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"Compulsion": The Fictionalization of the Leopold-Loeb Case and the Struggle for Creative Control of "The Crime of the Century"

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***Compulsion: The Fictionalization of the Leopold-Loeb Case and the Struggle for
Creative Control of the “Crime of the Century”***

By

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THESIS

Submitted to Northern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of MASTER OF ARTS

English Department

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: *Compulsion*: The Fictionalization of the Leopold-Loeb Case and the Struggle for Creative Control of “The Crime of the Century”

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ABSTRACT

When an artist releases a project into the global marketplace, it is difficult to say that it is “their” project from that point onward. Once an artistic work is made accessible to the public, it all but becomes public property as it is reinterpreted and re-released in different forms. In the case of literature, everything from plagiarism to unauthorized publishing can take place. Some methods of “stealing,” such as fan fiction, have less of an impact and can be viewed as harmless appreciation (as long as there is no profit being made). But other forms of theft, like the illegal distribution of an author’s work in digital form, are blatant abuses of copyright against the artist and the distributors and can directly affect the profit from legitimate book sales. However, such content hijacking is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a process that is restricted to outside interference from the public. For centuries, authors have had to deal with unwanted tampering to their work from within the writing profession itself-- from co-writers, editors and publishers, as well as from the companies that their stories, novellas or novels have been sold to. This thesis focuses on Meyer Levin’s *Compulsion*, as it made the journey from being the first “documentary novel” and bestselling book into a Broadway production, and the author’s struggles to maintain control over his written work. The intent of this thesis is to examine the numerous struggles faced by *Compulsion* on its journey into the world of theater and film, and the efforts and sacrifices made by all those involved to not only finish their respective projects but to present strong, important and powerful content to its audiences.

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M.L. ZAMBRANA

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INTRODUCTION

*THIS THESIS FOLLOWS THE FORMAT PRESCRIBED BY THE
MLA STYLE MANUAL AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH.*

“The Crime of the Century” is a phrase intended to identify the most sensational, horrific events of a given era. Yet the colorful phrasing has been applied to a number of different crimes and cases, including the murder of Dr. Patrick Henry Cronin in 1889, the Scottsboro Boys (falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931), the death of the Lindbergh baby in New Jersey in 1932, spying accusations against Alger Hiss in 1947, the 1950 Brinks robbery in Boston, the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, the 1966 murder of eight nurses by Richard Speck, and the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995.

But the 1924 Chicago trial of nineteen-year-old Nathan Freudenthal Leopold, Jr. and eighteen-year-old Richard Albert Loeb holds the most prominent place in the annals of journalism as “The Crime of the Century.” The kidnap and murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks at the hands of Leopold and Loeb, coupled with the media-intensive courtroom trial that took place, pales in comparison to more horrific crimes where the nation’s newspapers have echoed that title. But for an optimistic generation entering the grand and glorious Twentieth Century, the seemingly pointless murder of an innocent boy by privileged members of society challenged the ideals of the time.

On May 22, 1924, a man walking to work early one morning found the body of a

teenage boy lying face-down in a culvert, less than fourteen hours after the disappearance of a youth named Bobby Franks from the South Side of Chicago. A two-week search for the killers began, while newspaper articles and prominent headlines kept the story fresh in the public's mind and captured the attention of the nation. Reporters scrambled for information, real or made-up, to feed readers' appetites for as much scandal and dirt as could be believed, to the point where falsely-accused men were hounded by police to confess to the as-yet unsolved murder. "Police investigators focused on two teachers from Bobby Franks' school. They were held for a week and subjected to grueling cross-examination to force them to confess. The seven-day ordeal was ended by a judge's order when police failed to turn up any hard evidence" (Vitelli "Babe and Dickie on Trial, Part 1 of 3").

Meanwhile, the relentless coverage and intense media pressure even wore on the perpetrators themselves. Frustrated by the botched kidnapping plot and the unwanted early discovery of the body, even Loeb's self-confidence in the perfect nature of his crime wavered, to the point where he considered killing his partner Leopold and committing suicide in order to escape the tension.

Police eventually traced a pair of horn-rimmed glasses found near the body back to Leopold, and then linked Leopold to his friend Richard Loeb. Public scrutiny reached a deafening crescendo as the rich, educated, intelligent Jewish young men went to jail and then to court. The names of their respective families became tarnished to the point where several of Loeb's relatives legally changed their surname so as not to be linked to the dreadful event. Famed attorney Clarence Darrow, known for his defense in the "Scopes Monkey Trial," even stepped out of retirement to defend the "Loeb-Leopold case," as it

was known, to keep the two men from being executed under the death penalty.

Darrow succeeded in convincing Judge Caverly to spare their lives, and the judge issued a sentence of life plus ninety-nine years, out of “consideration to the age of the defendants” (Leopold 78). In his 1958 autobiography, *Life Plus 99 Years*, Leopold later remarked, “We need only have introduced our birth certificates in evidence!” rather than have gone through intense psychological examinations and Darrow’s efforts (Leopold 78). After Loeb died in Stateville Prison in 1937—sliced to death by a fellow inmate who stole a straight razor out of the prison barber shop and allegedly killed him for making sexual advances—the case became known as the “Leopold-Loeb case” from that time onward.

For his remaining years at Stateville, Leopold’s prison life and activities never faded from the newspapers. Everything he did—from the creation of several prison correspondence courses during the 1930s (many written with Loeb’s help) to his volunteer activities for malaria treatments during World War II—garnered public attention and scrutiny. In some people’s eyes, no amends could be made for the horrible crime he had co-conspired to commit, but because Loeb confessed to being the one who actually murdered Bobby Franks (with Leopold driving the rental car they used), a certain amount of public forgiveness and understanding began to come his way.

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

In the early 1950s, the most prominent voice to speak up on behalf of convicted murderer Nathan Leopold turned out to be a reporter-turned-novelist from Chicago named Meyer Levin. Along with publishing newspaper articles, Levin had been an associate editor for *Esquire Magazine*. He had written a total of nine books, including his 1950 autobiography *In Search*, which dealt with his spiritual growth in Judaism, a religious belief that became central to the plot and characters of his other eight novels.

In 1954, Levin interviewed Leopold and began research on what would eventually become a landmark novel titled, *Compulsion*. In this fictionalization of the Bobby Franks murder, Levin included details on the psychological analysis and legal battle that surrounded the Leopold-Loeb case. *Compulsion* carried the unique title of “documentary novel” and is considered by publishers to have been the first non-fiction novel released in the United States. More famous examples of the genre came along in subsequent years, eventually eclipsing *Compulsion*, including journalist Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operacion Masacre* (1957), about the 1956 capture and murder of Argentinean militants, and Truman Capote’s bestseller *In Cold Blood* (1966), which focused on the murders of four members of the Clutter family at the hands of Richard “Dick” Hickock and Perry Smith in Kansas.

