

street scene

'Swoon' reopens Leopold-Loeb murder



John Monaghan

The strange case of Leopold and Loeb has long fascinated criminologists and filmmakers. The senseless thrill murder of a young boy in 1920s Chicago has been examined at least twice

— in Hitchcock's "Rope" in 1948 and most definitively in Richard Fleischer's "Compulsion" in 1959.

"Swoon," playing Nov. 13-15 at the Detroit Film Theatre, is still wowed by the boldness of their crime. Instead of adopting a documentary-style approach, director Tom Kalin creates a wildly stylized film in black-and-white that works more for mood than narrative.

Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold Jr., young Jewish intellectuals from well-to-do families, are attracted to each other both sexually and by the escalating danger of the crimes they commit. Richard, the more dominating of the two, threatens to leave his partner, if they don't come up with something really clever — a perfect murder.

The words "Dear Sir" cryptically open the ransom note. No passion here. No lust for money. Chance leads them to the 13-year-old victim, Bobby Franks, who they kidnap, murder and burn with acid seemingly beyond recognition.

The discovery of Nathan's glasses at the murder site and inconsistencies in their alibis lead to their capture. Unlike the courtroom drama of "Compulsion" (with Orson Welles receiving star billing as defense attorney Clarence Darrow), the new film goes a step further by plotting their lives in prison.

"Killing Bobby Franks would join Richard and I for life," Nathan says proudly after the murder. During press conferences on the courthouse steps, neither shows much remorse for the murder. They laugh privately at their newfound celebrity.

"Swoon" works almost completely as a silent film, with its fluid, dream-like camera work adding to the "swoon" of the title. German expressionist films of the '20s and the work of Carl Dreyer are recalled in the stunning high-contrast black-and-white compositions.

This is an admittedly low-budget project, shot in just 14 days with unknown actors. Stock footage cleverly establishes the Roaring '20s setting



Getting away: Daniel Schlachet (left) is Richard Loeb and Craig Chester is Nathan Leopold Jr. in "Swoon," the latest cinematic look at the infamous 1920s Leopold-Loeb murder case.

with the requisite drinking, dancing and street scenes that would have been far too expensive to recreate.

One ingenious shot at the trial, with light flooding the back of the courtroom, finds a roomful of actors almost suspended in time. It could easily pass as a photograph from the era.

Craig Chester and Daniel Schlachet, who play Leopold and Loeb respectively, dress and act with period authenticity. Yet, they work primarily as props

in director Kalin's meticulous compositions, where scenes usually last just a few seconds.

If you have a comment, question or suggestion, write to John Monaghan, Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150, or call him at 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone and dial mailbox number 1866.

on screen

"Reservoir Dogs," Nov. 6, exclusively at the Maple Theatre, Bloomfield Hills. Arvey Kettel leads a wild bunch of crooks and killers who go crazy when their jewel heist goes awry. This stylish first film from writer-director Quentin Tarantino was a hit at both the Sundance and Cannes film festivals.

"Beauty and the Beast," Nov. 6-8, at the Detroit Film Theatre, Detroit. Long before the makers of Disney's new cartoon were even born, French poet/artist Jean Cocteau created this lyrical version of the classic fable. Jean Marais stars as the tortured "Bele." Josette Day has sympathetic "Belle." (Originally scheduled for Sunday screenings only, this film will play for the entire weekend due to an inability to acquire "M.")

"A Brief History of Time," through Nov. 14 at the Michigan Theatre, Ann Arbor. Released last month at the DFT. Check out the extended run at the Mich. Errol Morris' ("Thin Blue Line") paints a fascinating portrait of ALS-stricken physicist/writer Stephen Hawking, who explores the mysteries of space and time from his wheelchair.

"Stoker's Dracula," Nov. 13 in wide release. The Horror. The Horror. Francis Ford Coppola ("Apocalypse Now") tackles the vampire legend and from what we can tell from the previews, it promises to be a wild ride. Gary Oldman plays the vampire, Winona Ryder the object of his affections, with Anthony Hopkins and Keanu Reeves lending support.

"Malcolm X," Nov. 20 in wide release. Denzel Washington stars and Spike Lee directs this much-anticipated biography of the controversial black leader. Lee already made headlines by trying to persuade young viewers to skip school and check his flick out. The big question remains how much the hyper-opinionated director sticks to the facts.

"Fassbinder Festival," Mondays and Tuesdays through November at the Michigan Theatre, Ann Arbor. The late director set the fascinating, though admittedly depressing, tone for German cinema in the 1970s. In cooperation with film classes at the University of Michigan, the Mich's retrospective continues with "The Stationmaster's Wife" (Nov. 1-2); "Fox and His Friends" (Nov. 8-10); "The Third Generation" (Nov. 16-17) and "In a Year of Thirteen Moons" (Nov. 23-24).

'29th Street': Like real families

LeAnne Rogers

Frank Pesce Jr. is a lucky guy, has been his whole life. He'll be the first guy to admit it and has lots of examples to prove it. The guy is a legend around Queens. Naturally, when Frank becomes a finalist in New York's first lottery, everybody who knows him figures he is going to win \$6.2 million.

When the amusing comedy "29th Street" opens, Frank, played by Anthony LaPaglia, is nervously waiting for the drawing results in Madison Square Garden on Christmas Eve 1976. Frank sits in the audience chain-smoking and sweating, praying to God that his name won't be called.

Naturally, Frank's luck holds and he slips out of the auditorium after slipping off his name tag. Trudging through the snow, Frank vents his anger at winning the lottery by hurling snowballs at his parish church and the Nativity

scene. When the priest threatens to call the police, Frank has a great response, "I'm Catholic. I can do whatever the hell I want."

Well, maybe not. Frank is soon cooling his heels at the local police precinct where the officers demand an explanation for his behavior. So Frank tells his life story, a life cursed with luck.

We get to meet Frank's loud, argumentative and basically loving family including Frank Sr., whose unluckiness seems to be in direct proportion to his son's good luck. Played by Danny Aiello, the elder Pesce is a gambler who doesn't manage to break even most times.

Father and son are both dreamers, neither very adept at being successful at a career. Frank Sr. lost his trucking business and ends up having to commute by bus and train to New Jersey to work as a driver.

Frank Jr. wants to do something but he can't figure out exactly what that something might be. So, instead, he moves through a series of short-term

jobs, hangs out with his buddies and starts picking up some cash as a doorman at a mob gambling joint.

LaPaglia plays Pesce as a directionless, amiable guy who in retrospect can see the struggles his father survived. Aiello's Frank Sr. is also basically a nice guy who is at some level baffled by why things just don't work out.

This is a nice little film about parents and children and their intertwined life stories. The acting is good, especially by LaPaglia and Aiello who are funny, angry and often exasperating, especially to each other.

"29th Street" is an interesting movie that doesn't follow a predictable plot. Frank Jr. has good luck but sometimes it's due to his own goofiness. In the end, he finds a good family assures a happy ending.

"29th Street" is available at your local video store. If you have a question, comment or suggestion, send it to LeAnne Rogers, Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.