

# Oswald Sings

I don't know about you, but I'm fed up with plays and musicals that seem to meander all over the map before coming to L.A. Particularly annoying are the "bright, bold Broadway revivals" that look about as bright and bold as wet cardboard when they finally hit town—several years late and minus most of their original cast members, as well as some of the scenery. The dreary, all-new *Guys and Dolls* was a good example.

Sometimes, however, the intervening years manage to assist the play. That appears to be the case with Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. The musical about president killers, with a score by Sondheim and book by John Weidman, opened in New York at Playwrights Horizons in December 1990, just about the time then chief George Bush decided to kick Saddam Hussein's butt. The mood abroad was unusually patriotic, and the reviews ranged from lukewarm to flagrantly vitriolic, as if Sondheim and Weidman, by daring to comment on this country's penchant for violence, were immediately eligi-

## Sondheim's *Assassins* are back from the

ble for the Nathan Hale Award. The show closed two months later, and it was generally perceived as a failure—though, according to most accounts, it had never been Sondheim's plan to bring it to Broadway.

Four years later, thanks to the Los Angeles Repertory Company, *Assassins* has made its way to a professional Southern California venue, the Los Angeles Theater Center. (The play's official premiere was about two years ago at San Diego State University.) The price we pay for this late arrival is the lack of surprise and outrage that attended the New York debut. On the other side of the ledger, it's this very lack that allows us to appreciate the many strengths that may have been overshadowed by its audacity. If you'd paid too much attention to what the critics were saying back in '90, you'd

have gotten the mistaken idea that this was the theatrical equivalent of Hollywood high concept—John Wilkes Booth meets Lee Harvey Oswald. Instead, *Assassins* is a mordantly funny, complex, exquisitely crafted



work that the intervening four years have turned more profound and relevant. (On the same day the show premiered in L.A., Francisco Martin Duran was indicted on a charge of taking potshots at the White House.)

What Sondheim and Weidman have done in their lyrical, lethal revue is to speak volumes on the subjects of violence, disenfranchisement, notoriety and the warping of the American Dream. They do this by providing us with a pageant of presidential assassins, namely John Wilkes Booth, who shot and killed Honest Abe back in 1865; Charles Julius Guiteau, who shot

## dead—and lethally funny by Dick Lochte

James Garfield when the politician refused to appoint him ambassador to France; Leon Czolgosz, who murdered William McKinley at a Pan-American Exposition; Giuseppe Zangara, who tried to kill Franklin D. Roosevelt but only managed to bump off Chicago mayor Anton Cermak; Samuel Byck, who had planned to hijack a commercial jet and fly it into the Nixon White House; Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme and Sarah Jane Moore, who were each unsuccessful at dismissing Gerald Ford; Lee Harvey Oswald; and the relatively new

kid on the block, John Hinckley, who tried to ventilate the Great Communicator.

These deranged folks are each given a center-stage chance to explain why they felt the necessity to off a president. As Sondheim and Weidman would have it—based on some authentication—their woozy motives range from the political (Czolgosz was a socialist who believed he was following the wishes of Emma Goldman) to the professional (Guiteau thought it would help him sell his books; actor Booth had been bothered by bad reviews) to the romantic (Fromme and Hinckley were trying to impress Charles Manson and Jodie Foster, respectively). These musical confessions, along with the rather surreal mixing and matching of the actual and wanna-be assassins, form the basis for the play.

There's also a balladeer-narrator who smugly chides them. "Damn you, Johnny," he sings to Booth. "You paved the way/for other madmen to make us pay. Lots of madmen/have had their say/but only for a day." But the composer and playwright obviously don't subscribe to the balladeer's optimism. They let the assassins attack him and tear him apart. And in the final, most chilling tableau, they have Booth trying to talk a reluctant Oswald into killing JFK. "Today we're going to make a joyful noise," he says, eyes blazing.

For *Assassins*, Sondheim has created an American songbook. There are rags, a cakewalk (to the gallows), Sousa-like marches, Stephen Foster-like sing-alongs, barbershop harmonies and even a syrupy, Carpenters-esque love duet, with Fromme and Hinckley pledging their love to Charlie and Jodie.