Levin focused on the psychological makeup of his characters in *Compulsion*. He re-named them “Judd Steiner” (Leopold) and “Artie Straus” (Loeb), as he did for every other character in the book, and kept a number of real-life events and courtroom testimony intact in his work of fiction. But he did take some liberties; Levin inserted a

cub reporter named “Sid Silver” as a Mary Sue/Gary Sue version of himself, who skirts around the edges of the action and interacts with those involved. Sid Silver becomes the one that prompts the beginning of the investigation, when he deduces that a pair of glasses found with the body do not fit on the face of the murdered boy, “Paulie Kessler” (Franks).

Although *Compulsion* involved fictionalized characters and dramatic scenes, the majority of the book also contained legitimate source material from the trial, confessions, and psychological and medical examinations done on Leopold and Loeb. Leopold himself, after reading the novel in the 1960s and comparing its contents to court transcriptions and psychiatrists’ reports provided by his attorney Elmer Getz, concluded that the amount of factual material made up approximately sixty percent of the material—a reversal of figures from his earlier estimate in 1956, when he first read the book and put the fiction content at sixty percent. He realized that he’d forgotten certain details about the events of 1924, and the legal documents that he hadn’t had access to in prison refreshed his memory in that regard.

Released by New York publishers Simon and Schuster in 1956, *Compulsion* became the third best-selling novel in 1956. It was among a collection of other popular novels that went on to become motion pictures including *Peyton Place* (which also enjoyed long-lasting fame as a television series in the 1960s), *Auntie Mame* with Rosalind Russell, *Don’t Go Near the Water* with Glenn Ford, with Spencer Tracy, and *The World of Suzie Wong* with William Holden.

The cover of *Compulsion* was designed by artist Paul Bacon, who “downplayed the cover’s imagery, depicting two small jittery figures printed in red. He devoted most of

the space to the title and the author's name... he set a new trend in jacket design. The 'big book' look was born" (Daugherty 214). The intriguing and successful images laid down by Bacon would continue to be used over the next several years for advertising and book publication purposes related to *Compulsion*.

As Levin's "documentary novel" grew in popularity, Simon and Schuster re-issued the book from hardcover to paperback in order to capitalize on their hot-ticket item. They also provided regular nationwide advertising in newspapers and popular magazines, with ads that contained slogans like, "Do you know anyone who isn't discussing this novel?"

CHAPTER TWO: *COMPULSION*, THE PLAY

In the Wednesday, December 5, 1956 issue of *Variety*, a small article was published that read, “Film producer Darryl F. Zanuck is purchasing the screen rights to Meyer Levin’s *Compulsion*, with the stipulation that the author have the legit adaptation ready by December 1, 1957. A Broadway producer will be selected by Levin” (*Variety* 79). After months of negotiations and rejections from other movie studios, Levin’s successful novel *Compulsion* had finally been purchased by 20th Century Fox, but the deal came with a unique caveat: in order to get the movie produced, Levin had to prove his story’s appeal and relevance to a modern audience by first presenting it on the Broadway stage—and he had to do it before December 1st, 1957.

Levin already had a literary nightmare on his hands with the 1955 presentation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Based on Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, the play was produced by Kermit Bloomgarden and written by playwrights Albert Hackett and Francis Goodrich; Levin had been the first to dramatize Frank’s diary, only to find his work rejected. Levin felt that certain elements of Frank’s story had been deliberately downplayed or excised altogether from the Broadway script, suppressing the Jewish content in order to appeal to a wider, Christian-based audience. A lawsuit against Otto Frank, Anne’s father, resulted in a \$50,000 settlement for Levin, but won him no friends in the theatre community.

The still-troubling conflicts with *The Diary of Anne Frank* only complicated and stressed the overworked Levin when he tried to find a producer and get *Compulsion* written and staged by the end of 1957. Levin ran into many delays and rejections from

producers and actors alike, including Orson Welles, who wanted the role of the defense attorney Jonathan Wilk (with Levin's full approval); beset by numerous financial problems, Welles eventually dropped out of the pre-staging efforts. Noted producers Theodore Mann, Leigh Connell and Jose Quintero also bowed out.

As Levin found himself running out of time to fulfill 20th Century Fox's contract requirement, he settled for producers Michael Myerberg and Leonard Gruenberg and chose them to stage his play during the 1957-58 season (despite their poor track records with stage productions). But he had not forgotten the original case that had inspired him; Levin published an article in the popular family magazine *Coronet* in May 1957, titled "Leopold Should Be Freed!" in which he addressed the upcoming parole hearing for Nathan Leopold. Even with the support of Levin, poet Carl Sandburg, mystery author Erle Stanley Gardner, and several University of Chicago classmates—all of whom believed that Leopold had been fairly punished, felt remorse for his crime and had earned his freedom through his good deeds in prison—Leopold's parole was delayed for another year.

Early on in the Broadway preparations, Levin quickly found himself on the "outs" of the creative process, thanks in no small part to producer Michael Myerberg. In his forward to the 1959 publication of his dramatic stage script, *Compulsion: A Play*, Levin described how Myerberg went from "overflowing with compliments" to insisting on the hiring of an additional writer to develop scenes (Levin *iv*). In May 1957, an article in *Variety* announced that a rival production also dealing with the Leopold-Loeb case, *Counsel for the Defense*, was planning to debut at the same time. Myerberg used that threat to bring in a fledgling writer named Robert Thom as Levin's "assistant" on July 19.

Even though the producer and writer for *Counsel for the Defense*, Jay Julien and William Marchant, eventually cancelled the run of their play, Thom remained with *Compulsion* and proceeded to rewrite much of Levin's script, under the promise of receiving twenty percent of the royalties from the show, but no program credit.

Myerberg, the self-determined arbitrator between the two writers, proceeded to side with Thom in any and all creative disputes, shutting out any of Levin's rewrites, and refuting anything script-wise that Levin tried to address. When set designer Peter Larkin and director Alex Segal were hired in July 1957, Segal was supposed to be the arbitrator between Thom and Levin, as stated in a document dated August 8, 1957. However, it's unlikely that any neutrality existed where their relationship was concerned; Segal, hand-picked by Myerberg to be the director, had worked primarily in live television on such programs as *The United States Steel Hour* and *Celanese Theater*, but had no credits whatsoever as a theater director. Plucked from his out-of-work status and given the golden opportunity to work on a high-profile Broadway play, based on a successful best-selling novel, it is likely Segal would not have done anything that contradicted Myerberg's vision for *Compulsion*.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BROADWAY ACTORS

Due to the literary success of Meyer Levin's *Compulsion*, and with no knowledge of the behind-the-scenes squabbles going on with the dramatic version, every young actor suitable for the roles of "Judd Steiner" and "Artie Straus" wanted to be a part of the soon-to-be hit Broadway production. However, the standard "cattle call" auditions only deceived the eager actors into thinking they had a chance to be hired, as acting agents simply referred clients directly to Myerberg. The producer then hired based on either previous association or the actors' reputations, yet going through the motions of auditioning other candidates.

