Murder Most Queer

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In the same decade that the homicidal homosexual appeared on the American stage in the romantic melodrama *The Drag*, newspapers told the sensational story of real life murderers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. These two young men made national headlines when they went on trial for the 1924 murder of Bobby Franks, and the “unnatural” sexual relationship between Leopold and Loeb became a part of America’s fascination with the case. These real murderers inspired many theatrical representations, first in the 1920s, but again in the 1950s, the 1990s, and the new millennium. Each retelling of the case is different, not because the facts changed in any significant way but because the social and ideological contexts changed radically. American culture’s dominant understanding of homosexuality—and its understanding of homosexuality as criminality—went through great transformations during the twentieth century, reshaping the significance of the homicidal homosexual as a figure in the cultural imagination. An exploration of the many theatrical representations of Leopold and Loeb (as well as their cinematic adaptations) reveals major changes in how theater artists constructed the homicidal homosexual, initially encouraging audiences to condemn such characters, then to pity them, and finally to identify with and possibly even admire them.

The relationship between the events of the real world and the drama of the theatrical world is one that has intrigued our culture for centuries. Throughout history, playwrights and performers have “made history” by creating dramatic narratives based on real people and real events, from the comedies of Aristophanes and the history plays of Shakespeare to the documentary theater of Anna Deavere Smith and Moisés Kaufman today. There is, perhaps, a basic pleasure in seeing the real world re-created in the artificial world of the theater, especially when art gives form and
meaning to a reality that is filled with chaos and uncertainty. But when it comes to real violence and death, the relationship between reality and art can be more complex and disturbing. This is especially true of dramatic narratives inspired by real homicidal homosexuals, since the significance of these killers is highly contested within a homophobic society. Because performances about real homicidal homosexuals are read in relation to historical reality, they open up a wide variety of possible interpretations. Examining the fictional representations of real queer killers highlights the ways in which ideologies and historical contexts, systems of theatrical production, and genre conventions fully influence the creation and reception of these representations, which change radically over time.

While the homicidal homosexual may have originated as a homophobic construction, there are, of course, actual gay and lesbian people who commit murder, and the representations of these real people raise more complex problems about queer villainy. Antigay organizations are fond of pointing to gay and lesbian murderers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Andrew Cunanan, and Aileen Wuornos as “proof” of the evil of homosexuality, which then becomes “evidence” in the argument to deny civil rights to LGBT people. For example, the antigay Family Research Institute publishes the writings of Paul Cameron, who directly links the gory details of Jeffrey Dahmer’s cannibalism to a “substantial minority” of gay men and lesbians who practice “violent sex,” as well as the reportedly high rate of suicide among gays and lesbians. The conclusion to be drawn from these tenuously connected assertions is that “most violence involving gays is self-induced” and therefore hate crime legislation should not be passed.1

The imagined link between homosexuality and murder is so strong that even when murderers are not known to be gay, the tabloid media sell the fantasy that they are. Soon after the 2002 capture of John Muhammad and John Lee Malvo, known as the “Beltway Snipers,” the National Enquirer ran a picture of the two men smiling and with their arms around each other under the headline “Snipers: Their Secret Gay Life—& Why It Made Them Kill.”2 Similarly, after the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech, the Globe “exposed” the killer Seung-Hui Cho’s “Secret Gay Life: What REALLY Drove Him to Kill.”3 These tabloid stories are largely devoid of reliable facts about the murderer’s sexuality; rather, the “evidence” is constructed to fit neatly into the ready-made template that positions homosexuality as the cause of murder and the homosexual as pathologically driven to murder. When the queer killer trope is extended to mass mur-
derers like Adolf Hitler and Mohamed Atta, homosexuality is constructed as a threat not just to individual lives but to civilization itself.\(^4\)

Interpretations of queer villainy are further complicated when real homicidal homosexuals become the basis for characters in fictional narratives. Although murderous queer characters in plays, movies, and novels can be—and have been—used to vilify LGBT people, all representations of queer killers should not be automatically dismissed or condemned as negative representations. Dramatic narratives about real homicidal homosexuals, often created by LGBT theater artists and presented to queer and queer-friendly audiences, have the potential to create more complex responses and interpretations, interrogating and possibly even combating the homophobia promoted by antigay ideologies and narratives. Performances can create new narratives that wrest the homicidal homosexual out of the hands of the homophobes and allow different meanings to emerge.

I would further argue that the significance of a homicidal homosexual can change radically depending on the context of its historical moment. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserted, there is no singular “homosexuality as we conceive of it today” but rather multiple, competing, and often contradictory understandings of homosexuality.\(^5\) The supposed link, then, between homosexuality and criminality is also multivalent, and exploring how this link is created and re-created over time can shed light on the construction and deconstruction of queer villainy. In plays and films inspired by real queer killers, real criminal cases are once again brought before the public, inviting the audience to take their place in the jury box and render judgment—not just on the criminals but also on systems of justice and the homophobic ideologies that influence those systems.