In spite of the bouncy melodies, this sort of dark, edgy satire, calling attention to society's ills, makes for a show that wouldn't even have to wait until Saturday night to close on Broadway. But it's just what the stage doctor ordered for an ambitious theater company like the L.A. Rep, which is probably why managing director Peter Ellenstein worked for two years to get the rights. His effort has paid off with a

lean, spirited production that has far exceeded its initial run and recently moved from a small stage at LATC to that location's 500-seat Tom Bradley Theater.

I saw it at the smaller theater, but I assume Robert L. Smith's splendidly spare but versatile set—sliding silk screens in the main, with a wooden stairwell leading to a gallows—has been carried over. Ditto for Kay Cole's fluid choreography and the enthusiastic cast, which, under Ellenstein's direction, explores the full potential of the well-crafted roles. Tom Zemon is a properly demonic Booth, while Sean Smith's Czolgosz is a model of mind-muddled truculence. Alan Safier's Guiteau is a con man who believes his own patter. Bridget Hoffman's Fromme is a waspish waif, all childish emotion, and Jean Kauffman's Moore is a brain-dead housewife running on angst. John Allee is a confused, despair-ridden Oswald; Gary Imhoff a dyspeptic, furious Zangara; and Steve Jackson Wilde as Hinckley is an unworldly, glum, murderous nerd.

Best of them all, Paul Carr puts everything he has into his would-be Nixon slayer, a bitter and paranoid alcoholic who wrote wild letters to Leonard Bernstein, among others, and once picketed the White House in a Santa Claus suit. The actor, a familiar presence both on stage and TV for the past several decades, isn't a strong singer. (With the exception of Smith, this is a cast better at histrionics than high notes.) But grizzled, unkempt and seemingly filled to the brim with beer, self-pity and ferocious contempt, he leaves a lasting impression of the man, as well as the madness.

I should quickly add that this is the one Sondheim score that doesn't need singers at the top of their craft. Ironically, for his bitterest lyrics, he has written his most accessible music. (You might actually leave the theater humming the songs.) And if these actors aren't exactly a match for the original-cast recording, as accompanied by Thomas Griep's orchestra of five, they manage quite well.

*Assassins* is a slam-bang production, both figuratively and literally. If its mes-

## Performance

sage is harsh, it is the most entertaining bad news you're likely to hear this new year. **A-**

Another Sondheim "failure," **Merrily We Roll Along**, which opened in 1981 and closed almost immediately, thanks to savage reviews, continues to exhibit a longevity the surviving members of the New York critical establishment must find surprising. The book by George Furth—an adaptation of a 1934 Kaufman & Hart play—begins with its lead, Franklin Shepard, at the peak of his career, a showbiz superstar and a totally worthless human being. It then travels backward in time to visit milestones in his life and career until, finally, we see the talented, generous, likable young man he once was.

Sondheim's score—consisting mainly of songwriter-type compositions, from ballads to novelty numbers—was splendid then, and it's even better now. Recently, two revivals have appeared—in New York and London—that used a number of new songs and reworked old ones. The cast recordings of both have just been released. The American version (on Varese Sarabande CD) is performed by the cast of last year's York Theater Company production, with Malcolm Gets as Franklin; Adam Heller as his collaborator, Charlie; Michele Pawk as Franklin's second wife, Gussie; and Amy Ryder as their gal pal Mary. But the orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick are the ones used for the not-quite-recent La Jolla revival. Tunick also orchestrated the British version, but the American is the superior disc. Not only are the voices more appealing, they've been recorded with more care. The British version, in spite of being in Dolby surround sound—or maybe because of it—seems jumbled at times and does little for the male leads' brittle and nasal deliveries. On that album (TER), Franklin sounds a bit like the late Paul Lynde. If you don't want to take my word for it, find a store where you can play CDs before purchase, and compare the songs "Franklin Shepard, Inc." and "Good Thing Going." Then buy American.

**U.S. revival A**  
**British revival C**