The transparent audition process didn't escape the candidates themselves. One notable rejection for the cast was Warren Beatty, who had been promised the part of Artie Straus by the producers, but got the impression that Myerberg already had someone else in mind. Mid-audition, Beatty confronted Myerberg and Segal with what seemed to be the obvious and said, "You don't want *me* in this role, do you?" He then got up and walked out on them. (Before its cancellation, *Counsel for the Defense* also wanted Beatty for one of its lead roles.) A month later, on August 21, 1957, *Variety* announced that Roddy McDowall—fresh from his success on Andy Griffith's *No Time for Sergeants* at the Alvin Theater—had been picked for the part of Artie Straus.

The hiring process also left Levin out of the loop, isolating him from yet another part of his play's progress. Levin was never informed of what days and times the auditions took place, so the author only had the chance to meet and shake hands with one potential candidate (who did not get a part in the production). With less than three months

until the scheduled opening, Levin's opinions were utterly excluded from consideration, as in all other matters, surrounding his play.

Frank Conroy came over from the Broadway production *The Potting Shed* (where he won a Tony Award in 1957 for the role of Father William Callifer) to fill the critical role of Jonathan Wilk, and to bring advance theatrical notoriety and legitimacy to *Compulsion*. An actor named Michael Constantine became his understudy; due to the limited cast size, understudies doubled as other characters in the play, so Constantine also had the roles of "Al, the owner of a speakeasy" and "Dr. Ball," one of the psychiatrists in the trial scenes.

An unlikely candidate for the role of Judd Steiner surfaced when, under Myerberg's instructions, director Alex Segal called and invited a specific actor to read for the part. The name of former child actor Dean Stockwell most likely came to Myerberg's attention thanks to actress Janice Rule; Rule was rehearsing for Myerberg's off-Broadway production of *The Minotaur* (written by Thom), which would premiere at the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut later that year. Rule had co-starred with Stockwell in Universal Pictures' b-movie *Gun for a Coward*, which had been released in February 1957. It marked Stockwell's return to acting after a five-year hiatus from the profession.

Stockwell abandoned Hollywood in 1951, following the termination of his seven-year contract with MGM, then re-started his career in 1956 with a handful of live television dramas in *Front Row Center*, *Matinee Theatre* and *Schlitz Playhouse*. He then segued into b-pictures with *The Careless Years* and *Gun for a Coward*. Outside of the obvious insider connection to Rule, Stockwell's nomination for the prominent role of

Judd Steiner made little sense. He had one theater credit to his name, from his appearance in the 1943 Broadway production, *The Innocent Voyage*. Only seven years old at the time, Stockwell tended to forget his one line, “I won’t be damned,” and his older brother Guy—also in the production—often spoke it for him. With his high forehead, slender frame and low, thick eyebrows, Stockwell had a haunting resemblance to the late James Dean, a trait which paved the way for his successful return to acting.

At the end of August, yet another change took place when the production shifted from the Belasco Theatre to the Ambassador Theatre—another decision of the producers which Levin had no control over. Staging *Compulsion* in the 1921-built Ambassador Theatre changed the auditorium space from the Belasco’s 1907 “little theater” atmosphere, with its shallow and sharply-sloped seating, to an unusual hexagonal arrangement; the auditorium had been placed diagonally on a small lot at 219 West 49th Street in Midtown Manhattan. The switch a little over one hundred more seats per show and put it more along Broadway Avenue, to take advantage of the foot and streetcar traffic.

In every possible way, Michael Myerberg had secured his grip and taken over the casting, writing and staging of Meyer Levin’s *Compulsion*.

CHAPTER FOUR: LEVIN'S LEGAL BATTLES

Levin found himself in a very difficult position, due to the way in which his stage play was being handled by Myerberg, Thom and Segal. The earlier squabbles between Levin and Thom had already led Myerberg to threaten to cancel the production at least once, and if anything kept *Compulsion* from entering the 1957-58 season, Levin would have reneged on his agreement with 20th Century Fox and risked losing the already-established movie deal, due to breach of contract. But he refused to have yet another Broadway play taken away from him without a fight, and to lose out on the larger glory of seeing *Compulsion* become a motion picture. *Variety* and *The New York Times* reported on the regular courtroom activity of lawsuits and countersuits between Levin, Myerberg and Gruenberg, Thom, and at least one of the lead actors, Roddy McDowall. Levin sued Myerberg and Gruenberg over the loss of creative control to the ghostwriter, Thom, for libel and lost wages.

Even actors Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell received a subpoena from Levin, allegedly for publicly speaking out against the play. According to an article in *Newsweek*, Thom claimed that “both McDowall and Stockwell had refused to appear in the original version of the script which McDowall described as, ‘a dirty play about two dirty little boys.’” (The time frame of the rewrites makes it unclear if McDowall actually read and rehearsed off the original script, as written by Levin, or from one of the drafts altered by Thom). The “matter of Meyer Levin, Respondent, vs. Roddy McDowall, et al, Appellants” was quietly settled the following year.

On August 27, 1958, Levin's legal representatives submitted paperwork to the

Clerk of the County of New York, to be handled by the New York Supreme Court Appellate Division - First Department. Robert Thom fired back against Levin, Myerberg and Gruenberg, then withdrew and dismissed his complaints against the producers. In the section, “Uncontradicted Facts,” the court describes Levin as having expressed “jealous sensitivity for his reputation” (New York Supreme Court 4). This seems a somewhat backwards statement under the circumstances, given that the producers and Thom technically worked for Levin, and should have had no creative power over the final product.

Seeking justice for his butchered drama, Levin even filed with the Dramatists’ Guild of New York. *Variety* reported that “The Dramatists’ Guild does not recognize any agreements affecting a production contract unless it has approved them,” but because the agreements regarding the arbitration of rewrites was never filed with the Guild and the League of New York Theatres, the Guild said “it refused to abide by the Levin-Myerberg pact and insisted on the author's final authority.”

