

# TO MY GREAT CHAGRIN

THE UNBELIEVABLE STORY OF BROTHER THEODORE

Starring



**THEODORE GOTTLIEB**

**WRITER & DIRECTOR**

Jeff Sumerel

**PRODUCERS**

Jeff Sumerel  
Jeter Rhodes

**PRESS CONTACTS**

Cara White | CaraMar Publicity | 843.881.1480 | [cara.white@mac.com](mailto:cara.white@mac.com)  
Jeff Sumerel | 864.787.3360 | [jsum@spontaneous.net](mailto:jsum@spontaneous.net)

[www.spontaneous.net](http://www.spontaneous.net)

## PRINCIPLE PARTICIPANTS

### **Eric Bogosian** (writer, actor)

"It was not performance art. It was mongrel theater. Theodore made a major impact on me. He was so highly ironic and so fierce. That was new. Nothing else like it. What I was looking at was a guy who was leapfrogging back in time, past the avant-garde, past the Beat Generation, going back to Weimar cabaret stuff."

### **Woody Allen** (film director, writer, actor, comedian)

"He was kind of an oddball attraction in the 1950's that would give these storytelling performances down in the village. When I first saw him, he was around when I was a teenager. You could go and see Theodore. Sit in the theater and he'd regale you with these stories. He was extremely histrionic and flamboyant. A very, very effective, intense storyteller. He did get quite a few laughs. I was a fan of his like everybody else."

### **Penn & Teller** (two-man magic & comedy team)

"What you have there is a proud freak. This is my world view. You can laugh at me if you want. I know you're laughing at me. And that's okay, because I'm telling you the truth. It was remarkable. I don't know if there's anyone who was more of a pure inspiration in theater than Theodore to us. It was enormous."

### **Bruce Pandolfini** (chess champion)

"He had that voice. No matter what he said, he could be funny. He knew me because I was part of the chess scene. He was a decent chess player. (He) Could hold his own. I think it gave him much relief to work out any kind of plan and see it realized. In life we settle for a lot of things. In chess you don't have to."

### **Lydia Stryk** (playwright)

"For me there's this sense in this long arch of history in this one man. Then this self-creation. How you can create a radically free identity for yourself. This man who was very old riffing on what that meant. That he was near death. I think one of the beauties about Theo is he had this nihilistic show, yet he was one of the most hopeful, life-affirming, romantic characters in real life. That wonderful paradox."

### **Harlan Ellison** (writer)

"Teddy was mesmerizing. There was a passion, there was a mystical quality, an arcane depth to him that absolutely froze into place an entire audience. He was absolutely the most paralyzing, compelling performer I've ever seen."

### **Dick Cavett (actor & talk-show host)**

“It was goose-pimple-making. He was so dramatic without having spoken yet. And I began to think this might be a mad man on the brink. And something awful may happen in the next minute. To me that's almost the essence of good acting in theater – a sense of danger.”

### **Joe Dante (film director & producer)**

“He was mesmerizing. Just fascinating. There was a lot going on with this guy. We now know the kind of childhood and adulthood he had. And that colored his view on life and pushed him to a rather dark corner. I think he was a pioneer in that. I don't think anybody was doing that. Lenny Bruce was doing stuff, issue-oriented. But Theodore was pushing it, in a performance art direction.”

### **Henry Gibson (actor)**

“I made the trip to NY and suddenly found myself watching – Brother Theodore. And I really wasn't sure what I was seeing. And on reflection now, I realize it's like what it must be like with people's exposure to great art the first time.. Perhaps the first audience of Stravinsky or Picasso first dabbling of cubism. You didn't know what you were seeing, but you knew it was important. And you wanted to know more.”

### **Tom Schiller (writer & director, Saturday Night Live featured player)**

“I adore Brother Theodore. He's a minch. A lot of comedians do material, and it's not drawn from themselves. But you can tell this man has been through serious angst in his life. He's had many failures and disappointments in his life. But he's managed to make this hilarious version of his life.”

