

► Magnetic performances in an intimate setting make the often surreal "Assassins" a winner.

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John Weidman musical "Assassins" opened in New York in 1991. It was not a success, and there was no movement to bring a major production to a big Los Angeles theater.

But Peter Ellenstein of the Los Angeles Repertory Company liked the show, and his efforts to obtain the rights to it finally resulted this year in his company's presenting it in the 90-seat Theater 4 of Los Angeles Theatre Center.

There it has enjoyed sold-out performances resulting in a two-week extension of its scheduled run, through Jan. 15.

It is understandable why the show would be a failure in New York. The subject matter is notably unpleasant, dealing with nine assassins or would-be assassins of United States presidents, from John Wilkes Booth to John Hinckley.

There is no story line, and Sondheim and Weidman play fast and loose with history in a way that is both aggravating and confusing to the literal minded.

But in the intimacy of the Los Angeles production the audience can become more closely absorbed in the individual dramas played out and, with the stunning performances by the Repertory Company cast, can accept the seemingly absurdities presented and enjoy the frequent humor that goes along with the drama.

You may object to one sequence or another, but you have to admire the daring of the concept and the frequent brilliance of its execution.

The Sondheim-Weidman gallery of actual or would-be assassins includes, in addition to Booth, killer of President Lincoln, and Hinck-



## Assassins: The daringly different, powerfully provocative Stephen Sondheim musical is finally in LA and it's great!

Only Stephen Sondheim, who defied theatrical convention by making a musical about Sweeney Todd The Demon Barber of Fleet Street who made meat pies out of bodies, could have created a musical about the most notorious assassins in U.S. history. The concept was too "different" to open on Broadway, or find an audience in its brief two-month run at the small off-Broadway Playwrights Horizons Theatre.

Obviously it was also too much of a risk for LA's major theatres, so *Assassins* remained in limbo for almost four years, with the only way to appreciate it being a superb RCA original cast recording. Until now, with the excellent Los Angeles Repertory Company production at the LA Theatre Center. For reasons why they did it I'll quote these words to theatre critics from Peter Ellenstein, Managing Director:

"I was attracted to *Assassins* for several reasons. The first two were obvious - the chance to work on anything written by Mr. Sondheim, and the thrill of hosting the LA premiere. Beyond that, I found the subject matter intriguing - a chance to look at society from the bottom up.

*Assassins* deals chiefly with three things: Love, broken promises, and guns. A volatile mixture. The authors ask us to step back before the point of assassination and to see these dangerously miserable people as human beings, not monsters. The assassins desperate longings, for all that they will never get, would be tragic if their despair didn't turn into vengeance. Unfortunately, that personal vengeance has affected all of us, the nation, and the course of history.

Though the play is filled with laughter, *Assassins* is no attempt to glorify the people of their acts, but to put them into the context of America. In learning about these horrible (and all too frequent) acts of the past, instead of ignoring them as random, perhaps we can begin to understand why they occur, and how to prevent our world from being shaped by violent anger."

Everything about *Assassins* is brilliantly presented. From the opening scene, a carnival's shooting gallery, where the assassins enter one by one and are encouraged by the proprietor to solve their problems by picking up a gun, to the use of a Balladeer, who throughout the show sings us our history and drifts through assassinations as a professional witness to American catastrophe.

His songs introduce John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, McKinley's



assassin, those who attempted killing FDR, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, etc.

Each assassin close-up is dramatically and musically staged in different ways, to represent the changing locales and times. Yet it all flows so smoothly, without a break in the action, with scenes and characters dove-tailing into each other.

In fact, the entire production is a credit to the honored 28-year-old L.A. Repertory Company now headquartered in downtown's theatre center, its director, and the uniformly fine 19-member cast, especially Tom Zemon as Booth, John Allee as Oswald, Bridget Hoffman as Fromme, & Timothy Smith as the balladeer.

*Assassins* plays Thurs-Sat at 8, Sun. at 2 and 7. Call 213-485-1681 for tix/inf.

P.S. Complimentary limousine service is available to the Los Angeles Theatre Center when dining at the Sheraton Grande Hotel's (333 S. Figueroa St.) Back Porch or Scarlatti Restaurants. I and a friend availed ourself of this service by having a magnificent Sunday brunch at 12, and then being chauffeured to the theatre for the 2 pm matinee. The food was great. The service spectacular. The valet parking free. This free parking is also available when attending the next door Laemmle movie theatre. Call the hotel at 213-617-1133 for reservations.