According to *Variety*, on Monday, September 9, Myerberg “obtained an order from Supreme Court Judge Sol S. Streit requiring Levin to show cause why the arbitration action should not be enjoined.” Two days later, the trade magazine reported that the case appeared in New York Supreme Court before Judge Jacob Markowitz, at which time Myerberg claimed that Levin’s original script was in “bad shape,” requiring the use of a “collaborator.” The court ruled on September 25 that “the issue was not subject to regular arbitration proceedings as required by The Dramatists Guild...” because the agreement with Segal from August 8 “was not filed with the Guild at the request of Mr. Levin to protect his position in a pending court action against Kermit

Bloomgarden over an adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Mr. Levin charges a ‘vulgarization’ of his adaptation.”

Then, Levin’s tone in dealing with the situation changed briefly—in part, because of his religious beliefs. On Friday, October 4, *The New York Times* ran this unusual advertisement from Levin on Page 28:

At sundown begins our Day of Atonement, whose peace-making meaning is known to all.

In this spirit, I appeal to producers Michael Myerberg and Leonard Gruenberg to settle our differences about *Compulsion*. The dispute revolves about which of the two texts is to be presented. As the author, I suggest that the producer's version and my version be performed on alternate weeks.

The play could open as scheduled on October 21, I would wait my turn. There is no variation in the play's action, but only in style, motivation, and characterization as reflected in the text. I have discussed all practical problems that might ensue from this proposal; they can be solved. Paying the actors for learning the extra set of lines would be preferable to continued strife.

The theatrical public could find stimulation in the values posed by the differing texts. I trust all people of good will may urge this solution.

Faithfully, Meyer Levin (Address: c/o Monica McCall Literary Agcy., 667 Madison Avenue, New York City)

A corresponding article on Page 32 read, “When appraised of Mr. Levin's offer, Mr. Myerberg said, ‘We will give this proposal our careful attention and consideration as we have every other proposal that Mr. Levin has made.’” (*Variety* 32)

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PREPARATION

Despite the ongoing sagas of arbitration and rewrites, the production continued the arduous task of preparing for its opening night, which was scheduled for October 21, 1957. The heavy, depressing material brought both physical and emotional stress to the cast, as they struggled with the difficult subject matters of murder, homosexuality, mental illness, and the focused and intense portrayal of a courtroom case. But even the advertisers for *Compulsion* were not immune from the pressure put on their high-profile product. On October 9, *Variety* reported a minor alteration in advertising techniques: “Annet the Times, the wording of mail order ads... has been changed slightly in the past fortnight. The paper, which customarily refuses to print superlatives in advertising, is understood to have cued trade protests when it ran a *Compulsion* ad lauding the play as ‘The crime of the century - the thrill book of the year - the most exciting play of the season.’ The revised text retains the first two statements, but the offering is now referred to as ‘one of the most anticipated plays of the season’” (*Variety* 56).

Although things went smoothly for the cast through most of October, trouble hit two of the lead actors. Dean Stockwell became one of the thousands of people in the United States affected by the Asian flu epidemic, and his illness led to the cancellation of the Wednesday, October 16 preview. Two days later, he had to quit during the first act of the Friday night preview and hand over the role to his understudy, D.J. Sullivan; luckily, Stockwell recovered enough to make it through Saturday night’s preview and subsequent performances.

A worse fate awaited actor Frank Conroy. Due to the strain from his demanding

role as Jonathan Wilk, a shadow of real-life lawyer Clarence Darrow, Conroy suffered a heart attack and had to be rushed to Medical Arts Center Hospital. The newspapers mistakenly announced his heart attack as the flu shortly after it happened, but corrected themselves on the following day, and it was reported a few days later by *The New York Times* that he was warned by his physician to quit *Compulsion* altogether. The actors' combined illnesses led to a three-day delay of the opening night performance, until Thursday, October 24, 1957.

CHAPTER SIX: THE REVIEWS

With the successful staging of *Compulsion*, Meyer Levin met his deadline for 20th Century Fox with little over a month to spare—even though, for advertising purposes, the play was labeled as the “producer’s version.” The critical reviews came out the following day, and opinions on the drama varied widely. In most cases, the opinion of the critic depended on the newspaper, as some publications put themselves behind *Compulsion* favorably while others (either in honest opinions or through the motivations of their editors) judged the play more harshly. The script and the three-hour performance time of the play came under heavy fire for their quality and length, but the actors received high praise for their work. In particular, thirty-year-old Michael Constantine was recognized for the admirable way he stepped up to fill in for Frank Conroy, and for the strong performance that he offered in Conroy’s place as the aging Jonathan Wilk.

Famed critic Walter Kerr of the *Herald-Tribune* wrote in his “First Night Report” that, “there are scenes that catch hold in their first few moments and seem to explore every nuance of disturbed and disturbing minds. Dean Stockwell, for instance, draws his mouth taut, freezes his shoulders, and—in gasp after effortful gasp—wriggles from himself the truth of his relationship to a ‘master’ he has chosen to serve. The grinding arrival at self-knowledge is chillingly drawn.” Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* also praised the lead actors, writing that “Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell play the two boys brilliantly, Mr. McDowall gay, antic and arrogant; Mr. Stockwell, crushed, weak, gloomy” (Kabatchnik 235).

Frank Aston of *The New York World-Telegram* and *The Sun* printed one of the

most praising critiques of the two actors in his article, “Murder Trial Is Strong Tonic”:

And here's one spectator to report that at the finish he felt tired. The truly exhausted ones, however, must have been Roddy McDowall and Dean Stockwell who played the killers. What a beating they took. Their every moment went full tilt. They did so well so often that it was difficult to choose high spots. Mr. Stockwell probably reached his peak of agony in confessing his unnatural passion and Mr. McDowall reached his in a heart-tearing jail scene with his mother when he sobbed, ‘I want my teddy bear.’ They’re magnificent, these lads.

Variety had less favorable comments and much more to say. “*Compulsion* is disorganized, sprawling, terribly overlong, painfully verbose, unattractive, frequently in poor taste and overproduced... this is a huge and massive production of literally scores of scenes and approximately fifty speaking parts.” Alex Segal came under equal credit and criticism for the complicated play but “he must also take some of the rap for the overwritten, formless script.” The critic also commented on the behind-the-scenes disputes over the script: “Original novelist Levin gets sole author billing in the program, with a parenthetical note that his is the ‘producer's version,’ whatever that means...”