## **Brother Theodore**

Was a monologist and comedian known for rambling, stream of consciousness dialogues which he called “stand up tragedy”. He was born Theodore Gottlieb into a wealthy family in Germany. Under Nazi rule, he was imprisoned at Dachau and later was aided by Albert Einstein, a family friend, who helped with his release to the United States. Theodore worked as a janitor at Stanford University, a dockworker in San Francisco before moving to New York City where his one-man Off-Broadway show, drew audiences from around the world, and ran for 17 years.

The impact of his performances sparked the admiration and friendships of such people as Billy Crystal, Eric Bogosian, and Woody Allen. His television appearances spanned from Jack Paar to Johnny Carson to Merv Griffin to David Letterman. His diverse movie experiences joined him with Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and Tom Hanks among others. The Los Angeles Daily News described him as Boris Karloff, Salvadore Dali, and Nijinsky all in one.

## **STORY PARTICIPANTS**

Woody Allen  
Gretchen Berger  
Len Belzer  
Eric Bogosian  
Fred Casten  
Dick Cavett  
Oliver Clark  
Bob Claster  
Joe Dante  
Christopher Dodrill  
Harlan Ellison  
Henry Gibson  
J Jack Finelli  
Julian Firestone  
Henry Jaglom  
Michael Jaglom  
Penn Jillette  
Tom Lonner  
Sidney Mason  
Adam Mell  
Lorca Morello  
Robert Morton  
Sandra Nordgren  
Tom O'Connor  
Edith O'Hara  
Bruce Panolfini  
Barry Richardson  
Teller  
Tom Schiller  
Mark Shulman  
Lydia Stryk  
Dina von Zweck

## **CREDITS**

### **ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS**

Jack Finelli  
Jeter Rhodes

### **STORY SUPERVISOR**

Jeff Sumerel

---

### **SOUND DESIGN**

Duane Evans  
Williamson / Evans Words & Music

---

### **ARCHIVAL CONTRIBUTORS**

The Gottlieb Estate  
Department of Television and Radio  
Brooklyn College of The City University of New York  
Gretchen Berger  
Bob Claster  
Tom O'Connor  
Jack Finelli  
Tom Lonner  
Lorca Morello  
Mark Rosenblatt  
Dina von Zweck

Theodore caricature original artwork by Bert Wenk

Album photos: Maurice Seymour & Manny Fuchs

Monster Theodore Artwork: J R Williams

Destiny Conspires artwork: George Chastain

THE BLUE ANGEL ("Der blaue Engel") Transit Film

PLAYBILL ® All rights reserved. Used by permission.

### **MUSIC**

"Illusions" written by Friedrich Hollaender  
Performed by Marlene Dietrich Published by Famous Music LLC

## **FILM & TV APPEARANCES**

GANG WARS 1976  
APPLE PIE 1976  
NOCTURNA 1979  
GUMS 1976  
BURBS, 1989 Universal Pictures  
THE BLACK WIDOW 1947, Republic Pictures Corporation,  
LATE NIGHT WITH DAVID LETTERMAN 1982  
TONIGHT WITH STEVE ALLEN 1956  
LARRY KING LIVE 2001  
THE MERV GRIFFIN SHOW 1960  
THE DICK CAVETT SHOW 1974

## **PUBLICITY**

Cara White, CaraMar Publicity  
Jim Pitt Harris, Filmmaker Magazine  
John Donohue, New Yorker Magazine

## **RESEARCH**

Sara Bouvier  
Amanda Keating

---

## **PUPPET SCENES**

**Puppet Design & Construction**  
Maggie Whalen of Magpie Puppets

**Set Design & Construction**  
Jeter Rhodes

**Props**  
Jeff Sumerel

---

## **PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS**

Tom Rhodes  
Caytlyn Lackey  
Luke Douglas  
Phillip Calvin  
Joe Reid

## STORY CONTRIBUTORS

Enid Brownstone  
Ken Clare  
Jennifer Hartig  
Meg Hartig  
Tim Finch  
Flo Fox  
Carole Lewis  
Sandra Nordgren  
Mary Ann Riffon  
Yvonne Shurwell