Perhaps real homicidal homosexuals have inspired so many “retrials” because our society still wrestles with fears of queer villainy. To confront the stigma of criminality placed on all queers, we re-create queer killers in dramatic narratives that provide opportunities to reassess their criminality and imagine different versions of justice. Conflicting fantasies, fears, and ideologies are all evident in these retrials, nowhere more noticeably than in the many retrials of Leopold and Loeb. Over the better part of a century, they have inspired more performances than any other queer killers, and these dramatic narratives reveal as much about our changing notions about queer sexuality and criminality as they do about the facts of the case itself.
The Scene of the Crime: Leopold and Loeb on Trial

Nathan Leopold, age nineteen, and Richard Loeb, age eighteen, brutally murdered fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks in Chicago in 1924. In its time, the case of Leopold and Loeb was celebrated as “the crime of the century” and “the trial of the century,” and since then people have continued to find mystery and horror in the case, particularly in the motive for this seemingly motiveless murder, as well as the “strange relationship” that existed between the two teenage killers. Famed defense attorney Clarence Darrow represented Leopold and Loeb, instructing them to plead guilty and thus avoid a trial by jury. Even though he kept the public out of the jury box, Darrow could not eliminate its desire to render judgment upon Leopold and Loeb. Along with the three thousand people who fought every day to claim one of the hundred seats available in the sweltering Chicago courtroom, a media frenzy fed a constant stream of information and opinion to a national audience hungry to know, judge, and (in most cases) condemn. The theatrical retellings of the case fulfill a similar desire, encouraging the audience to take its position in the jury box, reexamine the facts of the case, and render judgment. Each performance reimagines the case according to the genre conventions and cultural concerns of its own times, resulting in new opportunities for audiences to retry the case for themselves and enjoy different fantasies of justice based on different values and desires.

First, it may be helpful to review the facts of the case. Leopold and Loeb believed that they were capable of committing the “perfect crime” and were free to do so because their superior intellects qualified them as Nietzschean supermen, above common law and morality. They typed a ransom note addressed “Dear Sir,” and chose their victim at random. They happened upon Bobby Franks and offered to give him a ride home in their rented car. While Leopold drove the car, Loeb struck Franks on the head with a chisel wrapped in tape and then suffocated him. They poured acid over the face and genitals of the corpse, then buried it in a culvert. Leopold and Loeb attempted to collect a ransom, but the body was soon found. Also found at the scene of the crime was a pair of glasses, which the police were able to trace to Leopold. The teenagers’ alibis didn’t hold up against the facts of the investigation, and Leopold and Loeb soon made full confessions. Their parents hired Darrow, who entered a plea of guilty—thus avoiding trial by jury—and convinced Judge John R. Caverly that the state should not execute the two teenagers. The sentence was life plus ninety-nine years.
In 1936 a fellow prisoner killed Loeb, but Leopold earned a reputation as a model prisoner and was released on parole in 1958. He spent the remainder of his life in Puerto Rico, where he married, worked as an x-ray technician in a hospital, and died in 1971 at the age of sixty-six.

There are many elements that inspire our continuing fascination with the case beyond the usual narrative thrills of crime, detection, and justice. Leopold and Loeb were young, wealthy, from respectable German Jewish families, remarkably intelligent, and well educated. These factors set them apart from other murderers in the public imagination, making them extraordinary and intriguing characters. Their case also stands out in the history of jurisprudence because of the importance of psychoanalytic testimony in a legal setting, as well as the famously solid and eloquent argument Darrow made against capital punishment. But the case lends itself to drama mostly because of two elements that remain elusive and mysterious and therefore open themselves up to creative interpretation. The first is the motivation for the “motiveless” crime: not anger, not love, not revenge, not money, but pleasure—the killers did it simply for the thrill of the experience. Most people are not satisfied with this explanation, which leads to the question of what motivates such a motivation. What internal or external forces cause someone to want to murder for kicks? The second element is the relationship between the criminals: Leopold and Loeb had sex together. But what exactly was the nature of their relationship, and what connection is there between their homosexuality and their murder?

As our society changes its understanding of crime and of homosexuality, and of homosexuality as a crime, these factors are reimagined in each retelling of the case.

Rope: The Detective’s Fantasy of Justice and the Elimination of Homosexuality

The earliest dramatic version of the Leopold and Loeb story is also the one farthest removed from the facts of the actual case, and although it was an English play with English characters, it had a significant impact on the representation of the homicidal homosexual in America. The playwright Patrick Hamilton denied that he had heard of the infamous American murder when he wrote his three-act melodramatic thriller Rope, retitled Rope’s End for its American production in 1929, just five years after the Leopold and Loeb case. Nevertheless, nearly every drama critic dismissed
Hamilton’s disclaimer and interpreted the play as “inspired by” Leopold and Loeb. Rope takes place over the course of a single evening and is set entirely in a posh Mayfair flat shared by two Oxford undergraduates, Brandon and Granillo. To prove their Nietzschean superiority and experience the sheer thrill of it, they strangle their classmate Ronald Kentley, put his body in a wooden chest, then invite Ronald’s friends and family over for a party, serving food and drinks from the chest. One of the guests, however, is Rupert Cadell, the boys’ former housemaster, and he grows increasingly suspicious of foul play, piecing together the clues until he confronts the killers and exposes their crime. The play is not a whodunit, since the audience knows the crime and the killers from the start. Rather, the tension of the play concerns whether the killers will get away with it or whether Rupert the amateur detective can find the truth.