In an attempt to distance Levin from the Broadway play, his agency mailed copies of his own script (the “uncut version”) to critics and drama editors in New York. This was done before the play premiered, with Levin trying to get “a fair appraisal of the play.” The article in *Variety* went on to remark, “If he follows the course he has pursued in his previous but still-standing claims against Kermit Bloomgarden, Cheryl Crawford, Lillian Hellman and Otto Frank over his alleged rights in ‘The Diary of Anne Frank,’ there'll be innumerable more lawsuits, accusations and assorted allegations about this stage edition of *Compulsion*. One thing is for sure—here are enough scenes and incidents and characters in the new show to do for at least two authors.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE PRODUCTION

Actor Dean Stockwell, however wonderful his performances may have been in *Compulsion*, had a great deal of trouble adjusting to the theatre lifestyle. The exhausting and repetitious stage role of Judd Steiner kept him on the boards for almost the entire run of the play, and required him to get a great deal of rest in preparation. Catching the flu did not make the task any easier, and his understudy had to cover for him on several occasions during the first month of performances. Along with the physical and emotional backlash, Stockwell also had to contend with living in an unpleasant environment—the city of his birth, New York City. Because he'd grown up in southern California, he despised everything about the vertical city, from his one-room apartment to the cold weather, feeling trapped by the lack of fresh air, and the claustrophobic atmosphere created by the skyscrapers. Every Monday, his day off from *Compulsion*, he escaped the gloomy city and drove to Connecticut or upstate New York to visit the country. In his spare time, Stockwell attended classical music and jazz concerts, music which he had a great passion for at the time even though it contrasted with the powerful introduction of rock 'n roll to the American lifestyle, though in an attempt to mesh with his fellow young people, he made a habit of going to a restaurant called Downey's on Eighth Avenue, and hung out there for the food and conversation. His co-star, Ina Balin, would join him on drives, and outings to book stores and record shops.

Roddy McDowall, on the other hand, had fled to New York City to pursue an acting career when he left his childhood studio contract behind in 1952. He got an apartment, a Vespa scooter to get around the city, and sought out a theater career to learn

and improve on his skills. His concentrated effort and dedication to acting enabled him to secure noteworthy roles (Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) and then leading roles, and although he worked somewhat regularly in television and theatre throughout the 1950s, McDowall still searched for something more. *Compulsion*, already set to be made into a movie, seemed to be the perfect opportunity for him to re-energize his Hollywood career.

The luck began to change for *Compulsion*. Frank Conroy returned to the cast in January 1958. Myerberg traveled to London, where he'd discussed the plans for the London production. And *America* magazine reported, "Dean Stockwell and Roddy McDowall, as young degenerates, are impressive in their roles, for which they have been rewarded with stars on their dressing-room doors."

CHAPTER EIGHT: BOX OFFICE SUCCESS AND FAILURE

During its first week, *Compulsion* earned \$31,000 for its first four performances and three previews, with tickets for the 1,150-seat Ambassador Theater selling between \$5.75 and \$6.90. For the second, third and fourth weeks, it made \$38,000 while simultaneously trimming twenty-five minutes of running time off the three-hour play. The first month of performances gave every indication that it would be a hit show, however ticket sales slacked off in subsequent weeks to \$36,200 and held steadily until the close of the play, which *Variety* said resulted in a net loss of \$80,000 on \$100,000's worth of investments.

The 1957-58 theater season on Broadway had presented thirty-seven new plays, eleven new musicals and eight revivals, for a total of fifty-six productions. That year's edition of The Burns Mantle Year Book, *The Best Plays of 1957-58*, lauded several plays such as *Look Back in Anger*, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, *Sunrise at Campobello* and *The Rope Dancers*, but gave *Compulsion* only a passing mention. “[*Compulsion*] re-enacted the grisly tale in twenty explicit scenes... Perhaps Hebbel long ago put his finger on why *Compulsion* fails to be a truly large and liberating drama with his remark that in a good play, everyone must seem to be in the right.” Also, “the terrible protracted trial scene becomes a weapon for hitting the audience about three times too often over the head.” An ironic description, perhaps intentional, considering that in 1924, fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks was killed by sharp blows to the head by Richard Loeb.

CHAPTER NINE: RE-STAGINGS

After the end of *Compulsion*'s Broadway stint, the original plan had been to move the New York production to Chicago and then to England, but those plans never came to fruition. "The notion about transferring the New York company to Chicago early next month and organizing another one to supplant it here has been dropped," reported *The New York Times*. "Michael Myerberg, co-sponsor, explained yesterday he could not obtain the house he wanted in Chicago for the hit melodrama."

However, the reason for Myerberg's inability to transfer the play did not depend on the availability of the theatres, but with the city itself. A mere thirty years had elapsed since Chicago had been impaled by the media over the Leopold-Loeb case. With Nathan Leopold still alive in prison, and still making headlines whenever an eager editor or reporter found reason to bring his name up, the idea of celebrating a play about the murder of a local boy fell flat. As far as the London plans went, the February 13, 1958 edition of *The New York Times* reported, "The producer said yesterday that he probably would ship the physical effects to London, where it will be recast and presented under auspices and a British associate."

The Broadway version ran its course at the Ambassador and closed on February 22, 1958 after 140 performances. After months of struggling in order to stage *Compulsion*, the only acclaim went to Peter Larkin, who earned a nomination for Best Set Designer for a Play/Musical at the 1958 Tony Awards; he lost to Oliver Smith's design for the runaway Broadway hit, *West Side Story*.

The only immediate re-stagings of *Compulsion* took place in 1958, one in

California and another in Pennsylvania. In the introduction to Levin's *Compulsion: A Play*, a performance was given at Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, which took place when he was in Israel ("I am told my play was an outstanding success"). Although the contract for the play stipulated that no changes could be made, the cast was cut down from forty to at least twenty-five, but Levin apparently had no problem with the adjustment. *Variety* reported, "the fact that the strawhat production feels that the revisions are necessary is figured significant, since one of the issues in the dispute between Levin and Myerberg was the producer's insistence that the novelist's own adaptation was overlong and required too large a cast."

A second staging was held at the Omnibus Center Theatre, formerly located at Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue in the heart of Hollywood, and was directed by Ed Ludlum. Approximately 2,000 actors auditioned for the available roles, and the production eventually settled on twenty-one actors for the cast, including Ray Stricklyn (who made his stage debut as Judd Steiner) Donald Buka as Artie Straus, and Sondra Kerr. One of the supporting actors in the production was Ted Knight, who later became famous for playing news anchorman Ted Baxter on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

It took until 1960 before the staging of *Compulsion* came about in the U.K. Produced by Glen Farmer, it was presented at the Pembroke Theatre in Croydon and starred Derek Smee, Barry Warren and Edward Rees as Jonathan Wilk. Like its predecessor in New York, however, the plays did not receive the warm reviews and box office support that were needed to guarantee its success.

