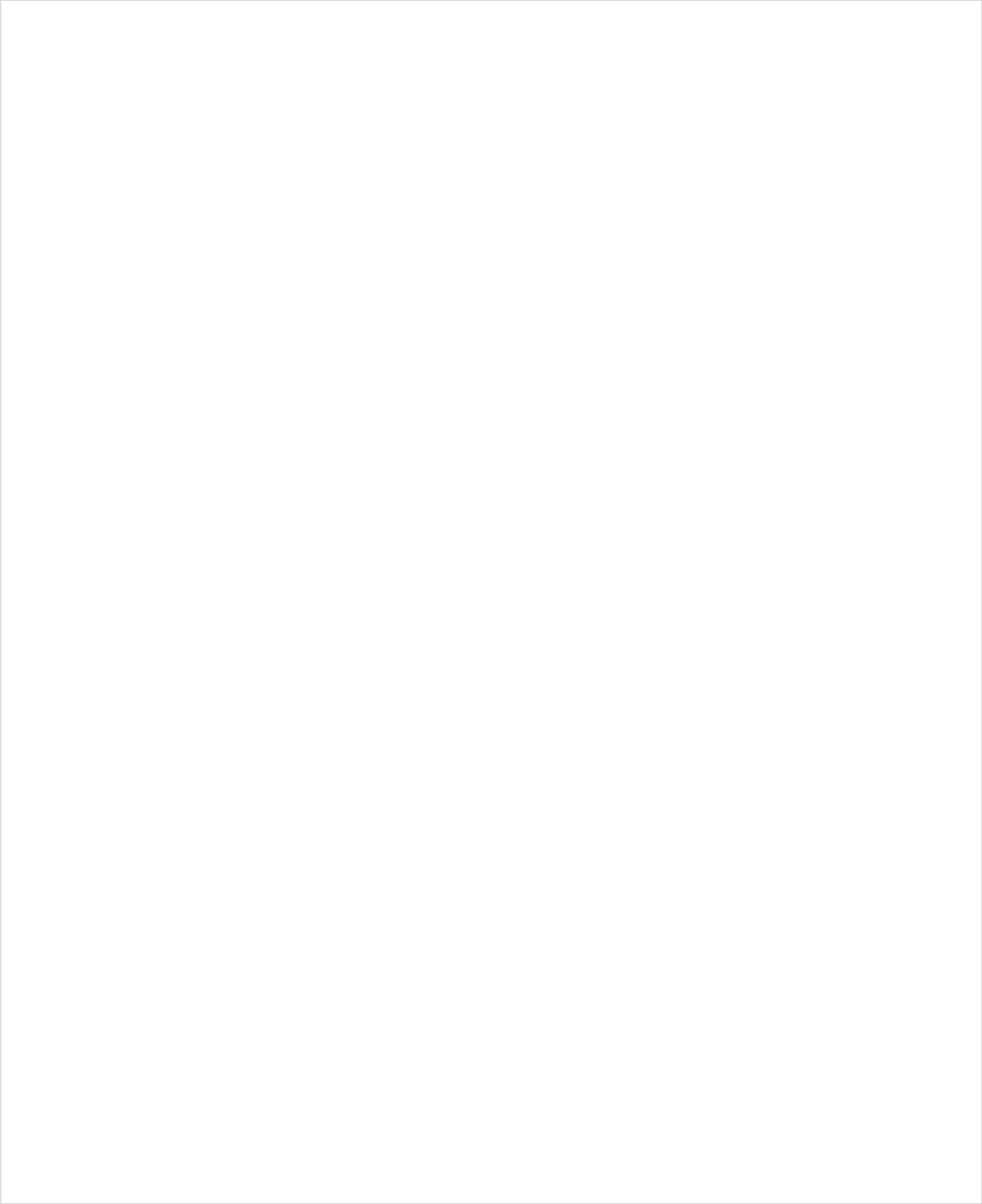
What impressed me most about this show was the high quality of singing from each and every one of the ten-plus leads. The show opens with Maddie Krause as bride-to-be Sophie singing "I Have a Dream" in her lovely, strong soprano voice, as she yearns to know the identity of her father. Soon her loyal friends Ali and Lisa, played by Maya Thomas and Anessa Chandra, arrive to join her with pitch-perfect harmony for the trio "Honey, Honey," as Sophie shares the fact that by reading her single mother's diary, she has learned of three possible fathers, and invited them all to the wedding! Elke Beaumont stole the show as Sophie's mother Donna, belting out her many numbers in a Broadway-bound powerhouse of a voice and carrying the show with her inspired acting. When her long-time friends and members of the former Donna and the Dynamos girl band arrive, we were further blown away by the gorgeous, mature voice of Natacha Jacques as Tanya and the standout dancing of Lilly Clark as Rosie. Eli Thornton as Sophie's fiancé Sky leant his elegant singing to the "Lay All Your Love on Me" duet with Sophie. And when the three dads arrive, wowza! Ian Murphy as Bill and Jacob Walton as Harry sang beautifully—especially tenor Jack Malin, whom we fondly remember as Laurie from last year's masked production of *Little Women*. His heartfelt "Knowing Me, Knowing You" brought down the house even as it broke our hearts. The singing, acting, and dancing of these many leads was uniformly excellent.