It should come as no surprise that the text of Hamilton’s play makes no direct reference to any sexual relationship between the two killers. The Lord Chamberlain maintained the prohibition of the depiction of homosexuality on the British stage, and in 1927 the New York legislature had introduced the Wales Padlock Law, which prohibited plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion.” The young killers’ sexual relationship is an unspoken secret, one constructed only by insinuation, merely hinting at a physical intimacy between the two boys. The first time we see them in full light, Brandon puts his arm around Granillo as he lights his cigarette from the other boy’s match, making this postmurder cigarette seem very much like a postcoital cigarette. As Alan Sinfield has noted, Hamilton also creates the killers as a masculine/feminine couple. Brandon is blond, athletic, and “paternal” and will become more assertive and threatening as the play progresses. Granillo is dark, slim, and courteous, and, in stereotypically Spanish fashion (i.e., as someone from an “intemperate” country), he will become more hysterical as the play progresses, even emitting falsetto screams when he is caught.

Like Rupert, the audience can search for clues. Isn’t Granillo rather effeminate? Doesn’t Brandon stand too close to him? Isn’t there something they are hiding from us about their relationship? We search for clues to ascertain their guilt, but we cannot know for sure. In a world where homosexuality is criminalized and cannot be directly acknowledged onstage, the violent act of murder stands in for the sexual act, merging to become a “sex crime” made up of a sexual murder and a murderous sexuality. Both consist of two men together performing an intimate and pleasurable physical act that they must keep secret within the privacy of their home.
The conspiracy of criminals mirrors the conspiracy of secret lovers. This point was made extravagantly clear in a 1994 London revival of the stage play. The director, Keith Baxter, staged an opening tableau featuring three naked men (the murderers and their victim) sprawled by the chest. Has there been a murder or an orgy? Is there a difference? In either case, Brandon and Granillo are a couple with a secret, hoping no one will find out the criminal act they have committed together.

Interestingly, and perhaps most surprisingly to those familiar only with Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film adaptation of *Rope,* the queerest character in the play is the starring role, the amateur detective-hero Rupert Cadell. This poet, who is also a veteran of the Great War, is, according to the playwright's character description, “foppish, affected, [and] verges on effeminacy,” spouting quips in the Wildean manner and professing a complete disdain for traditional moral standards, as well as for the mawkishness of heterosexual wooing. New York critic Robert Littell praised Ernest Milton, who received top billing in the role on both sides of the Atlantic, for masterfully presenting “a warped orchid of an effeminate Oxford decadent.”

Rupert is very much coded as queer in the mold of Oscar Wilde, the most famous “effeminate decadent” to ever come out of Britain. But what does this cynical, perfumed poet have to do with our homicidal homosexuals? In Hamilton's play, everything. Brandon and Granillo have learned their moral, ethical, and aesthetic philosophies from Rupert, and the playwright both figuratively and literally places the boys' murder at Rupert's feet. Upon discovering the corpse of Ronald, Rupert is confronted with the results of his freethinking philosophies, and, like Dr. Frankenstein, he is forced to reckon with the monstrosity that he has created.

The decadent poet, thrust into the role of criminal detective and enforcer of justice, sheds his world-weary pose to reveal a firm moral conscience. Hamilton creates a telling theatrical metaphor for this transformation when Rupert unsheathes his walking cane, previously a symbol of his effeminacy and lameness, to reveal a pointed metal sword, a phallic symbol of strength and justice, with which he holds the boys at bay. In order to claim this new role, Rupert must atone and reform, and he does so by destroying his malformed progeny, renouncing his previous teachings, and reestablishing a clear moral order. Using terms like *sin* and *blasphemy,* Rupert condemns his former pupils, extols the sanctity of individual life, and places his faith in society's system of justice. As he delivers the play's final words, he predicts what society will do to the boys, sounding not unlike a judge himself, handing them their sentence: “You are going to hang,
Rupert Cadell (Ernest Milton) holds Brandon (Sebastian Shaw) at bay with his walking cane, while Granillo (Ivan Brandt) cowers by the chest containing the victim’s body, in the 1929 Broadway production of *Rope’s End* (also known as *Rope*) by Patrick Hamilton. Photo: White Studio. Courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
you swine! Hang!—both of you!—hang!” (86). In Hitchcock’s film version, Rupert is a dry, intellectual, American oddball rather than a flamboyant English decadent, and the role is further normalized by the star persona of Jimmy Stewart. Bringing his “average guy” charm to the role, Stewart re-creates Rupert as a normative (and presumably heterosexual) hero who contains and condemns queerness in order to preserve the moral order.

Rope, then, allows its audience to enjoy the homophobic fantasy of eliminating homosexuality. Rupert renounces his decadent morality, while Brandon and Granillo are condemned to die. Thus Rope offers a cleaner, less complex fantasy version of the Leopold and Loeb case. Since the narrative is constructed through the conventions of detective fiction, the detective-hero’s success in exposing the crime and capturing the criminals is the end of the story. The detective’s fantasy of justice has no room for the lawyers’ arguments or the judge’s sentencing; it presumes eye-for-an-eye retribution and the removal of the criminal monsters, the moral aliens, from the society of “normal” people. This fantasy avoids the seemingly outrageous possibility that Brandon and Granillo might somehow escape the death penalty and eventually find a place in society. But justice is not as simple as this melodramatic thriller would have it, especially when it comes to condemning the homicidal homosexual. In the real world, Judge Caverly sentenced Leopold and Loeb to life in prison, and Leopold earned parole in 1958. Some historians believe that he achieved his freedom thanks in part to the novelist and playwright Meyer Levin, who argued for a different understanding of the link between homosexuality and criminality.

