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A century later, 'Crime of the Century' takes center stage



Taking a break from rehearsing "Never the Sinner" are (from left) Najah Imani Muhammad, Bruce Apar, and Youlim Nam, each of whom plays multiple roles in the Axial stage production.
Donna Svennevik

By BRUCE APAR

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If there's such a thing as "newsworthy local theater," the powerful stage play "Never the Sinner" – staged by Axial Theatre at Bethany Arts Community in Ossining Nov. 10-13 and 17-20 – makes as good a claim as any to that distinction.

Consider the evidence...

- The true story is based on the so-called "Crime of the Century" in 1924 Chicago that saw legendary defense attorney Clarence Darrow (also immortalized for his historic role in the Scopes "Monkey Trial," defending the theory of evolution) representing gifted, upper-class teenagers Nathan Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb for their "thrill" killing of 14-year-old Bobby Franks (second cousin and neighbor of Loeb's).
- As if ripped from today's headlines, the full-length drama delves into the inexplicably random killing of a schoolboy by other young people and comments on capital punishment, mental illness, public morality and psychoanalysis, which was in its infancy as a medical discipline at the time.
- The production brings together three Westchester arts organizations in a collaborative effort to help reinvigorate regional theater with socially conscious work: Axial Theatre (producer); Bethany Arts Community (venue); GoJo Clan Productions (whose co-founder




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very important key is collaboration and cooperation. Ben Franklin said it best – "The good we can do together surpasses the good we can do alone."

- "Never the Sinner" brings national talent to Westchester's local theater scene. The play is directed and produced by Axial artistic director Cady McClain, currently appearing in the daytime drama "Days of Our Lives," and a three-time Emmy-winner for previous daytime drama roles. Co-producing with her is stage/film/TV director Steven Williford, staff director of "The Young and the Restless," and Emmy-winner for "Days of Our Lives." Also producing the show are Amanda Quinn Olivar and Axial Ensemble member Dan Walworth.
- The play is one of the earliest works by John Logan, who has gone on to become a Tony-winner (for the play "Red" about artist Mark Rothko) and the screenwriter of Hollywood blockbusters such as "Gladiator," "Any Given Sunday" and James Bond movies "Spectre" and "Skyfall."
- The play is staged in cinematic style, with flashbacks veering from the courtroom trial to the planning of the crime, revealing the then-scandalously intimate relationship between Leopold and Loeb, portrayed by Tom Ryan and Michael M. Alvin, respectively. Both are students in the acting conservatory program at Michael Howard Studios in Manhattan, where Axial Theatre founder and president, playwright Howard Meyer, teaches acting.
- The entire cast of seven remains visible throughout the entire play, blending into the audience when not acting in a scene. Starring opposite Gorn's disarmingly brilliant Clarence Darrow, prominent local actor Patrick McGuinness plays his razor-sharp rival, state prosecutor Robert Crowe. Three of the actors play multiple roles, including yours truly as Reporter 1, Dr. White, Bailiff, and Sergeant Gortland. Youlim Nam is Reporter 2, Germaine Reinhardt, and Dr. Hulbert. Najah Imani Muhammad is Reporter 3 and Dr. Bowman.

Show times for "Never the Sinner" are 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday (Nov. 10-12 and 17-19) and 11 a.m. Sunday (Nov. 13 and 20). For tickets (\$25 general admission; \$10 students), go to axialtheatre.org. Bethany Arts Community is at 40 Somerstown Road, Ossining.

In addition to writing and volunteering, Bruce Apar's passion for theater and acting includes sitting on the board of directors of Axial Theatre.

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