CHAPTER TEN: *COMPULSION*, THE MOVIE

On February 21, 1958, *The New York Times* reported that the screenplay for *Compulsion* would be handled by Richard Murphy, in the first public mention that Meyer Levin's film had begun the process of transferring to the silver screen. Unlike the public drama that surrounded the play, Levin had no public argument against the idea of Murphy handling the rewriting of his novel, or with 20th Century Fox. He had most likely signed away all control over the novel to the studio, which was standard practice when the studio system purchased the rights to a novel, thus giving up total control for the privilege of seeing his concept on the silver screen.

Darryl F. Zanuck of 20th Century Fox handed *Compulsion* over to his son, Richard "Dickie" Zanuck, which allowed the younger Zanuck to step into the role of producer for the first time. Richard Zanuck and other second-generation young writers and producers in Hollywood—labeled “The Sons of the Pioneers,” because their fathers became legends in the motion picture business—didn't hesitate to use that insider's edge provided by their fathers, and from among the ranks of 20th Century Fox's players, Zanuck pooled the best available talent for *Compulsion* that he could get. In his autobiography, *Just Tell Me When to Cry*, Richard Fleischer wrote that while he only had what he described as “a nodding acquaintance” with Zanuck, Fleischer's solid reputation at 20th Century Fox preceded him and he was offered the screenplay above every other director there. After learning that Orson Welles had already been cast as Darrow, Fleischer claimed that he wanted to do the film more than anything.

Like all studios during the Golden Age of Hollywood, 20th Century Fox had a

stable of contract players to draw from, and those they didn't have under contract, they would "rent." Together, these efforts tended to pull in highly-recognizable names and faces, and *Compulsion* benefited from this arrangement. Martin Milner, who went on to gain greater success in the role of Tod Stiles in the CBS-TV show, *Route 66*, was given the role of Sid Silver, the fictional Meyer Levin counterpart. The popularity of the 1957 movie *Peyton Place* led to the casting of Diane Varsi to play the part of Ruth Evans, the girlfriend of Sid Silver.

And, because 20th Century Fox wanted him secured in their own stable, Dean Stockwell was brought over from the Broadway cast to resume his role of Judd Steiner. (It had been under Darryl F. Zanuck that, nine years earlier, an eleven-year-old Stockwell performed one of his most significant roles for 20th Century Fox in the 1948 film *Gentleman's Agreement* with Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire, Anne Revere and John Garfield.)

Just as Meyer Levin was left out of the film production, actor Roddy McDowall failed to make the transition from stage to screen with his role, and "Artie Straus" went to 20th Century Fox contract player Bradford Dillman. In a television interview during the 1970s, Dillman revealed, "I got *Compulsion* because they [the studio] were delayed on a commitment to me, and so they signed me for this picture and I couldn't have been more delighted... I'm sure that Roddy was deeply disappointed that he didn't have a chance to repeat his performance on film, and I was just lucky enough that they owed me a picture."

Filming started on October 6, 1958, and Dillman's introduction to Dean Stockwell on the set of *Compulsion* proved to be both surprising and a bit unnerving for

the actor.

I met him the first day of filming. I'd never met him before. And I was very sensitive to the fact that he would have preferred that Roddy was doing this part. And so when we were introduced, he shook my hand in a rather perfunctory way and walked off. So I thought, 'This is a little strange.' The first scene that we did—you know, you film out of sequence—the first scene that we did was the falling out of thieves where we're being interviewed by the District Attorney and we're supposed to be angry with each other. And so Dean hadn't said word one to me until the beginning of *Take One*, just before *Take One*, he turns to me and he goes through the longest litany of vilification that you could possibly imagine. Then Dick Fleischer says action, and he's angry, and I'M angry! So we get to the end of this thing... and he walks up to me and he said, 'Listen, I'm sorry about that, but I had to stoke my fires. 'You know what I mean?' I said, 'Hey, whatever turns you on'... and we were able to fall in and work well together after that.

Orson Welles had never been an easy man to work with, or to work for, although director Richard Fleischer had looked forward to *Compulsion* because of the casting of Welles in the role of Jonathan Wilk, he soon learned that he had to deal with Welles' control issues on several fronts as the seasoned performer of stage, screen, television and radio challenged Fleischer's directing duties whenever possible. To complicate matters, Welles had to limit the amount of time he spent in the United States due to his income tax problems. "The evidence indicates that Welles' tax problems were not the cause of his exile but a symptom or reflection of his greater problem; they were a sporadic form of harassment by the U.S. government that contributed to his staying abroad at various times in his career" (McBride 108). To shoot *Compulsion*, Welles drove up from Mexico on the first day of filming and, on the evening of his last day of work, booked passage on a freighter to China, and his rigid appearance schedule left no room for filming delays. He

left after the principal photography was completed, but without finishing the twelve-minute voiceover for the crucial courtroom summation speech. The resourceful sound editor ended up piecing together the last thirty seconds of Jonathan Wilk's speech using words, phrases and sounds that Welles made during the filming, along with dialogue and sounds from other movies to fill in the blanks that Welles had left.

Despite their conflicts, Fleischer and Welles worked together again on Fleischer's next picture, *Crack in the Mirror*, shot at the Studios Boulogne in Paris. One Saturday night, after a few drinks, Welles approached Fleischer. He insinuated that his outstanding performance made the director and the entire film look good. Fleischer calmly countered that he had never been as proud of a picture as he was of *Compulsion*, and that not even Welles could spoil that pleasure for him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: MOVIE PRODUCTION AND AWARDS

With the imminent parole of Nathan Leopold from Stateville Prison in 1959, and in an effort to avoid an insane tangle of lawsuits similar to the ones that had plagued the Broadway play, the cast and crew of *Compulsion* reportedly had to use the names “Artie” and “Judd” in any references to the film (as opposed to using the real-life names of Leopold and Loeb), even during private conversations. The studio’s legal department reportedly ordered anyone interviewed about the film to deny any connection that it might have had to the Leopold-Loeb case. No previous production that drew from the lives of Leopold and Loeb had encountered such media restrictions, including Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film, *Rope*. Due to the already-released novel and the somewhat successful Broadway production of *Compulsion*, however, no amount of fictionalization could have hidden the contents of the film, or their origin.

Fleischer found satisfaction in *Compulsion*. “Making this film, I felt very creative: it was an excellent period for me. I had a lot of ideas, about everything: images, stories, characters’ psychologies. The film was the result of a wonderful combination between my technique, my ideas and all other elements, like the sublime photography of Bill Mellor. Making it was so simple I nearly felt guilty: I even finished it four days before what was expected” (Fleischer 186).