Compulsion: The Social Worker’s Fantasy of Justice and the Cure for Homosexuality

In 1956, Simon & Schuster published Meyer Levin’s Compulsion, a “documentary novel” that mixed the facts of the Leopold and Loeb case with constructed fictions to create a national best seller. Levin had been a student journalist during the Leopold and Loeb case, and in Compulsion he changed the names of those involved but followed many of the facts of the case very closely, even quoting entire passages of transcripts from the court case. Levin’s stage adaptation had a difficult journey, as he publicly fought with his producer over control of his script. After much legal wrangling, a “producer’s version” of Levin’s script ran on Broadway for 140 perfor-
mannances in the 1957–58 season, with Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell as the killers. Levin disowned the Broadway production but published his version of the script for use in subsequent productions, along with a lengthy essay vilifying his producer and his “writing assistant” for hijacking the play. In 1959 Twentieth Century Fox released a film version, scripted by Richard Murphy and directed by Richard Fleischer.

While Rope follows a nearly Aristotelian model of unity, Levin’s script for Compulsion has twenty-seven scenes and at least thirty-nine roles, is three and a half hours long, and jumps around in time and location. It participates in a variety of narrative conventions: a sensational depiction of antisocial excesses; a psychological exploration of juvenile delinquency; a philosophical argument on fate and free will; a crime story with police, detectives, and journalists searching for a murderer; a tragic (heterosexual) romance; and finally a courtroom drama. In general Compulsion is not so much interested in the crime of Leopold and Loeb, here renamed Judd Steiner and Artie Strauss, as it is in their social deviancy and psychological neuroses. The play begins with old Judd Steiner (Leopold) in prison, up for parole, and being interviewed by the journalist who uncovered evidence against him at the time of the crime. Judd is reluctant to talk about the crime, but the journalist insists, saying, “Things like yours have been happening more and more. People are frightened, worried. If you could help them understand it, control it” (4). By “things like yours,” the journalist means crimes of juvenile delinquency, an obsession of 1950s popular entertainment, most famously exemplified by the film Rebel Without a Cause (1955) and the Broadway musical West Side Story (1957). Compulsion offers the thrills of teenage sex and violence but with a stated agenda of social exploration, understanding, and improvement.

In attempting to locate the cause of the crime, Levin aims for complex psychological portraits of Judd and Artie, showing that they are “abnormal” in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to American ideals of masculinity. David Savran has written about the 1950s as a time of “domestic revival” that relied on “a rigorously gendered division of labor and a corresponding polarization of masculine and feminine ‘sex roles.’” Savran argues that “the dread of a feminine male” plays a crucial role in constructing “Cold War masculinity” in the era’s plays. Compulsion dramatizes this struggle over the meaning, cause, and proper treatment of “malformed” masculinity with Judd and Artie as subjects for examination. For starters they are very wealthy, which is positioned as a corrupting,
feminizing force that leads to moral laxity and unmanly ease. They are highly educated, pompous intellectuals influenced by European philosophers, which Levin contrasts with the frumpy homespun American “commonsense” intellect of Darrow, here renamed Wilk.

The boys are also set apart by their Judaism, a factor ignored in the film version but central to the play version. Levin intertwines Judd’s experience as a “sissy” with his experience as a Jew—being called “dirty names” and having his trousers torn down by “normal” boys. Sander Gilman has written about how the difference of the circumcised penis figures in anti-Semitic prejudice, marking the Jewish man as not fully masculine, and Levin highlights this physical difference as a factor in Judd’s humiliation. In all these ways, Levin shows how Judd and Artie are not “normal” men, yet he also enters a plea of tolerance and understanding for such men. Levin seems to argue that Judd and Artie become criminals not simply because they are failed men but because they are the victims of an ignorant society that has unfairly rejected them as failed men.

The failures of masculinity caused by wealth, intellectualism, and Judaism are contributing factors to what Levin constructs as the greatest failure of masculinity: homosexuality, which he presents as a pitiful yet treatable condition. While Rope could not directly acknowledge homosexuality, Compulsion hinges on its revelation as an explanation for Judd and Artie’s crime. Judd, a weak intellectual, desperately wants to keep the attention and affection of Artie, a thrill-seeking scofflaw. Judd’s sexual/submissive deviance directly correlates with Artie’s criminal/aggressive deviance. Judd has a moral conscience and is reluctant to pursue criminal activity, but his adoration of Artie leads him to agree to a pact in which Judd will participate in crimes if Artie will participate in sex—a trade that creates an economic equivalence between murder and gay sex. The issue comes to the forefront in the climactic third-act courtroom scene, when a psychiatrist explains the pact and states that Judd was “helplessly bound by his passion,” setting off a shouting match between the prosecution (Horn) and the defense (Wilk).

Horn: When a man willfully engages in murder to gratify unnatural lust—you call that helpless?
Wilk: When a man is invaded by typhoid germs, is that willful?
Horn: If perversion is an excuse for murder, then we had better shut up our courts!
Wilk: Or better, turn them into hospitals. (110–11)
The doctor goes on to explain that sex per se was not the motive in the crime—although the prosecution tries to insinuate that Judd and Artie raped their victim and the murder was part of a homosexual act. There was no evidence in the actual Leopold and Loeb trial that they had raped Bobby Franks, but the prosecution did try to suggest it.

