

# Arts & Culture

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## THEATER

### A case of *Never the Sinner* proves ever fascinating

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

I remember the O. J Simpson trial being called “the trial of the century.” Thing is, it seems that every decade the media proclaims some case “the trial of the century” and some are truly more important than others. As time goes by, we may recognize the names of these cases, but the details get hazy.

Ending the current season at Silver Spring Stage is a smart production of *Never the Sinner*, which looks at one of the pivotal murder trials of the 20th century – the Leopold and Loeb case. It is a fascinating and thought provoking case, and issues from that trial still reverberate today.

Playwright John Logan expertly handles this complicated case and the issues involved. It is a real life courtroom drama, so the normal rules of an Agatha Christie mystery do not apply. We know who is guilty, but the question becomes why they did it. The answer to that question is critical to the key issue in this case – what to do with the defendants.

Most of Act I centers on the murder itself, and how two smart teenagers with their grandiose ideas right out of Nietzsche would kill young Bobby Franks in cold blood. The



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Front, Craig Miller (Clarence Darrow) and David Gorsline (Robert Crowe), rear Sam Ludwig (Richard Loeb) and Ryan Manning (Nathan Leopold, Jr.).

second half centers on the trial, which turned out to be one of the big events in the career of famous lawyer Clarence Darrow. Along the way both the insanity defense and the capital punishment arguments get thorough airing.

This is one of those cases that appears so simple on the surface and gets real complicated as you dive into it. Fortunately, director Michael Kharfen understands that and keeps the action moving swiftly while letting the actors fill in the details.

It helps that the two leads are both very good. Ryan Manning as the more introverted

and intellectual Nathan Leopold and Sam Ludwig as the more outgoing and seemingly carefree Richard Loeb do a good job portraying the complex and ever-shifting relationship between these two young men. Manning and Ludwig create two characters who are very intelligent, but are still very immature on important matters. They manage to give us a lot of details of these two men and still leave them enigmas.

As we get into the second half, the lawyers take center stage. David Gorsline as prosecutor Robert Crowe and Craig Miller as Darrow seem evenly matched and well skilled in the courtroom scenes. Whatever your opinion about the issue, listen to the closing arguments of these two lawyers: rarely has both sides of the capital punishment debate been presented so clearly and forcefully.

Jacob Yeh, Chris Curtis, and Robin Covington perform well as the ensemble, playing various witnesses and media personalities. This

was another case where the media (mostly radio and newspapers) had a field day, constantly demonizing or glamorizing the two young men partially to attract the public. Not that the media would ever do such a thing today. Both Logan’s script and the Stage’s production nicely capture that aspect of the trial as a constant undercurrent in the story.

There is a very functional and complex set by Bruce Starr, which allows for screen projections of various locations throughout the story. Costume Coordinator Eric Scerbo does a good job suggesting the flavor of Chicago in the ’20s, and there is a very interesting and detailed sound design by Kevin Garrett. On opening night the sound was occasionally too loud and competed too much with the actors, but that is my only real criticism of the production.

The problem is that there can be no justice in a murder case. You steal money from me and a trial should at least give me my money back. Whatever the court does with Leopold and Loeb will never return Bobby Franks to life. So the capital punishment debate and the insanity defense debate continue. After nearly a century, the questions raised in this murder case are still being argued and may never get resolved.

If you get the chance, see the neglected Alfred Hitchcock film *Rope*, which is loosely based on this same story. The movie is totally different from the play, but it’s still fascinating.

*Never the Sinner* continues at Silver Spring Stage through July 22. For more information on the current show or the 2007-2008 season, call (301) 593-6036 or visit their website at [www.ssstage.org](http://www.ssstage.org).

*Never the Sinner*  
Silver Spring Stage  
★★★★

### London 1888 with Jack the pop-rock Ripper

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

At the moment, area theaters are certainly fascinated by criminals. There’s that “Phantom” guy running around at the Kennedy Center and Silver Spring Stage is exploring the Leopold and Loeb murder case with *Never the Sinner*. All of them are amateurs compared with the granddaddy of them all, currently at Landless Theater Company with their production of *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper*.

Oh yes, and it’s a musical. Hey, if Stephen Sondheim can make musicals out of Sweeney Todd and presidential *Assassins*, why not Springheeled Jack? But if you’re expecting a Rocky Horror Picture Show style production, you are in for a big surprise. It turns out that

*Yours Truly* is a sober and meditative reflection on that awful autumn in 1888 London.

A word first about the company. Landless aims to attract a younger, more diverse crowd to the theater, and thrives on unconventional plays with oddball subject matter. While the group performs at DCAC in Adams Morgan, Landless was founded in Maryland and features several local actors. Director Andrew Lloyd Baughman is a native of Montgomery County who currently lives in Frederick.

But what is it about this 120-year-old case that still fascinates us? The murderer was never caught so that leaves plenty of room for historians and armchair detectives to devise their own pet theories. Then there is the sensational aspects to the case: the murders were brutal (the Ripper deserved his nickname) and the fact his victims were all prostitutes adds a prurient aspect to the crimes. But most of all, the Ripper was the first in a long line of criminals we are all too familiar with these days: the serial killer.

The musical itself is oddly credited to Jeremy “Frogg” Moody for musical concept and narrative by David Taylor. The script leaves a

lot of room for individual companies to maneuver. Whatever, someone did their homework. Most Ripper stories end up trying out their pet theory for who the murderer is or adding a fictional character like Sherlock Holmes/Johnny Depp to solve the crime. While a musical, *Yours Truly* generally sticks to the facts (until the very end), and covers the story very thoroughly.

While listed as a rock musical, that is stretching the point. A pop-rock musical is more like it, and quite a few of Moody’s songs could do well enough on the radio with different lyrics. A small ensemble of drummer, keyboards, and occasional guitar performs off to the side at DCAC and at times the musicians take secondary roles in the play proper. The cast does well with upbeat numbers like a Salvation Army scene but really shines in the ballads. “Itchy Park,” an elegiac ballad on a notorious open space homeless area in London is one of the loveliest songs I’ve heard this year.

All of this may cause you to scratch your heads – what about the murders? They are there, with five female actresses taking their turns in the spotlight. It may feel that the action stops in

the middle of this production, but it gives important information on the times and the infamous Whitechapel area where Jack’s victims lived. Plus a hint at the almost Keystone Cops antics of the London law officers, who found a major piece of evidence, literally some handwriting on the wall, and promptly ruined it.

Landless is a scrappy young company making the most of their limited resources. Still one wonders what they could have done with a larger playing area, a larger ensemble and better projections for the photographs (though in the case of the notorious Mary Kelly photograph, some audience members may find this a good thing).

What is not in doubt is this is a serious rendition of a story too often obscured by sensationalism and junk conspiracy theories. The truth is riveting enough, and the music manages to heighten that effect instead of trivializing it. For those who are fascinated by this shadowy historical figure, Landless Theater’s one hour production is a refreshing change of pace from the usual pulp approach to this subject.

*Yours Truly, Jack The Ripper* continues at DCAC in Adams Morgan by the Landless Theater Company through July 15. For more information call 202-462-7833 or visit their Web site at [www.landlesstheatrecompany.org](http://www.landlesstheatrecompany.org).

*Yours Truly, Jack The Ripper*  
Landless Theater  
★★★★