

InDepth Notes on

Thrill Me

book, music & lyrics
by Stephen Dolginoff



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Thrill Me:
Playwright Biography and Production History

STEPHEN DOLGINOFF (book, music, & lyrics) is an award-winning New York-based writer/composer. He received Drama Desk Award nominations for Best Musical and Best Music, an Outer Critics Circle Award nomination for Best Off-Broadway musical, and won an ASCAP Music Award for his musical *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*. Stephen's musicals *Beauty Sleep*, *One Foot Out The Door* (Backstage Bistro Award-Outstanding Book, Music & Lyrics), and *Most Men Are* were all produced in New York City and around the USA. His musical adaptation of *Journey To The Center Of The Earth*, his musical comedy, *Panic*, which is the story behind the infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast, and his musical suspense thriller, *Flames*, have been performed in theatres across the world. Stephen received a BFA in Dramatic Writing from NYU/Tisch School of the Arts. His work is published by Dramatists Play Service and Samuel French. As an actor, Stephen played Nathan Leopold in *Thrill Me* Off-Broadway and on the cast album.

Thrill Me debuted in a production directed by Martin Charnin (*Annie*) at the 2003 Midtown International Theater Festival in New York City. It was then staged for a limited run at the York Theatre Company in NYC from May through August of 2005. The production featured author Stephen Dolginoff in the role of Leopold and Doug Kreeger as Loeb. Michael Rupert, who was the original Marvin in William Finn's *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*, directed the production.

The New York Times said of the York Theatre staging, "The story is familiar..., but somehow...Dolginoff's pocket musical about the Leopold and Loeb murder case lands like a well-placed punch, arresting and a bit breathtaking.... Credit [the] lean approach to the storytelling.... Others have told the tale in plays and films, but there is something brazenly satisfying about Mr. Dolginoff's rendition.... [It]'s a reminder that evil often looks and sounds beautiful."

Over 100 productions followed, including a London Fringe production, which moved to the West End for a limited run and received a WOS Award Nomination. *Thrill Me* has also been seen in cities all across the USA including Los Angeles, where it received a Garland Award, Chicago, Boston, Dallas, Seattle, San Francisco, St. Louis, Orlando, and Philadelphia; in Canada (Vancouver & Toronto); in South America (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil); in Australia (Sydney & Melbourne); in several European countries (Spain, Germany, Greece, Belgium); and most notably, in Asia, where there are currently long-running productions in Seoul, South Korea (since 2007) and Tokyo, Japan (since 2011).

**Dolginoff at the Drama Desk Awards:
The Creator of *Thrill Me* is Thrilled Himself**

By Andy Humm

This article originally appeared in The Gay City News on May 18, 2006

If you are expecting the creator of a musical about Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, the Jazz Age thrill killers, to be some misanthropic Goth working in a basement somewhere, you do not know anything about Stephen Dolginoff nor have you seen his critically acclaimed *Thrill Me* that challenged and gratified audiences earlier this season at the York Theater Company here. Fresh from being nominated for an Outer Critics Circle award and two Drama Desk awards for Outstanding Musical and Music, he said he is “happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life.”

The sunny, lean Dolginoff, 38, lives and composes out of a tidy apartment in a theater district high rise with his beloved cat, Sox, and such inspirations as a doll of Jeannie from the *I Dream of Jeannie* TV show and a picture of Lucille Ball in her *I Love Lucy* prime.

The tag line for *Thrill Me* was “Relationships can be murder,” but Dolginoff said over coffee in his neighborhood diner, “Murder isn’t what it is about.” The two-hander, for which he wrote the book, lyrics, and music and in which he later starred as Nathan Leopold, is more about “what we do for the person we love—things we wouldn’t do on our own,” he said. “A lot of people can relate to that and the fact that it has aspects of a thriller.” As Nathan sings, “God knows why I find you so appealing.”

Wasn’t he concerned about the acceptability not to mention commercial prospects of a musical about child murder? While Dolginoff makes no excuses for the killers, he said, “They were 18, the kid was 14. It was more like killing a peer.” The victim, Bobby Franks, is not portrayed in the musical because the focus is on the relationship of the older boys, which is homosexual. The drama is about who is really in control.