The hysterical linking of homosexuality, pedophilia, and murder reached its high point in the 1950s, and Levin is careful to address and dismiss the charge in a scene with Wilk and Judd’s family, including his brother Max.

Wilk: People want to hang them if only because of the homosexuality.
Max: But the coroner swore it wasn’t in the crime. (97)

The extent to which homosexuality is “in” the crime is renegotiated in every retelling of this case. Levin goes out of his way to avoid demonizing the homosexual as a child rapist and murderer, criticizing those who would hang someone simply for being homosexual. Yet he cannot avoid the creeping suspicion that even if homosexuality is not in the crime, it is still lurking somewhere around the scene of the crime.

Levin views homosexuality as a common teenage malady that can be cured or outgrown. To prove this point, he introduces the fictional character of Ruth Slimovitsky, a fine exemplar of Cold War femininity, a nurturing and understanding young woman who meets and befriends Judd the day after the murder, when he is wracked by guilt and shame. She insists that Judd could be “normal” if he received “a girl’s affection.” In this Levin echoes the philosophy put forth by one of the biggest stage hits of the 1950s, Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), which shows how the love of a strong, nurturing woman can redeem a young man who has been rejected as unmanly. As Ruth hugs and consoles Judd, defense attorney Wilk, as the authoritative voice of compassion and reason, addresses the audience.

Between fifteen and twenty-one, the child has the burden of adolescence, of puberty and sex thrust upon him. Boys, without instruction, are left to work out the solution themselves. They may be led to excess. They may be led to perversion. Who is to blame? Some succumb to the darkest urges perhaps at the very moment when they are about to grow out of them. (44)
Levin asks his audience to appreciate the cruel irony: if Judd had met Ruth one day earlier, maybe he wouldn’t have become a homicidal homosexual. He succumbed to his darkest urges, as one might succumb to an illness, a weak victim who deserves our sympathy and our help—not a hanging but a hospital.

The film version, still constrained by the last vestiges of the Production Code, which regulated the discussion and depiction of sexuality in Hollywood films, soft-pedals the exact nature of these “darkest urges,” focusing on Judd’s anemic intellectualism and merely connoting his homosexuality. The film alludes to homosexuality but constructs it simply as the absence of masculinity and heterosexuality. For example, Judd’s older brother Max berates him for spending too much time with Artie and asks, “Don’t you ever go to a baseball game or chase girls or anything?” In addition, Judd’s long and longing stares at Artie leave little doubt that Judd is a homosexual waiting to happen, but the relationship is never named or dramatized.

The film version ends with the judge giving his sentence and sparing the lives of Judd and Artie, but neither of the boys seems grateful—they are unrepentant delinquents. The film asks the audience to pity Judd and Artie, but not necessarily to sympathize with them: the film’s top-billed stars are not the actors playing the criminals but the actors playing Wilk (Orson Welles) and Ruth (Diane Varsi), the normative characters who show the audience the “correct” way to react to the killers. The play shows much more sympathy for the killers, particularly Judd, whom we see in old age in prison, wise and repentant, having gained self-knowledge and moral understanding. The play presents a triumphant narrative of 1950s liberal humanism in which a just society rejects the death penalty and treats and cures criminal delinquency with mercy and compassion.

*Reopened Cases: The Lover’s Fantasy of Justice and the Defense of Homosexuality*

By the time the next retelling of the Leopold and Loeb case appeared on stage, several events had occurred that would influence and radically reshape new versions of the story. During the interim, the Supreme Court struck down stage censorship, the Stonewall Riots gave a major push to the modern gay rights movement, Leopold died, the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality should no longer be classified as a mental disorder, and a few states began to repeal their sodomy laws. Fur-
thermore, our culture “discovered” the existence of gay plays, gay films, and (most stunningly) gay audiences. All of these events created an atmosphere in which finally there could be a dramatic retelling of the Leopold and Loeb case that (1) used people’s real names, (2) did not have to fear censorship, (3) could consider homosexuality as something other than a sinister crime or a pathetic mental illness, and (4) did not presume the heterosexuality of the audience. Presented early in the century as ruthless killers whom the audience is encouraged to condemn, then in midcentury as juvenile delinquents whom the audience is encouraged to pity, in recent decades Leopold and Loeb have been presented as romantic lovers with whom the audience is encouraged to identify. In these later narratives, Leopold and Loeb are the stars of their own story, with no detective, lawyer, or would-be girlfriend to direct the audience’s response.

John Logan’s play *Never the Sinner* went through many incarnations between its debut in Chicago in 1985 and its off-Broadway success in 1998. The play is, in Logan’s own words, “a love story,” and while it recounts the crime story, the court case, and the media frenzy, the main focus is the relationship between Leopold and Loeb. *Compulsion* imagined Leopold as sexually desperate and Loeb as rather reluctant “rough trade,” but *Never the Sinner* presents a romantic couple dependent on each other, perfectly represented by the closing image of act 1: the two boys waltzing together to Irving Berlin’s “What’ll I Do?” In act 2, as they await their sentencing, Loeb is stunned and saddened by the realization that if they go to prison they will be sent to separate prisons. He asks, “If they hang us—would they do that together? At the same time?” When Leopold replies, “Probably,” Loeb decides, “Then I hope they hang us” (117). The main question of the play, then, is not so much why they killed Bobby Franks or how society should deal with them but rather what effect these events will have on their relationship. Logan insists that Leopold and Loeb are not moral aliens but that “we all could, given some unkind twists of fate and character, be them” (17). *New York Times* critic D. J. R. Bruckner recognized this intention with the title of his review: “Leopold and Loeb as Everymen.”