## MORAL SUPPORTERS

Susan Cyr  
Mark Johnston  
Phil Davis  
Joe Reid  
Karen Young  
Jack & Catherine Sumerel  
Rich Letteri  
Mimi Wyche  
Rick & Connie Sumerel

## SPECIAL THANKS

Jack Finelli  
13th Street Theatre:  
Sandra Nordgren  
Edith O'Hare  
Tom & Elizabeth Lonner  
Henry Gibson  
Mimi Wyche  
Ben Whiteley  
Will Tingle  
Dan Streible  
Teri Tynes  
Scott Gould  
Eddie Feldman  
Jim Hanna  
Charlie Viracola  
Jim Orr  
John Donohue  
Matt Diffie

Sarah Allentuch  
Jim McKay  
J. Michael Craig  
Candace Stewart  
Lindsey Chase  
Chris White  
Sam Reynolds  
Sue Priester  
Eric Rogers  
Leslie Farrell  
Bertis Downs  
Judy Englander  
Peter Wentworth  
Bud Anderson  
Underground Coffee & Lounge  
All Souls Unitarian Church  
CreativeCoaster Design

**The Nice, Cooperative People of New York City**  
**The numerous Brother Theodore fans, friends, and peers.**

## INTRODUCTION

# TO MY GREAT CHAGRIN

## THE UNBELIEVABLE STORY OF BROTHER THEODORE

In February 2001, South Carolina filmmaker Jeff Sumerel receives the unlikely phone call that he has been approved and selected to chronicle the life and career of a most unusual and compelling individual; someone who is considered by many to be one of the most influential post-modern monologists and a significant link in the history of American comedy.

An individual whose impact has sparked the admiration and friendships of such people as Billy Crystal, Eric Bogosian, and Woody Allen. His television appearances have spanned from Jack Paar to Johnny Carson to Merv Griffin to David Letterman. His diverse movie and theatrical experiences have joined him with Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and Tom Hanks. His one-man Off-Broadway show, which has drawn audiences from around the world, ran for 17 years.

The Los Angeles Daily News described him as Boris Karloff, Salvadore Dali, and Nijinsky all in one.

He is Brother Theodore.

Born in 1906, Theodore was indulged by his wealthy business-owning family, and spent his youth as millionaire playboy whose ideal lifestyle came crashing down with the rest of Europe as the Nazis came to power. By using what Theodore described as the “power of despair”, he endured the sobering loss of his entire family, his fortune, and his own identity, as a survivor of Dachau concentration camp.

Albert Einstein, a close friend of Theodore's mother, was instrumental in obtaining an affidavit that allowed Theodore to escape to the United States in 1942. Penniless and without practical skills, a humiliated and stunned Theodore was shipped to America. Forced to work as a janitor at Stanford University, Theodore yearned to reclaim his high-status and wealth.

Continually haunted by his loss, and hindered as a displaced foreigner, Theodore realized he must re-invent himself while outwitting fear and despair. At his lowest point he entered the theatrical world where he unleashed his extraordinary brand of absurdist philosophy and diabolical fantasies of love and passion – and became one of America's most respected humorists.

**TO MY GREAT CHAGRIN: the Unbelievable Story of Brother Theodore** chronicles the incredible journey and impact of this singular performer.



## SYNOPSIS

# TO MY GREAT CHAGRIN

The Unbelievable Story of Brother Theodore

**“It is my sincere wish, that immediately after my death, my head be severed from my body and that it be replaced with a bouquet of broccoli. It’s the artist in me.”**

– Excerpt from stage show

Theodore Gottlieb, who became known as **Brother Theodore**, was a tenacious, caustic, on-the-fringe-of-celebrity, performer in New York City for over 40 years.

He survived Dachau concentration camp, played chess with Einstein, was befriended by Orson Welles, appeared on American television more than 100 times, and gained admiration from the likes of Woody Allen, David Letterman, Billy Crystal, Merv Griffin, Dick Cavett, and Frank Capra, among others.