Donna and the Dynamos sing "Super Trouper" as a fun surprise at Sophie's bachelorette party, wearing costumes hand-made by Maya Thomas. From left to right, Lilly Clark (Rosie), Elke Beaumont (Donna), and Natacha Jacques (Tanya). Photo: WAHS Drama.

Soon the Dynamos are reunited, effervescent in silver lamé and lace costumes designed and hand-made by Maya Thomas, belting out such favorites as "Dancing Queen" and "Super Trouper." The chorus, in sequins and shimmer, accompanied the leads with intricate harmonies. Brilliant choreography by Lilly Clark, Maya Thomas, Mary Beard, Molly Carfagno, Claire McCulloch, Rebecca Wood, and Rebekah Bono filled the stage with exuberant dancing and charming human tableaux. As the three dads vie for the privilege of walking the daughter they never knew they had down the aisle, their love for her and for Donna shines through. The acting, from the major leads down to the goofy island guys, was poised and convincing throughout, catching us up in the story and providing the welcome escape we all need these days. Jackson Davis as Pepper may have stolen the chorus

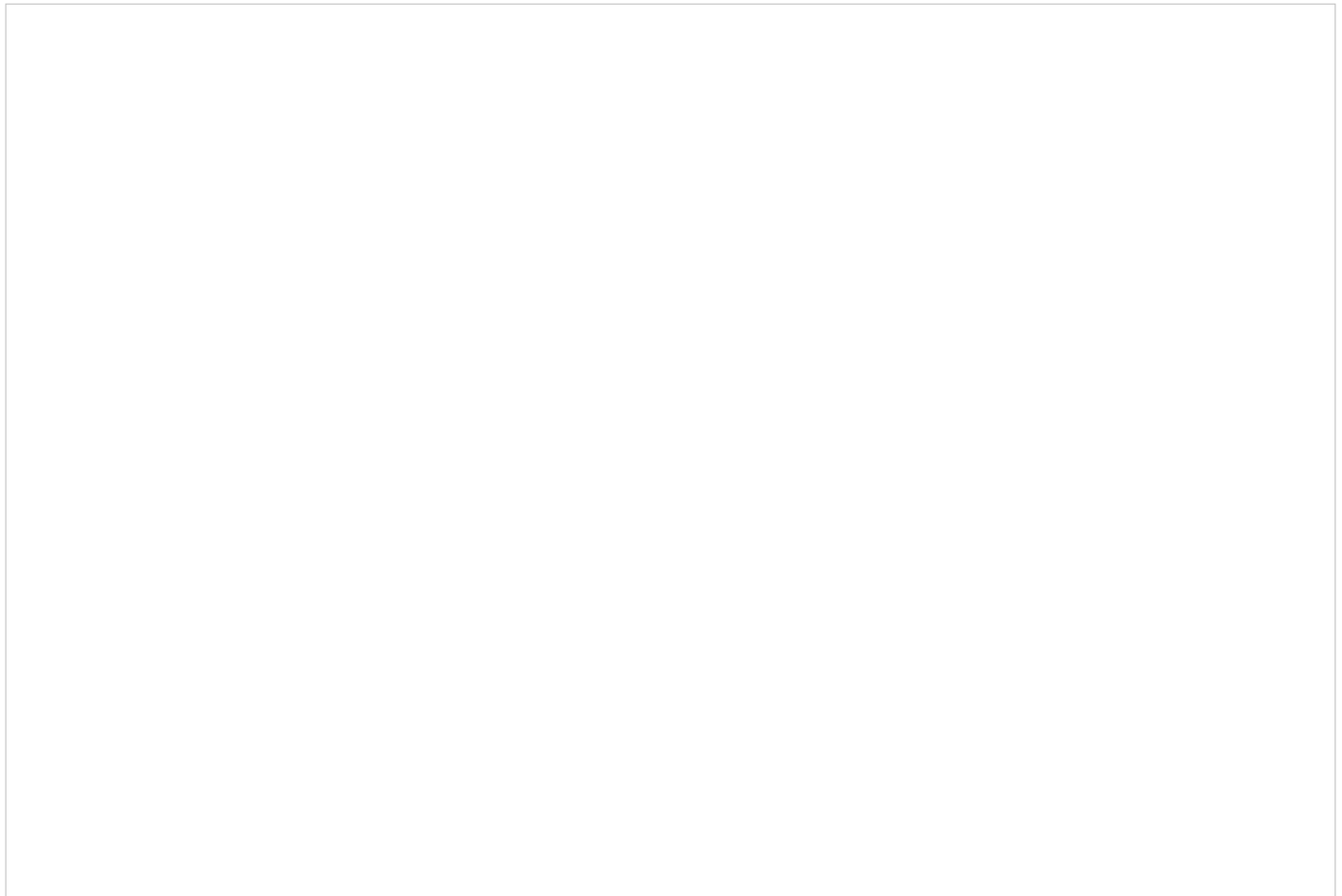
with his spectacular dancing. A major twist at the end of the show deepened our understanding of true love.