The 1992 independent film *Swoon*, written and directed by Tom Kalin, also imagines the story as a gay romance. Over the title credits, we see Leopold and Loeb walking arm in arm, then going into an abandoned warehouse where they passionately kiss and then exchange rings while shafts of light slice the shadows to create a romantic atmosphere. As John Clum notes in his analysis of the film, the infamous sexual/criminal pact is presented as an exchange of wedding vows.
Leopold: If I do what you want . . .
Loeb: . . . I’ll do what you want.

If previous versions could be accused of distorting the truth by making the sexual relationship between Leopold and Loeb sinister and pathological, then *Never the Sinner* and *Swoon* distort the truth by making it romantic. While it is true that Leopold and Loeb could clinically be described as “homosexuals,” Logan and Kalin create fantasies in which they are lovers and a “gay couple,” at times bickering or abusive but mostly romantic, even comically domestic.

*Swoon* emphasizes that Leopold and Loeb were victims of the homophobia of both the court and the press. As doctors give testimony about their sexual relations, suddenly they are shown frolicking in their bed, which has surreally appeared in the middle of the courtroom: their homosexuality is on trial here. Janet Maslin argued in the *New York Times* that *Swoon* “is more successful in taking apart this particular chapter in criminal history than in reassembling it with a clear point of view.” But the film’s postmodern anachronisms encourage the audience to create links to the queer world of 1992, with its Queer Nation/Lesbian Avenger era defiance and celebration of the sexual outlaw. Leopold and Loeb become emblematic figures, enacting queer fears and anger over (but perhaps also taking pleasure in) being treated like criminals in a homophobic society. *Swoon* is the one version of the story that continues through Loeb’s death in 1936 and Leopold’s in 1971. Being a love story, the film begins with a marriage and follows the ups and downs of the couple, till death do they part.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the romantic paradigm was evident in two small, experimental productions that brought the story into new theatrical territory. In 2003 New York witnessed a fringe festival production of *Thrill Me: The Leopold and Loeb Musical*, with book, music, and lyrics by Stephen Dolginoff. The show was remounted as *Thrill Me: The Leopold and Loeb Story* for an extended off-Broadway run at the York Theatre in the summer of 2005, and has since gone on to numerous productions around the United States and the world, including a long-running production in South Korea. This dark, two-character chamber musical attempts to sever the link between murderous criminality and sexuality by presenting Leopold sympathetically as a love-struck young man who enters into a Faustian bargain with the cool and sadistic Loeb: he signs the sexual-criminal contract in order to ensure his romantic fulfill-
ment, but he loses his soul in the bargain. In other words, Leopold is the queer, but Loeb is the killer, literally an *homme fatal* who combines sexual allure with deadly menace. Indeed, the show’s most seductive song is the one Loeb sings to the unseen Bobby Franks as he lures the boy into his car and to his death. The author’s unique contribution to Leopold and Loeb lore, which is crucial to his project of redeeming Leopold, is that Leopold purposefully orchestrated their arrest so he could assuage his guilty conscience, as well as achieve his romantic goal of being with Loeb forever.

From a realistic point of view, this motivation may seem unlikely, but it redeems Leopold as a “good boy” who had the misfortune to fall in love with a “bad boy”—a popular motif in gay male fantasy, from the novels of Genet and Mishima to the HBO prison soap opera *Oz*. Loeb is guilty of murder, Leopold is guilty of falling for a sexy sociopath, and Dolginoff’s show ends with the killers/lovers singing a duet about how they’ll be together for “Life Plus Ninety Nine Years.”

Laural Meade and the Anodyne Ensemble turn the story into “deconstructive vaudeville” in *Leopold and Loeb: A Goddamn Laff Riot*, presented in Los Angeles in 2003. The characters of Leopold and Loeb are each performed by a pair of actors—one male and one female—giving us four actors who continually alternate lines and express contradictory feelings and thoughts, truly queering the notion of singular, let alone singly gendered, identity. This multiplication can also be read as a comment on the many previous portrayals of these characters, as can the constant replaying and revising of scenes, as if identities and actions might be endlessly reproduced. Meade also creates Leopold and Loeb as a tragicomic duo not unlike Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the individual identity of one relies on an association with the other, one cannot exist without the other, and there is often confusion as to which one is which.

While many of the familiar facts of the case are presented, they are interspersed with dance numbers, jokes, and games. When asked in court if they plead guilty, the Leopolds and Loebs respond by putting on wedding veils and dancing to the ABBA song “I Do, I Do, I Do.” The link between gay romance and murder is reiterated, but through the distortions of a funhouse mirror, making it simultaneously creepy and ridiculous. Juxtaposition allows for a variety of possible meanings, so it is hard to know exactly what to think when Loeb tells “fag” jokes as he repeatedly strikes Bobby Franks, or when the Leopolds and Loebs pull down their trousers, erotically humping and slapping each other while Darrow gives his stirring closing argument in court. *Laff Riot* invites the audience to sit in
judgment, but consistently shifts truth and meaning, dismissing any normative character (like a detective, lawyer, judge, or nurturing girlfriend) who might give the audience a firm moral foothold. The significance of the story is more elusive than ever, which may be the most accurate representation of all.