Critics praised the performances of Dillman and Stockwell, saying that “Dillman rates tops after this,” but Stockwell felt dissatisfied with the way the movie had been handled in comparison to the play, and he found himself dissatisfied with his performance. Because of the deletions and changes made by the film in comparison to the

Broadway dramas, he'd even considered backing out of the role altogether. Part of the changes stemmed from the fact that the MPAA ratings system hadn't been invented yet, and the film's main topics of violence and homosexuality had to be diluted. However, the role did earn Stockwell his first award at Cannes Film Festival, a Palm d'Or for Best Actor, which was also awarded to Dillman and Welles.

Variety announced in February 1959 that 20th Century Fox's *Compulsion* would not be released in Chicago, although Charles Einfeld, the Vice President of Advertising for the studio, conceded that "we may open near Chicago." Due to Chicago having a "police censor" who could "pink slip" offensive material, the studio didn't want to risk losing audience members. However, as the film eventually received positive reviews from The Chicago Tribune and "Mac Tinee" (columnist Frances Smith), it apparently made it to the city. Mac Tinee wrote a separate article focusing solely on Dillman titled, "You Won't Forget Brad Dillman," in which she reported, "Dillman's next film will be another meaty role. He'll star in *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence." Perhaps in another attempt to woo him into signing a contract with 20th Century Fox, the role went to Stockwell instead, who learned a British accent and gave one of his best performances as artist Paul Morel.

When *Compulsion* was first shown in New York in January 1959, *Variety* reported that "the 20th Century Fox brass first saw the film on the coast, [and] the reaction was anything but enthusiastic. Since then, what with all the favorable critical reaction, 20th has changed its mind..." The Writers Guild of America took notice of *Compulsion* along with fifteen other films that year, including *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Ben-Hur*, *The Nun's Story* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* starring Millie Perkins. (The

following year, Dean Stockwell married Millie Perkins, but they divorced two years later. In an ironic twist, Perkins later went on to marry writer Robert Thom.)

Nominations came from the Directors Guild of America for Richard Fleischer (Best Director) and from the Writers Guild of America for Richard Murphy (Best Screenplay), but no awards came to *Compulsion*. As in everything else connected with the play and film versions of *Compulsion*, Meyer Levin received no notice whatsoever for either his dramatic version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* or for *Compulsion*.

CHAPTER TWELVE: NATHAN F. LEOPOLD, JR.

In his autobiography, *Life Plus 99 Years*, Nathan Leopold wrote that in 1955, “I received a letter from Meyer Levin saying that he planned to write a book about my case and asking for an interview. I didn’t realize then that this was the beginning of a train of events that would have tremendous consequences—whether for good or ill—upon my life. Mr. Levin was persistent; he didn’t stop with writing me; he got into contact also with my family and with my friend, Ralph Newman. Arrangements were finally made for Ralph to bring him down to see me in the visiting room” (Leopold 367).

When they met, Levin was eager to point out that he’d been at the University of Chicago with Leopold in the 1920s, but Leopold had no memory of meeting him. “To the best of my knowledge, the one and only time I ever saw Mr. Levin was at that fifty-minute visit.” (Leopold 367) When Leopold informed Levin that he had just completed his own book about his years in prison, and asked if he’d be willing to collaborate in the rewriting, “his response was immediate and enthusiastic; he thought it was a fine idea.” However, after learning that a reporter named John Barlow Martin had been commissioned to do articles about him in *The Saturday Evening Post*, and concerned what effect that publicity would have on his book, Leopold decided against working with Levin. Determined to write his own book, Levin proceeded to question anyone in Leopold’s acquaintance, and even used his column in a New York paper to, as Leopold stated, “publish a public demand that my family make available all records—for the public good, he said. We simply could not share that point of view. What possible good could come from raking up once more—and sensationalizing—the sordid details of a

tragedy a generation old? What good, that is, for anyone but Mr. Levin?" (Leopold 368)

At the time of *Compulsion*'s release, Leopold had concerns that the new attention on his life in prison would hurt his chances at parole. "*Compulsion* was published in October 1956. To me the date of its publication had sardonic significance. It was the thirty-fifth anniversary of the death of my mother. Now it would be the anniversary also of the death of my hopes. *Compulsion* is at once a horrible, a fascinating, and a beautiful book—beautiful in the sense that the iridescent surface of a swamp is beautiful. It is perhaps 40 per cent fact, 60 per cent fiction..." (Leopold 369)

Leopold's fears were warranted. His petition for a rehearing for parole was rejected two months after the release of *Compulsion*. But Levin's sincerity in siding with Leopold helped ease the imprisoned man's situation when, after *Life Magazine* published a close-up of him in 1957, Levin was shocked to learn that Leopold was unhappy with the appearance of *Compulsion*. Thus, the *Coronet* published the article "Leopold Should Be Freed!" for Levin to give his public support for the idea that Leopold be released. In his autobiography, Leopold confessed his amazement at the gesture. "I was overwhelmed. I was most grateful to Mr. Levin. Whether he wrote the article as a way of saying he was sorry he had caused me pain, or whether, in the interests of fairness and accuracy, since I at least felt that the book was damaging, he wanted to set the record straight and to express his own views unequivocally, I do not know" (Leopold 92).

Leopold's July commutation hearing was held in June 1957. Along with his attorneys, Varian B. Adams and Elmer Gertz, presenting a "complicated and voluminous mass of documentary evidence," five witnesses testified in his defense: three former schoolmates, a doctor connected to the malaria project that Leopold had volunteered for,

and Meyer Levin. “Where could one conceivably find stronger champions” (Leopold 194).

After serving thirty-three years in Joliet and Stateville prisons for his part in the 1924 murder of Bobby Franks, Nathan Leopold finally left prison on March 13, 1958, dressed in a prison-sewn suit, wearing a gray hat with a black band and holding a small paper-wrapped bundle of his personal belongings. The following day, he boarded a plane to fly to New York, then to Puerto Rico, where he would live out his days as a technician in what the media called a “back-woods hospital.” Hal Higdon, author of *Leopold & Loeb: The Crime of the Century*, wrote that Leopold “worked two years at the Church of the Brethren Hospital. He attended graduate school at the University of Puerto Rico, obtaining a master's degree. He taught at that university, did research in the social service program of Puerto Rico's Department of Health, worked for an urban renewal and housing agency, and did research in leprosy at the University of Puerto Rico's School of Medicine. He also published a book on ornithology titled *The Birds of Puerto Rico*.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: LEOPOLD V. LEVIN

Whatever Nathan Leopold's personal feelings towards Levin might have been, they did not stop him from seeking legal justice once he was released from Stateville Prison, and it was determined that a lawsuit regarding the use of his name would not be in violation of his parole. The *New York Times* reported, "Nathan Leopold, free on parole after having served thirty-two years in prison for murder, asked nearly \$1,500,00 in damages today from Meyer Levin, author of the book *Compulsion* and fifty-six other defendants." The other defendants included publishing houses, 20th Century Fox and the forty-eight Chicago movie theaters that showed the film. The lawsuit was filed by Elmer Gertz, Leopold's attorney, and alleged that Levin "unjustly appropriated Leopold's name, likeness and personality for profit." Leopold specifically sued Levin for \$150,000.