“It was such a compelling story,” he said and not difficult to write once he got started. “I felt, ‘Here’s the whole story laid out for me.’ I just had to figure out how to get it told through just the two characters,” especially in the second half when they are being interrogated and tried.

Getting it produced was another matter. When he wrote it ten years ago, he thought, “two weeks in a Village basement sounded good.” He said his many

rejection letters would read—“We think it is well written, it’s just not for us.” Eventually, he showed it to producer Jim Kierstead who submitted it to the 2003 Midtown International Theater Festival where it was very well received. It got produced in Boston, Melbourne, and Orlando before its long run starting last May at the York, “a birthplace for new literate, intimate musicals, and a place where underappreciated musical gems from the past are rediscovered,” according to its mission statement.

While writing it, “I had to imagine myself as both characters,” but he never imagined himself being in it. When the York run was extended and Matt Bauer could not continue as Nathan, Dolginoff was asked to join Doug Kreeger onstage.

“At first I said, ‘Absolutely not,’” Dolginoff said. “I was afraid I would ruin it. I hadn’t performed in years and never had the lead.” But he was persuaded that he was the only one who could take over on such short notice. The York let this reporter see his first performance last year and I was able to report that he triumphed. Now he is the toast of the town.

At the Drama Desk nominees’ reception, “I was overwhelmed,” he said. “So many people knew who I was and knew *Thrill Me*. I couldn’t believe it. When I was a little kid in Kansas City, I would dream of things like that. No one was happier than I was.” It was especially gratifying because the run at the York ended last summer, but was still strong in the memories of people he encountered at the party.

There are eight productions of *Thrill Me* scheduled over the coming year, including St. Petersburg, Florida in July and Seattle in February where Dolginoff will reprise his performance. It’s also slated for Dallas, Chicago, Richmond and Philadelphia, and Seoul, South Korea (in Korean).

Despite its success, it is still “not the type of show that high schools and community theaters will do,” but in Philly’s Media Theater, it is part of a season that includes *Aida*, *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown*, *Oklahoma*, and *Pump Boys and Dinettes*. Go figure.

Dolginoff grew up in Kansas City, did theater in high school and went to New York to study acting at NYU where he realized he did not want to be one. “My passion was writing and composing,” he said. He did an adult take on *Sleeping Beauty* called *Beauty Sleep*.

“I realized how hard acting was—so much competition,” he said, and he would have been performing other people’s work. “As a writer, everything I would create would be original.”

He wrote *Most Men Are* about male-male relationships, gay and familial, as well as dealing with AIDS, in 1995. He has always been out as a gay man. “It never occurred to me to be untruthful,” he said.

“No one is not going to do my play because I’m gay. Actors are afraid they might not get hired because of it, but it’s very different for writers.”

He has also written musicals of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and another called *One Foot Out the Door*, for which he won a Bistro Award.

Dolginoff has survived all these years as a struggling writer by having a supportive family and by doing part-time work in theater offices. But now he is totally dedicated to advancing *Thrill Me* and will not start another musical right away unless he gets a commission or something moves him. “The thing I’ve learned,” he said, “is if a song doesn’t come fast, it doesn’t come at all.”

Stephen Dolginoff’s success may not have come fast, but his time has surely come.

Stories That Can Evoke Conflicting Emotions:
A Q&A with *Thrill Me* Director Bret Young

As a notorious theatrical jack-of-all-trades, what made you decide to add director to your multi-hyphenate?

Notorious, huh? Thanks! I think it was a simple natural progression. I have worked over many disciplines in the craft of theatre during my career and found that I was developing strong opinions about how certain stories could be told.

What drew you to this story specifically?

I have always been drawn to stories that show what we, as human beings, are capable of under given circumstances. Stories of love and lust and how those can intersect. Stories that can evoke conflicting emotions, like a beautiful love story that is tragic, being excited and scared at the same time, or pain that also feels kind of good.

What has inspired your take on the material?