It would be misleading to state that there exists some sort of “progression” in the Leopold and Loeb narratives, especially since all these plays (and even the films) continue to circulate in a variety of different circumstances before a variety of different audiences. Patrick Hamilton’s Rope has proven remarkably enduring, with recent revivals in London (2010), Sydney (2010), and New York (2012), along with many university productions. A contemporary audience of Rope, then, might view the murderers as villains to be condemned, victims to be pitied, and lovers with whom to identify. Never the Sinner has also maintained its popularity, with productions around the country, two fringe revivals that ran back to back in New York in the summer of 2007, and a Chicago revival in 2009. The proliferation of Leopolds and Loebs satirized by Laural Meade shows no signs of abating. Other additions include Sky Gilbert’s Rope Enough, in which two modern-day defendants cite Leopold and Loeb as role models, staged at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in 2005; Golden Age, by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, seen at New York’s Kraine Theater in 2005, which imagines Nathan Leopold dating all American redhead Archie Andrews of comic book fame; Nicky Silver’s metatheatrical The Agony and the Agony, staged at the Vineyard Theatre in 2006, which has Nathan Leopold expressing his anger over having to appear in yet another play (see chapter 6); and Los Angeles’s Blank Theater Company’s 2008 world premiere of Dickie & Babe: The Truth About Leopold & Loeb, a docudrama written and directed by Daniel Henning.

All three major film versions of the Leopold and Loeb story continue to circulate, available to contemporary audiences and also, in the case of Rope, influencing new artists. In 2002 Kansas City filmmaker Kendall Sinn “remade” Rope in a super-low-budget HDV version, using Hamilton’s script with a smattering of Arthur Laurents’s screenplay but updating and resetting the drama in Kansas City. (Sinn’s goal was to accomplish with video what Hitchcock could not with celluloid: an entire film made from a single take, without a single edit.) But, while nearly every reference has been updated, the film’s attitude toward homosexuality has not: it remains the sinister secret, never directly shown or named but folded within the murderous crime. Barbet Schroeder’s film Murder by Numbers (2002)
dramatizes but never names the affections of a murderous young man for his partner in crime, making the sexual attraction all the more sinister. Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997, remade in English in 2007) ironically names homosexuality as one of many psychological “reasons” for a murderous duo’s evil, only to then deny it, chastising the audience for its willingness to accept the facile and clichéd explanation.

Reid Farrington combines film and theater in his performance piece *Gin & “It”* (2010), in which Hitchcock’s *Rope* is projected in various fragments, while technicians and grips perform the “offscreen” duties that make Hitchcock’s seamless vision possible. But among the team of men, one performer, who frequently fails in his job, is singled out, gay baited, and finally bundled into a sack, which is hung suspended above the stage. As in Hitchcock’s film, homosexuality is a problem and hindrance that must be silenced and erased, and Farrington’s piece enacts the homophobia offscreen that is implicit onscreen. The position of the homosexual, then, shifts from perpetrator to victim, and although others have attempted to erase him, he still hovers over the proceedings.

*Queer Verdicts: The Audience as Jury*

The proliferation of homicidal homosexual narratives, along with the proliferation of different attitudes about homosexuality in our society, allows for a wider variety of possible reactions to the representation of real queer killer cases than ever before. While the tabloid media often flatten controversial and complex cases into easily digestible and melodramatic narratives, theater artists can bring another perspective, becoming a valuable part of our social discourse by “queering” the stories and offering audiences alternative ways to see and understand. In the case of Leopold and Loeb, for example, Hamilton leads his audience to righteous condemnation with the belief that homosexuality is evil, Levin leads his audience to righteous mercy with the belief that homosexuality is a sickness, and a handful of more recent narratives lead the audience to romanticize and identify with the criminalized homosexual.

But just as a jury might resist the arguments of a persuasive lawyer, so audiences can come up with resistant readings of these texts, coming to various and often contradictory conclusions of their own. Different narrative elements may inspire different reactions, depending on whether the narrative foregrounds “positive” qualities (e.g., romantic longing) or “neg-
ative” qualities (e.g., horrific violence). Audiences can also choose to focus more on the positive or negative, creating their own understanding about the guilt or innocence of the characters. An audience member’s verdict may also depend on how he or she interprets “the crime,” which functions not just literally but also emblematically. Leopold and Loeb murdered Bobby Franks—but they are on trial for much more than that.

As a gay man involved in queer studies, I have had a variety of different responses to plays and films about Leopold and Loeb. I do not wish to essentialize my own response as a universal “gay response,” nor do I imagine that such responses are limited only to audience members who identify as gay or queer. Rather, I hope to show how an audience member who is not homophobic and does not dismiss these narratives out of hand as “negative representations” can have a rich and complex response to these plays and films. Sitting in the metaphorical jury box of the retrials, such an audience member may come to a variety of “verdicts” in some sequence or combination.

**The “Guilty as Sin” Verdict.** No matter how out and proud I am, it’s hard to escape all of the stigma and shame still associated with being queer. Stories about Leopold and Loeb present a magnified version of my own internalized sense of criminality. These plays and movies give me a chance to explore, even to indulge, my own feelings of criminal guilt in a “safe” way. I identify with these criminals, and even find some satisfaction in their punishment, because part of me feels that I, too, deserve to be punished.