Sophie's three dads brought down the house when they dressed as the Dynamos to sing "Waterloo." From left to

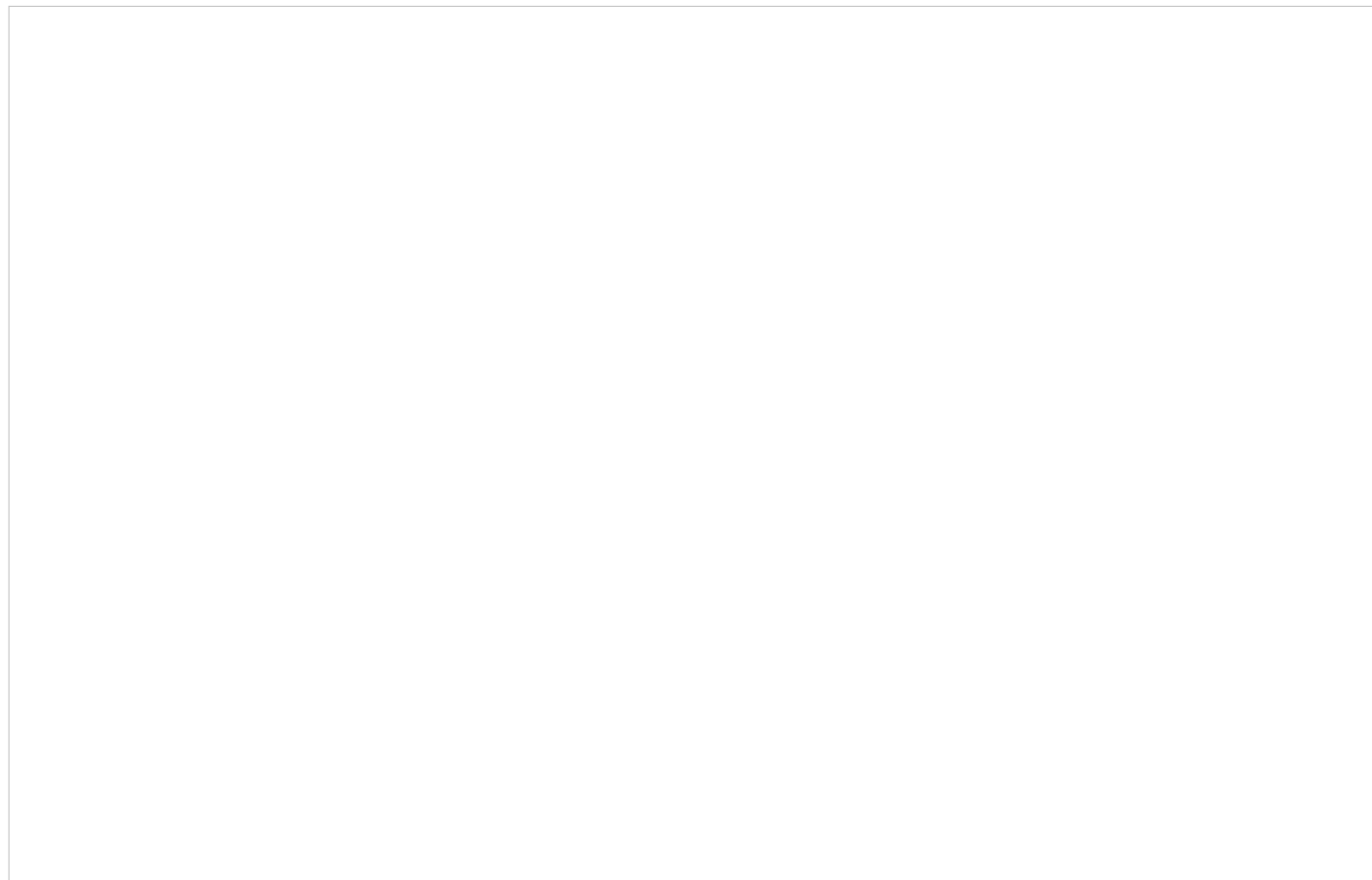
right, Ian Murphy (Bill), Jack Malin (Sam), and Jacob Walton (Harry). Photo: WAHS Drama.