I needed for my first true directing experience to be on the small side and thought a two-character piece would fit the bill. I am also drawn to the period in which *Thrill Me* is set. I think that the 1920's were an amazing time in American history. The sensational nature of this crime and trial and the idea that at that time people were really crossing boundaries- prohibition, organized crime, and speakeasies. The decadence displayed in the face of the law and religion. I also found it very sexy.

Right now you are in the midst of the rehearsal process. What has surprised you the most about working on this material?

That we are finding humility, humor, and love under all this behavior that is considered immoral and depraved. Again, conflicting emotions.

What has been the most challenging aspect of working on the material?

The fact that I am not trained musically. I rely greatly on our musical director and the talented actor/singers.

What can a modern audience take away from this adaptation of the story?

The lengths we as humans are willing to go to for love haven't really changed throughout history

How does the show speak specifically to an LGBT audience?

I think as well as stories that speak to coming out, first gay love, breaking out of the closet, etc., we have to accept that there are bad gays, too. We are woven into the fabric of society. Both the positive and negative.

How did you know that you had found your Leopold and Loeb?

I knew we had something with Michael Parrot the minute he walked in the door. He was able to embody Nathan Leopold from the very first read. Once he was cast, we began a search for his partner in crime (pun intended). Scott Nickley came in and nailed the mixture of cockiness and smarts that Richard Loeb needed. Plus their chemistry was screaming out from the beginning.

How did you settle on the rest of your creative team?

I wanted a group of designers that would go with me down this dark path and not be afraid to make it real. I have such great respect for this team and their talent. They were hand picked from a long history of work in San Diego theatre. I am very lucky.

How do you keep everyone from going mad working on material this heavy?

We laugh a lot! We also know that we are telling a story.

Why does this story still fascinate people ninety years later?

We are all still fascinated with anything that breaks the rules. We also like looking into the minds of people on the fringe. Knowing who you don't want to be is just as important as knowing who you want to be. This allows us to sit safely in our seats and experience something truly far from our own lives (hopefully!).

Do you think it's important for the LGBT community to explore our dark past?

I think it's important to know that we have always been here and that we come from all walks of life. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

What true-life crime story still has the power to haunt you?

I was actually friends with Andrew Cunanan before he lost his damn mind and went on a mad killing spree that ultimately ended the lives of several people including Gianni Versace. How's that for haunting?

Leopold and Loeb: Queer Facts and Coded Fictionalizations

Over the past century there have been many so-called Crimes of the Century. At least a couple each decade. In today's day and age, where the 24 hour news cycle dominates, most crimes are forgotten about almost as soon as they happen. Some occupy our national consciousness for a spell while most fade to the background. Some have longevity because of their ties to certain areas or cultures. Only a few have the power to resonate across decades.

In the LGBT community, there are cases still lurking just behind us that won't let us forget the darkness our community can be plunged into. Jeffrey Dahmer. Aileen Wournos. John Wayne Gacy. And Leopold and Loeb. Even if you think that you aren't familiar with the Leopold and Loeb case, chances are that you have seen an adaptation of their story at some point, whether you know it or not. Almost a hundred years later, their crimes still fascinate.

Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were wealthy, exceptionally intelligent law school students living in Chicago in the 1920's. They connected in their teenage years, with Leopold acting as an accomplice to petty crimes committed by Loeb. Eventually these crimes ceased to satisfy their urge for thrills. As the intensity of their crimes increased, so did the intensity of their relationship, which eventually became sexual.

Together they planned to commit the perfect crime. A crime they thought they would never be caught for because they were convinced that they embodied philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of Superman. They believed that, because of their superior intellect, the laws of the average man did not bind them. A scheme was hatched to kidnap and murder a young boy at random. They carried their plan out on May 21, 1924, when Leopold was 19 and Loeb was 18. The victim was 14-year-old Bobby Franks.



Richard Loeb (l.) and Nathan Leopold (r.) in the courtroom.

After the killing, the young men went on about their lives as normal, convinced they had successfully hidden their tracks, until a break in the case turned up eyeglasses that Leopold had dropped near the body. This led to their arrests, confessions (in which they both accused the other of being the one to strike the fatal blow), and the unraveling of their "perfect crime."