**The “Scapegoat” Verdict.** Leopold and Loeb were truly evil, and I’m both ashamed and angry that they have been identified as part of the queer community. Therefore, it is satisfying to watch them be caught, condemned, and expunged from our society. The experience is cleansing, especially since Leopold and Loeb represent the stigma of “evil” still attributed to queer people. I can enjoy the fantasy of getting rid of the “bad gays,” which enact my desire to get rid of the stigmatized part of myself.

**The “Guilty Past” Verdict.** These plays and films show how homophobic social forces and ideologies of the past twisted Leopold and Loeb, turning them into monsters. I can watch their comeuppance with some sadness because they are victims of homophobia, but also with pleasure because I’m happy to be rid of the warped, “abnormal” queers produced by previous generations. I can reflect on how society has changed and that we are not like that anymore.

**The “Guilt by Disassociation” Verdict.** These plays and films show how those qualities that I do not share—rather than the quality of homosexual-
ity, which I do share—are really the crucial factors in creating a murderer. For example, being upper-class intellectuals is what twisted Leopold and Loeb’s morality, not their homosexuality. And even if it were, the sexual relationship between Leopold and Loeb was rather strange, warped by the closet, and not at all like my sexual relationships.

The “Guilty of Love” Verdict. I’m comforted by the fact that Loeb was the real killer of Bobby Franks, while Leopold was simply a love-struck gay kid who acted as a reluctant accomplice. (When I was young and foolish, I certainly did things I’m now ashamed of in order to keep the affections of an unworthy and ill-chosen beloved.) Loeb is a sociopath who is guilty of murder, but Leopold is guilty only of being in love. It’s a relief to be able to separate the queer from the killer.

The “Extreme Case” Verdict. Leopold and Loeb represent the most villainous homosexuals in our culture. If a play or movie can show that even these monstrous killers are human beings who deserve understanding and sympathy, then surely queer people like me (who are not committing murder) can find a place in our society. Their extreme case helps to normalize my own position.

The “Gay Martyr” Verdict. Homophobes think that queer people are as evil as murderers and treat them like criminals. The depiction of the legal prosecution of Leopold and Loeb mirrors my own sense of persecution, allowing me to feel sadness and anger over the mistreatment of these queer characters. They are victims just as we are victims.

The “Gay Criminal” Verdict. Society treats queer people like criminals, and we’re glad to be outlaws because the laws are unfair. Leopold and Loeb are not bound by common morality and homophobic repression. There is strength and power in their criminality, and I admire their arrogance, daring, and rebelliousness. I hate feeling like a victim, and so the role of the aggressor fulfills an empowering fantasy.

The “Fair Trial” Verdict. These plays and films show that Leopold and Loeb were tried and convicted not just for murder but also for homosexuality and gender nonconformity. Neither the legal system nor public opinion ever treats them fairly because of bigotry and prejudice. These plays and films allow me to finally give these queer men a fair trial. My verdict: guilty of murder but innocent on all other counts.

The “Gay Avenger” Verdict. In reality I know that Bobby Franks was an innocent victim, but in the realm of fiction he represents reproductive heterosexuality and the family, the symbols of innocence and goodness used to oppress the supposedly wicked and “antifamily” homosexual. In
these dramatic fantasies, Leopold and Loeb strike a blow against the oppressive and repressive homophobic ideologies that torment them. There is righteousness in their rage, and therefore I can root for them, since these homophobic ideologies also torment me.

*The “Good Drama” Verdict.* Murder makes for good drama. Oedipus, Medea, Richard III, Macbeth, and even Hamlet—they’re all killers. The dramatic depiction of murderers is thrilling because they enact extreme and violent passions in a way that I will never experience. As a queer person, I enjoy seeing queer characters who have this magnitude and stature within the story, and there are now enough “good” gay characters in our culture that I don’t have to feel guilty about enjoying the “bad” ones once in a while. Of course murder is wrong, but the depiction of it is thrilling because it helps us explore the full depth of our humanity.

Narratives that retry real homicidal homosexuals allow the audience to reexamine and reconsider murder cases that have the power to raise troubling issues about the relationship between homosexuality and criminality—a relationship that, despite great changes between 1924 and today, is still being negotiated in our legal system and our daily lives. Although it is possible to dismiss plays and films about real life queer killers as inherently homophobic because they depict “negative representations,” I believe that these narratives benefit from being read as performances that actively wrestle with fears and fantasies about social stigma and criminality. Especially since antigay ideologues and the tabloid press often assume a simple pathological link between the sexual deviant and the murderous criminal, these plays and films offer alternative narratives—or at least more complex ones—that ask audience members to interrogate their assumptions, fears, and fantasies about homicidal homosexuals.

Artists involved in creating theater and film inevitably wrestle with cultural legacies that include heroes and villains, as well as everything those heroes and villains represent. The retrials of Leopold and Loeb and other real queer killers are the results of artists’ and audiences’ need to create new meanings out of these particularly fascinating, mysterious, and troubling parts of our cultural legacy. As long as audiences sense that queers do not always achieve justice in our society, both in courts of law and in public discourse, then plays and films that rewrite criminal cases and imagine alternative “queer” versions of justice will play an important role, showing that the case is always open for reexamination and the final sentence can always be rewritten.