The flexible, multi-level set functioned perfectly and the orchestra, which was uniquely positioned at the back of the stage, played the complex, jazzy music with skill and enthusiasm. This new location made room for stairs leading up from the auditorium floor to the stage, and allowed the so-called "fourth wall" between stage and audience to be broken as the wedding guests arrived from the back of the auditorium through the audience, and dancers filled the aisles on various occasions. Everyone in this high-energy show was having so much fun, it made me wish I had gone to high school in the 21st century! As the whole ensemble spilled out into the aisles for a smash-up ending, the mood throughout the room was nothing short of euphoric.



Donna (Elke Beaumont) wails "Money, Money," lamenting that she doesn't have enough to run her business, with the chorus dancing to choreography by Lilly Clark and Maya Thomas. Ensemble includes (left to right) Turner Monroe (masked), Birdy O'Connell, Matt Neu, Natacha Jacques (black mask), McKenna Thornton, Phoenix Claiborne (masked), Jackson Davis, Lucy Shadel, and Helen Rumsey. Photo: WAHS Drama.

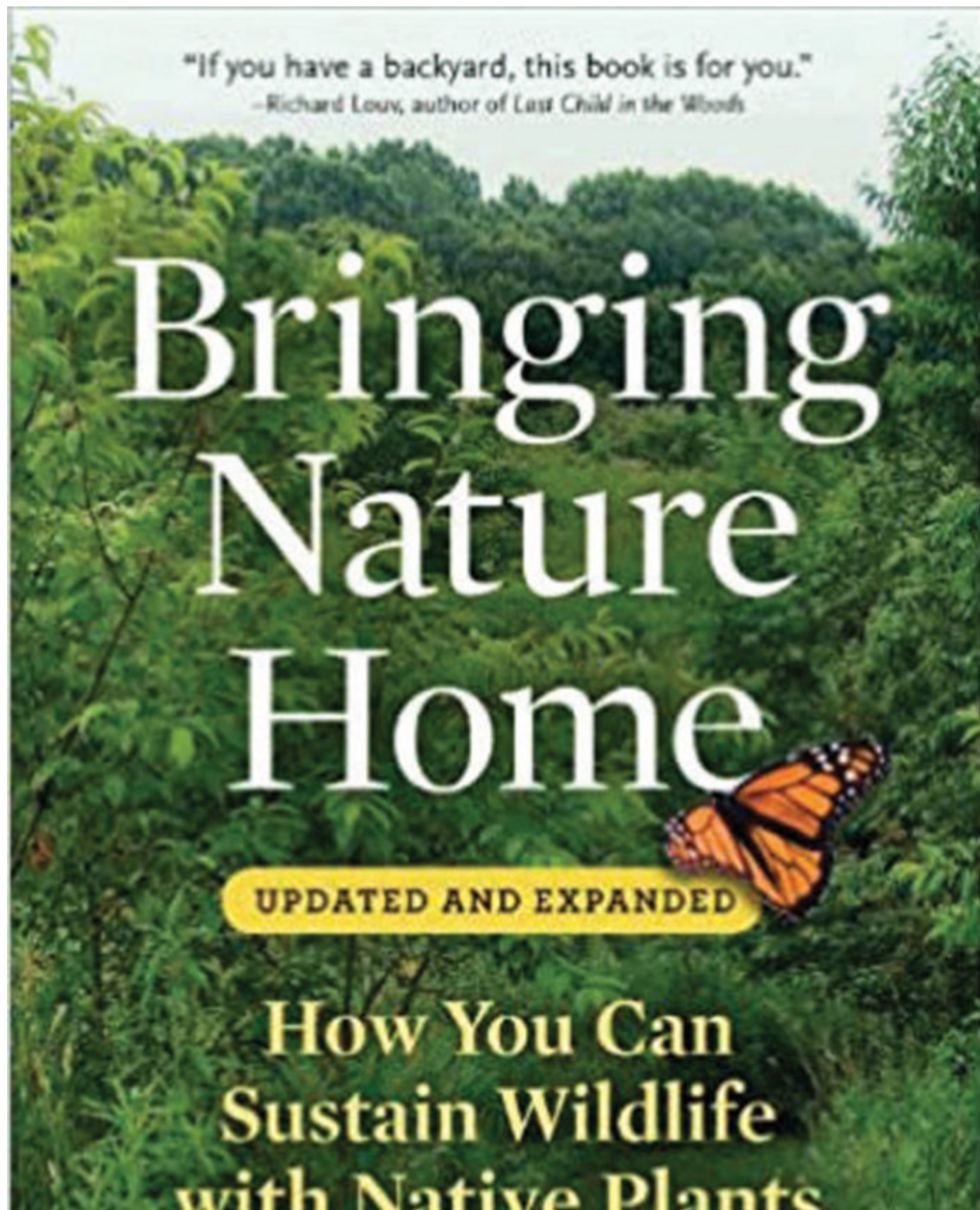
“These past two years have been so hard for so many of us, and I wanted our musical to help place a little more emphasis on the fun we have together and the love we share,” said Pitts in her program notes. “What we needed [this year] was something uplifting and joyful, something that would inspire us to lighten up a little.” Goal achieved!