On October 4, the paper ran an article on the reactions of Levin and his attorney, Ephraim London. "London... said yesterday that Leopold was 'most ungrateful in bringing suit against Meyer Levin.' He remarked that Mr. Levin had been largely influential in changing the 'climate of public opinion from direct hostility to understanding and sympathy toward Leopold' in both the book and in Mr. Levin's appearance in Leopold's behalf before the Illinois Pardon Board. Levin said here yesterday that he was 'astonished' by the suit."

It took over ten years and a great deal of back-and-forth, but finally in May 1970, "SUPREME COURT OF ILLINOIS - NATHAN F. LEOPOLD, Jr., Appellant, v. MEYER LEVIN et al., Appellees. No. 41498" came to the appeals court essentially as a right-to-privacy lawsuit. The judgment read, "We conclude that the judgment of the

Circuit Court of Cook County which vacated the summary judgment for the plaintiff on the issue of liability and granted summary judgment and judgment on the pleadings in favor of the defendants was proper. Accordingly, the judgment is affirmed.” The Illinois Supreme Court rejected Leopold’s claims, and yet the legal conflicts regarding the use of one’s persona in fiction remains an active struggle in the court system.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE LEGACY OF *COMPULSION*

Meyer Levin's theatrical version of *Compulsion*, though it was never shunned by the theatre community, was also rarely staged. But the source material remained a fascinating pool, and over the years, other playwrights and screenwriters would go on to tackle the Leopold-Loeb case from their own perspectives.

John Logan, who would go on to write screenplays for *Gladiator*, *Any Given Sunday*, and *The Aviator*, read Levin's novel one day and subsequently spent years of research learning about the Leopold-Loeb case. His work, *Never the Sinner*, premiered in 1985 and won Logan the Joseph Jefferson Theater Award for Outstanding New Play. In regards to the production, Logan wrote, "I hope I have been true to the absolute cruelty of the characters and the senseless savagery of their crime, while still presenting the very human passions that compelled them."

Thrill Me: The Leopold and Loeb Story took the tale into a new realm: that of the musical. The off-Broadway production premiered in 2003 at the New York City Midtown International Theatre Festival, and was later produced by the York Theatre Company in 2005. The musical was released as a recording by Original Cast Records in 2006, and has enjoyed worldwide fame with appearances in Australia, South Korea, Greece, Japan, Germany, Canada and the U.K. Stephen Dolginoff, author of the play, its music and lyrics, stated in a *Los Angeles Times* interview, "I created my personal version of the story. It's not a docudrama or a biography. It's a musical thriller. I think it's a story that can be told a million different ways."

In 2008, a small production titled "Dickie and Babe" was staged in Hollywood,

California at the Blank Theatre Company's 2nd Stage Theatre, under the direction of playwright Daniel Henning. *The Los Angeles Times* reported that “[Henning’s] near-obsessive attention to historical accuracy is the driving force behind his docudrama. He has set an ambitious if strangely academic goal for himself—to tell the Leopold and Loeb story as objectively as possible, minimizing conjecture and dramatic embellishment. For three years, Henning immersed himself in court transcripts, medical reports, letters and other documents. Each scene in *Dickie and Babe* is based on one or more of those sources.”

Despite the popularity of the Leopold-Loeb case in the 1920s, there have been remarkably few motion pictures made which present the elements of the crime or the trial in the medium of film. The most recent motion picture to tackle the overtones of the Leopold-Loeb case has been the 2002 film, *Murder by Numbers*, starring Sandra Bullock, “torn from the pages of both American and cinema history... two brilliant but twisted teenage boys, played by Ryan Gosling and Michael Pitt, commit the ‘perfect murder.’ Then, to prove their mental superiority, they play cat-and-mouse games with the police” (King *L.A. Times*).

Ten years earlier, the 1992 release of *Swoon*, produced by Fine Line Features, re-told the story of Leopold and Loeb’s story in 1920s Chicago. Filmed in a black-and-white art house-style, the movie played up the homosexual element to the pair’s relationship. *Swoon* won the Caligari Award at the Berlin Film Festival, as well as the 1992 award for excellence in cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival.

For Meyer Levin, who died on July 9, 1981 in Israel, *Compulsion* came full circle when author Rinne Groff wrote a play also titled *Compulsion*. The stage drama used

music, marionettes, projections and live voice-overs to tell the story of an author and playwright named “Sid Silver,” played by Tony Award winner Mandy Patinkin and a direct reference to the Gary Sue character that Levin wrote into his novel. Playbill describes Sid as a man “whose lifelong mission is to bring Anne Frank’s diary to a worldwide audience via his own stage adaptation that retains the Jewish aspects of the young girl's story.” In essence, the name of Meyer Levin was fictionalized in the same way that he, himself, utilized the personas of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, and for the same purpose: to tell a story that the author believed in.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

No written work, once it is removed from the author's control, can remain intact in another medium. Its content is subject to the whims of an editor, a publisher, a producer, a director or other writers, and the story itself can fall victim to reboots and sequels. Sometimes these changes transform an entire novel into an epic story. Rod Serling's rewriting of the end of Pierre Boulle's novel *Planet of the Apes*, where Taylor is on his knees along a beach, screaming up at the remains of the Statue of Liberty, was an alteration despised by the author, but which presented a much-needed dramatic twist to an eager audience and opened up the *Planet of the Apes* franchise in both the 1960s and 2000s—something that could not have been achieved had the film worked with Boulle's original concept.

In the end, *Compulsion* overcame the burden of its true-crime counterpart and the controlling factors of a theater environment and the legal system, even as its creator, Meyer Levin, became mired by the complications of transforming his novel into other mediums. *Compulsion* succeeded in making the journey from book to play, then came to life through the collaboration of professionals in the motion picture industry and took on new life as a film. A tale of social deviancy turned the mirror back on society and confronted its audience with important questions about morality, upbringing, self-conduct and the consequences of one's actions, and helped society re-examine the phrase, "The Crime of the Century."

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