TO MY GREAT CHAGRIN attempts to reconcile the cryptic, oddly comic fury of **Brother Theodore’s** performing persona with the stranger-than-fiction chronology of his life.

***“I’m not well, my friends. Not well at all. The only thing that keeps me alive is the hope of dying young. Ladies and gentlemen, I have traveled far and wide, near and abroad, yet I have never seen anything remotely as revolting as my show.”***

It’s all there. In code. In silence. Inflection.

In what seems like idiosyncrasies of an actor’s timing, odd choices of words, meaningless or compulsive gesticulations.

The knotted, massed strength of the body. The boxer’s arms. The gargoyle’s face.

A whole life. Walks up under the unflattering light on the tiny stage, and says ... what?

***“It’s obvious you haven’t the vaguest idea of what I’m talking about, and that fills me with pride and satisfaction.”***

***“In this best of all possible worlds ... everything’s in a hell of a mess.”***

However, when Theodore was young, in Dusseldorf, in the 20’s, everything was not in a mess. Everything was gravy. Ladled thick, spilling over. His father was a millionaire, in publishing, and his mother’s second husband a wealthy industrialist. After receiving his diploma, he went to university, and studied Literature, Theater, Philology, whatever suited him.

He was born – or doomed – to an elitist's life. He ran in circles of German high society. It was his way - the family way. A massive estate. Servants. Butlers. Grounds keepers. The lavish parties with international guests.

One in particular – Albert Einstein.

Less of a guest really. More of a relative. In fact, he lived with Theodore and his family for several months. Not surprisingly, given that Theodore's mother was Einstein's mistress for 25 years.

No wonder Theodore's life read like a hard-to-believe novel.

***“I need you my friends, with your splendid intellects. The world needs you. Your loved ones need you. Won't you help me help you help them? I can't do it alone my friends. I'm not a reincarnated Joan of Arc or something. I'm just plain folks.”***

He was literally a playboy millionaire. He bounced from multiple family homes; Berlin – Rome – Madrid – Paris.

His father called his studies and interests “useless things”. Certainly they were useless in the face of what was coming.

Hitler. The Nazis.

But useless too were his father's precious wealth, possessions, - 'influence'. His entire family was exterminated, like rats in the basement of an old house.

***“I spent seven months, without any great enjoyment, in Dachau...”***

Watching creaky old rabbi's, strapping bricklayers, canny merchants, and rich playboys like himself, all reduced to shorn quaking sheep, moving this way and that in mud ruts and black snow until they died.

Something happened, though.

He didn't die.

In a turn of fate worthy of Dante, the Nazis offered him his life and one Deutschmark for the sum total of his father's vast assets. He walked out of Dachau with nothing left of his family but the name. And the power of despair. A power he conjured during an exchange he would never forget.

***“My friends, I cannot see you. I'm blinded by the spotlight. But somehow with my third eye – with my inner eye I can see you. You are a small but utterly repulsive audience.”***

***“Ladies and gentlemen, some times I'm called The Black Pope of the Church of Satan. But frankly, I feel more like Winnie the Pooh.”***

Somehow he was suddenly in Switzerland. He didn't remember the transit at all. Funny how that can happen. You close your eyes, exhausted. And when you open them again, you're in Switzerland.

Where he began to learn what it meant to have nothing.

When you have nothing, you have to DO something. He hadn't ever really DONE anything, and he didn't really know of anything useful he much wanted to do.

***“I would rather be a contented pin-worm than a tormented Brother Theodore. But I'm afraid I have no choice in the matter. I see too deep. I see too much. I have gazed into the abyss and the abyss has gazed into me. And neither of us liked what we saw.”***

A fleeting thought? Or a mantra? Perhaps one that developed as he crossed the Atlantic to America? New York City. Only then to be dispersed elsewhere as one of thousand of Jewish refugees. He ends up in California, as a custodian at Stanford University. The once intellectual playboy of Rome, Paris, and Berlin, now cleaning toilets? How could this be? It couldn't. He was fired. Repeatedly. And rehired by those faculty members who missed his master-level chess game.