The trial that followed became a media spectacle. Loeb's family hired defense attorney Clarence Darrow, whose fame would later grow after the

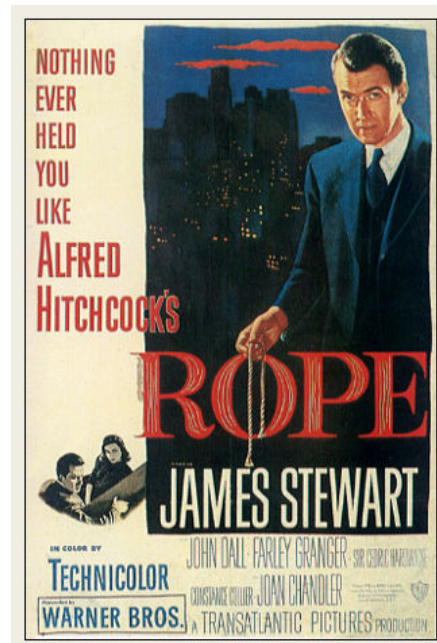
Scopes “Monkey” trial on teaching evolution in 1925. Darrow had the young men plead guilty to avoid a jury hell-bent on vengeance and argued that they were mentally diseased. In a 12 hour closing argument, he stressed their youth and argued that capital punishment only serves as retribution without rehabilitation. The judge did not give them the death penalty. Instead he gave them life plus 99 years, mostly owing to the fact that they were legal minors in a time when people were considered of age when they turned 21.

Leopold and Loeb were imprisoned, maintaining their relationship despite periods of separation. Eventually reunited at Statesville Penitentiary, they even taught classes at the prison school. Then, in 1936, Loeb was slashed with a straight-razor in the shower by a former cellmate. Leopold saw and spoke to him at the prison hospital after the incident, even washing blood from Loeb’s body. Loeb died from his wounds.

Leopold dove into a deep depression, but continued teaching, working in the prison library, and writing. He finished his autobiography, *Life Plus 99 Years*, in 1954 and was released on parole four years later. Moving to Puerto Rico after release to avoid attention, he married a widowed florist, worked at a hospital, and rediscovered his love for bird watching. He died of a diabetes-related heart attack in 1971 at the age of 71.

The Leopold and Loeb story inspired several well-know works of fiction and drama. Some have greater fidelity to the facts than others, especially when it comes to the nature of the relationship between the young men, but their creators were all clearly taken by this story of symbiosis, attraction, and crime. Ninety years after the crime was committed, we are still exploring this tale that is as dark and magnetic as its protagonists are.

In 1929, just five years after the crime, the play *Rope* by Patrick Hamilton was produced in London. It moved the setting across the pond, making the two young men students at Oxford who murder a fellow student for “the sake of danger and for the sake of killing.” They put the victim in a chest and proceed to throw a party, using the corpse-filled furniture as a buffet table. The piece had a brief run on Broadway with the title *Rope’s End*, with a small New York revival in 2005



A poster for Hitchcock's adaptation of *Rope* prominently featuring co-star James Stewart.

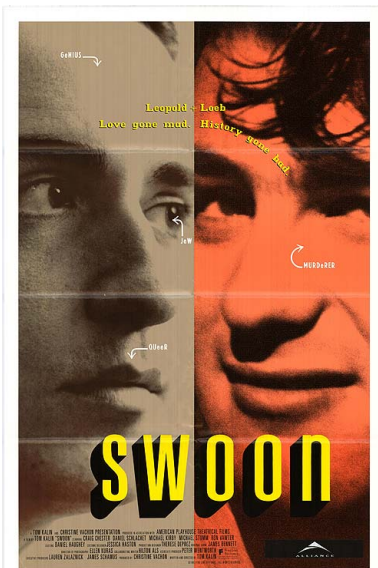
and one in London in 2009. It is a traditionally structured, three act play that clearly shows its age, with any hints of a romantic relationship between the men remaining strictly subtextual.

The play is better known to modern audiences through its 1948 film adaptation of the same name directed by Alfred Hitchcock and written by gay dramatist Arthur Laurents, who also penned the books to the musicals *Gypsy*, *West Side Story*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, and the screenplay for *The Way We Were*. This version of *Rope* relocated the story to New York City and featured John Dall and Farley Granger, who were both gay in real life, as the central pair. The gay subtext remains despite the strict production code in place in Hollywood at the time, with those working on the film's production referring to the homosexuality only as "it."