The 75+ members of the full cast, crew, and orchestra of Mamma Mia!, which wowed audiences at WAHS April 21-23. Photo: Mindy Beaumont.

Why Plant Natives?

August 4, 2022



"If you have a backyard, this book is for you."
—Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*

Bringing Nature Home

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

How You Can
Sustain Wildlife
with Native Plants



Bringing Nature Home by Douglas Tallamy

You have probably noticed the growing movement (no pun intended) to garden with native plants—it's hard to miss the myriad articles, programs, websites, and testimonials to its benefits. But why should we join this movement? While we've all noticed the steep decline in bees, butterflies, moths, lightning bugs, gnats, and other insects in recent years, and read about the need for these pollinators to protect our food supply, do we really understand how planting native will reverse this trend?

In her [excellent article in last month's Gazette](#), Piedmont Master Gardener Angela Orebaugh presented a cogent argument for why we need pollinators—i.e., birds, bats, bees, butterflies, and moths. By pollinating plants, they make our abundant food supply possible, as well as helping flowering plants, which produce oxygen and remove carbon dioxide from the air. She provided a do-it-yourself guide to creating a pollinator garden, and included a handy list of native plants to get you started. A native plant is usually defined as one that grew here prior to European colonization, but this definition is a matter of debate.

I hopped on the Plant Native bandwagon early, because I've always loved wildflowers and because all my friends were doing it. But I did not really understand WHY it is important to garden with native plants until I read the bible of the movement, *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* (2007/2009) by Douglas W. Tallamy. Tallamy is chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware, and has been researching and teaching about the relationship

between plants and wildlife for 30 years. This book offers an additional key reason we need native plants: they feed native insects—including bees, beetles, dragonflies, lightning bugs, and caterpillars—which in turn feed other wildlife, such as birds, bats, turtles, spiders, and frogs. “Insects provide food either directly or indirectly for most other animals,” Tallamy explains. “Nearly all terrestrial birds rear their young on insects.”

The major revelation that enlightened me upon reading this book is that because they “coevolved” with native plants over millions of years, *most insects can eat ONLY native plants*. “Alien” plants, by contrast, are ornamentals from Europe and Asia imported by nurseries—including the many lovely species that routinely populate our gardens, such as forsythia, crape myrtle, and butterfly bush—some of which have become invasive. Because the leaf chemistry, shape, and developmental timing of alien plants taste bad to them, make them sick, or are not even recognized as food, “most native insects cannot, or will not, eat alien plants.” Ninety percent of our native insects—including the caterpillars that grow into our beloved butterflies—are “specialists,” meaning they require a native host plant in their life cycle. While butterflies will *nectar* on a whole range of native and alien flowers—such as zinnias, lantana, and marigolds—their caterpillar larvae can only *feed* on specific, native host plants. The monarch butterfly, whose caterpillar eats only the leaves of milkweed plants, is not—as I had previously assumed—the exception, but the rule—just one example of the vast majority of insect specialists. Fritillary larvae eat only the common violet, and larvae of the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail—Virginia’s state insect—eats only native trees such as black cherry, tulip poplar, and birches. The monarch was recently declared an endangered species by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), its population having declined 75% over the last 10 years and 95% since the 1990s.