So he hustled chess, tried work at the shipyard, and waited. Waited for the shock to subside. Waited for the servant to come take it away. Waited for the arrival of Elsa, his 17 year-old wife from Germany.

Things could be better now. Should be better. But how? With what?

The echo of that exchange at Dachau. A rainy day. Suddenly called to line up. A guard started at one end and casually strolled. What would it be?. He stopped just ten or fifteen spaces from Theodore. A brief exchange. A question – an answer – a gun shot. He cocked his Luger again. Three spaces closer. A longer exchange, another gunshot. Now at Theodore. The guard passed... then returned. Theodore waited for the question that had no answer. Yet somehow he found one. In his German elitist accent, he yelled at the guard.

***“Can't you see I'm busy here working for the Fuhrer?!”***

The power of despair. A performance, long before he ever got on stage.

***“Well, you guessed it my friends. All of you guessed it. From the very beginning. And you were right. I am mad. Yes, the great, incomparable Brother Theodore is mad. That's what I am, basically. Simply, intrinsically mad. Mad. MAD. MAD. But remember my friends, madness is a very helpful sickness. If it weren't for my madness, I would have gone insane long ago.”***

He lost thousands of dollars of his own hard-earned money mounting a collection of Poe monologues before ever attempting to perform original material.

“Stand-up Tragedy”, he would come to call it. Others, not surprisingly, were a bit more effusive.

Though he appeared on television with Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Dick Cavett, Steve Allen, and David Letterman, and performed his one-man show for over 17 consecutive years in Greenwich Village, he still had to try to hustle up work teaching German just to keep a roof over his head.

But wait? He was a legend? The cult following? The fan clubs? The peers who were in awe of him.

***“You think of Miles Davis. Someone who absolutely understands the rules and how to break them. Brother Theodore was the most honest performer I’ve ever seen. He was the greatest single influence on our act.”***

**– Penn Jillette**

***“You didn’t know what you were seeing, but you knew it was something great. I imagine what it was like seeing great art for the first time. Like Stravinsky.”***

**- Henry Gibson**

But ultimately, none of it mattered.

***“I detest everything I stand for. To be Brother Theodore is no bed of roses. I’m the bride at every funeral -- I’m the corpse at every wedding -- Each time I look in the mirror I break into tears. Sure, the mature beauty of my riper days ... There is no mail in the mailbox. The telephone never rings. The party’s over. It happened so fast. In one night it happened while I was dreaming of life.”***

One night, at the age of 94, in a New York studio apartment.

***“It is fatal to be right when the rest of the world is wrong. There is no room in ordinary society for extraordinary people. I’m a million light years ahead of my time. I’m a somebody in a century of nobodies. I’ve always known it. And now I’ve said, and now you know it too.”***

### **Daily News, Los Angeles**

Boris Karloff, surrealist Salvadore Dali, Nijinsky, and Red Skelton appeared simultaneously in the person of a man named Theodore. His program - fabulous... fantastic... fascinating – is a composite of horror, surrealism, classicism, and burlesque. His acting is emotional... eloquent...his technique artful... It is the unusual, designed to please those who like the unusual.

### **San Francisco Examiner**

Not for anything would we miss Theodore – macabre sardonic...diabolical fantasies. The program is extraordinary – so is the man... Theodore speaks with bold touches... holds his audience in rapt attention – A delicate and dramatic tidbit for those intelligently appreciative of good theater.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

### JEFF SUMEREL

WRITER :: PRODUCER :: DIRECTOR

Jeff Sumerel began developing his talent for film, art, and performance in 1974 at the San Francisco Art Institute. As a result, by 1976 two of his short subjects were selected for numerous film festivals as well as purchased for the S.C. Arts Commission's permanent film collection.