In 1956, Meyer Levin's novel *Compulsion* was published. He had attended the University of Chicago at the same time as Leopold and Loeb, though he did not know them personally and Leopold personally disapproved of Levin's version of the story. Written in a documentary style that hewed closely to the facts, the novel was adapted into a 1957 stage play by Levin himself. The work was adapted into a film directed by Richard Fleischer in 1959 with Orson Welles top-billed playing their attorney. The gay aspects of the story were once again beneath the surface, expressed only through indicative dialogue and clever editing.

San Diego born playwright John Logan, who would go on to write screenplays for *Gladiator*, *The Aviator*, *Skyfall*, and *Sweeney Todd*, wrote his off-

Broadway hit *Never the Sinner* in 1988. The openly gay writer's adaptation is the first major work to take the homosexual implications of the story and finally bring them out of the shadows. It makes the love story as important as, if not more than, the crime elements and courtroom drama. The show played here at Diversionary in 2002 in a production directed by Sean Murray, who is now Artistic Director at Cygnet Theatre.



Poster art for the film *Swoon* directed by Tom Kalin

During the height of the AIDS crisis in the early nineties, an important movement of independent filmmaking that focused on LGBT themes emerged known as New Queer Cinema. Among such filmmakers as Todd Haynes (*Poison*), Jennie Livingston (*Paris is Burning*), Gus Van Sant (*My Own Private Idaho*), Derek Jarman (*Edward II*), and Gregg Araki (*The Living End*), was gay director Tom

Exploring the Dark Side of the LGBT Experience at Diversionary

Diversionary Theatre has a mission to try to tell the full spectrum of stories from and about the LGBT community. Often these stories are about triumph, joy, and progress, but we have also ventured into the territory of subjects that are not so celebratory. It is essential for us to do this in order to show a fuller picture of who are and who we were as a culture. We can't forget the shadowy parts of our history in the hopes that they will go away. We must bring them into the light and acknowledge their existence to move forward and beyond.

In 1991, we produced the San Diego premiere of *Small Town Confidential* by Jim Pfanner. It was based on the true case of a McCarthy-esque witch-hunt to smoke out gays in Boise, Idaho in 1955 referred to as the Boys of Boise. Over a thousand people were investigated, some gay and some not, lives were ruined, families were torn apart, and sixteen men arrested on the basis of false allegations that over a hundred boys were involved in sexual acts with a ring of homosexual men. The play, directed by then executive director Reuel Olin, was an attempt to shed light on an oft-forgotten scandal of homophobia.

1998 brought *Suddenly Last Summer* written by legendary gay playwright Tennessee Williams and directed by D.W. Jacobs, who co-founded the San Diego Repertory Theatre. In it, an unseen gay man whose death on vacation at the hands of young locals he sought sexual favors from is the springboard for psychological trauma in his cousin and denial in his mother, who refuses to see him as the amoral hedonist he was. Murder, pimping, lobotomy, and cannibalism swirl together to form a dark portrayal of a troubled protagonist and the unlikable, disturbed family left to pick up the pieces in his absence.

The Killing of Sister George by Frank Marcus opened here in 2002 in a production directed by Tim Irving. It starred San Diego theatrical legend Priscilla Allen in the title role as an alcoholic, temperamental radio actress. This play garnered more than its share of controversy over the years by portraying an emotionally manipulative central lesbian relationship that was doused with S&M that borders on abuse. However, since it's original production in 1966, this black comedy has gone on to become an LGBT classic.

Martin Sherman's 1979 play *Bent*, about two gay men who fall in love while at the Dachau concentration camp during WWII, is a modern queer drama touchstone that brought the issue of the treatment of gay people by the Nazis into a sharp focus. After the play's debut, historical research on the subject increased greatly. It has been seen at Diversionary twice- first during the 92/93 Season and more recently in a 2009 co-production with ion theatre company co-directed by Glenn Paris and Claudio Raygoza.