The typical American suburban landscape of sterile, manicured lawns and pretty, alien shrubs represents a food desert for local wildlife. “Our native insects will not be able to survive on alien plant species,” Tallamy explains,

because “if an insect’s hosts are not present, it won’t be either.” In *Bringing Nature Home*, Tallamy presents the strongest argument yet—backed by copious research evidence—that home gardeners can make a difference in sustaining our biodiversity by planting native as much as possible, and eliminating alien invasives such as autumn olive, English ivy, privet, and Japanese honeysuckle, which crowd out the natives. The book also provides an eye-opening list of the host plants for many butterflies and moths, as well as lists of recommended native trees, shrubs, grasses, ferns, and perennials for each region of the U.S.

If you’re ready to get started, the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) from the Thomas Jefferson Soil & Water Conservation District offers modest grants for turning turf grass to native meadow—but you must apply before beginning the plantings.



WELCOMING GUESTS AGES 21+

Enjoy locally crafted vintages, panoramic views, and warm hospitality.

CHISWELL
FARM & WINERY

As Tallamy reminds us, “Because food for all animals starts with the energy harnessed by plants, the plants we grow in our gardens have the critical role of sustaining, directly or indirectly, all of the animals with which we share our living spaces. The degree to which the plants in our gardens succeed in this regard will determine the diversity and numbers of wildlife that can survive in managed landscapes.” The Plant Native movement represents a paradigm shift in the way we garden. “[Native plant] gardeners can and will ‘change the world,’ he continues, “by changing what food is available for their local wildlife.” Of course, we can still plant our favorite non-natives, but we should try to strike a balance. I have peonies and weigela alongside the false indigo and swamp rose mallow.

One fun and easy way to join the Plant Native movement is via Tallamy's Homegrown National Park project, "catalyzing a collective effort of individual homeowners, ... farmers, and anyone with some soil to plant in...to start a new HABITat by planting native plants and removing most invasive plants" (homegrownnationalpark.org). Once you've started planting natives, you can "get on the map" by registering how much land you have devoted to native plantings, no matter how small. The national goal is 20 million acres; Virginia boasts 1,979 acres so far, 1.25 acres of which are in the 22932 zip code.

Finding native plants to buy is challenging, but getting easier as demand grows. The Piedmont Master Gardeners has recently provided stickers to our local nurseries to identify the native plants they carry. Hummingbird Hill Native Plant Nursery in Free Union will consult with you to recommend and sell you the native plants suitable for your specific ecosystem (hummingbirdhillnatives.com). The National Wildlife Federation's Garden for Wildlife sells native plants online by state (gardenforwildlife.com/collections/native-plants-for-virginia). The Joyful Butterfly in South Carolina sells both host and nectar plants and seeds for butterflies, including all varieties of milkweed (joyfulbutterfly.com).

Edible Landscaping in Afton sells food plants, many of which are native, such as pawpaw and persimmon (ediblelandscaping.com). And every spring, watch for the wonderful local plant sales offered by Monticello, the Virginia Native Plants Society, and Piedmont Master Gardeners.

Resources for Choosing and Identifying Native Plants:

- Flora of Virginia—book for \$90 or app for \$20
Piedmont Native Plants: a Guide for Landscapes and Gardens (2015, 2019) \$15 from www.vnps.org
- The Seek app by iNaturalist
- Virginia Native Plant Society www.vnps.org (includes a list of native plant nurseries)

- Piedmont Master Gardeners piedmontmastergardeners.org/gardening-questions/native-plants/
- Plant Virginia Natives www.plantvirginianatives.org, and
- Va. Dept. of Conservation & Recreation www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/nativeplants Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora www.vaplantatlas.org
- Audubon Society's Native Plants Database www.audubon.org/native-plants, where you can search by zip code.
- And every spring, watch for the wonderful local plant sales offered by Monticello, the Virginia Native Plants Society, and Piedmont Master Gardeners.