While at Henderson Advertising for 3 years, as a copywriter for national brands, including Fantastik, St. Pauli Girl Beer, and STP Oil Treatment, Sumerel honed his writing skills, and furthered his role as a producer, while also absorbing a broad range of marketing experience.

In the 1980's Sumerel capitalized on his talent for scriptwriting and performing that soon garnered him a high-ranking position on the national stand-up comedian circuit. The experience would prove to be invaluable for storytelling, pacing, editing, and targeting an audience. These skills were augmented during that period, as Sumerel was consistently hired to produce and direct entertaining, message-driven videos and stage presentations for corporate sales conventions. His clients included Verizon, BiLo Groceries, Fluor Daniel, Milliken, Michelin, Harris Teeter, and Dow Chemical. During this period, Sumerel made valuable contacts with other entertainment and film professionals who would prove to be integral in his future projects.

During the early 1990's Sumerel produced and directed "Forlorn Beauty," a feature-length independent film about an eccentric, elderly Southerner and her outrageous yet poignant tales. From the acclaim received, Sumerel was offered several individual grants from SCETV to produce short subjects, which eventually led to the network offering him the opportunity to write, produce, and direct "Beyond Belief" a half-hour program.

In 1997, he produced and directed "Kudzulla", a multi-disciplinary, innovative production that had live actors lip-synching and providing sound effects to a feature-length film satirizing suburban sprawl. "Kudzulla" was booked as the special event at numerous film festivals including those in Athens, GA, Brevard, NC, Charleston, SC and Memphis, TN.

In 2002 Sumerel wrote and directed "Bragging Rites", a feature-length documentary about the 100-year football rivalry between Clemson and the University of S.C. The film received statewide attention and went on to be distributed by BiLo groceries and Wal-Mart.

Over the years, Sumerel's works have received numerous awards and recognition at such places as the Charlotte Film Festival, Utah Film Festival, River Run Film Festival, The Lafayette Museum, and The Baltimore Film & Video Festival where his "Vision Problems" won 1st Place.

Among the venues where his films have been screened are California Arts Institute Utah Film & Video Center, Charlotte Mint Museum of Art, Cincinnati Artists Group, Piccolo, Spoleto USA, SCETV, Dayton Visual Art Institute, SC Film Crawl and Nickelodeon Theater.

Sumerel was a member of the Governor's Task Force, for developing the S.C. Film Tax Incentive, and has been a judge or guest artist at the Utah Film & Video Festival, Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, SC Film Festival, International Television Association and SC Society for Philosophy among other organizations.

**JETER RHODES**  
**PRODUCER :: EDITOR**

Jeter Rhodes graduated from The Citadel in 1996 with a BA in English. Immediately afterward, he began to explore his dream of becoming a filmmaker, by applying his English degree towards media journalism with a position as a field videographer and producer with WIS-TV in Columbia, S.C.

Jeter soon left television news and became a sought-after crew member for various aspects of productions, and was regularly called upon by such companies as Ways & Means Productions, Chernoff/Silver Advertising, Kingfisher Productions, and Wachovia Bank.

In 1998 Jeter fully realized his intention of having a film career when he was accepted at the N.C. School of the Arts. In 2002 he graduated with a BFA in Filmmaking.

Based on his outstanding graduate project, Jeter was courted and brought on-board as editor and associate producer of "Bragging Rites", a feature-length documentary about the 100 year football rivalry between Clemson University and the University of S.C. "Bragging Rites" went on to become a statewide phenomenon receiving significant media attention, including endorsements by the Clemson and USC football coaches when they screened the film for each of their teams on Rivalry Day. Also, "Bragging Rites" is believed to have become the first S.C. independent film to be distributor by Wal-Mart.

In addition to his feature-length work, Jeter has produced and edited numerous projects for such organizations as Acadia Real Estate, The Greenville County School District, The Warehouse Theatre, and the Boy Scouts of America. He is currently developing "Nightfur", a feature-length film which is to begin production in Spring 2008.



**SPONTANEOUS PRODUCTIONS**  
**[www.spontaneous.net](http://www.spontaneous.net)**