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# TIMES

Southern California's Weekly

## The Blazing Guns of Sondheim

review by KEN DICKMANN

**H**ow do you answer the musical question, "Do you want to shoot a President? Leave it up to Stephen Sondheim to give an answer in his most disturbing musical *Assassins* at the L.A. Theatre Center through Dec. 31. Cynicism runs wild in Sondheim's lyrics about this heavy topic. Supported by the book of John Weidman, Sondheim, with the work of a terrific cast, actually makes this bleak subject work as entertainment, while America itself is examined.

Produced by the Los Angeles Repertory Company, *Assassins* deals with three things: love, broken promises and guns. As the motivations of group of historical assassins are explored, we come to see the underbelly of America and the lack of fulfillment of the American dream for some — who become lost people. Generally regarded as crazy, these history makers are looked upon as human beings who can't understand the injustices laid on them. This in turn has created despair, and in their quiet desperation they become attention seekers.

Starting with the pioneer of American assassins the actor John Wilkes Booth (a striking and strong voiced Tom Zemon), *Assassins* moves out into creating a wall of reasons for the dirty deeds. Each gun toter — including Booth — felt the killings were for the betterment of the country. In typical Sondheim style, politics aside, he notes that perhaps Booth killed Lincoln because he was getting bad reviews.

As history and events move on, each assassin binds together with the group led by Booth, encouraging others to strike out and change the course of history with one shot. It becomes frightening to see the power in numbers setting out to destroy the system they were never a part of.

Leon Czolgos (a disturbing Sean Smith), a quiet Central European immigrant, is prompted to action by an unknowing anarchist agitator, Emma Goldman. Former preacher, writer and lawyer, Charles Guiteau (Alan Saffier) felt he should be Ambassador to France and

shot President Garfield when he was rejected. Blaming his stomach problems on the rich, Giuseppe Zangara (Gay Imhoff) attempts to shoot Roosevelt, but kills the mayor of Chicago instead.

There's no doubt that our more modern assassins are even more disturbed, having illusions about how right their actions are and their disillusion about what life should be for them. Beer drinking Samuel Byck (a hilarious Paul W. Carr) plans on killing Richard Nixon by hijacking a commercial airliner and crashing it into the White House. John Hinckley (Steven Jackson Wilde) wants to kill Reagan to earn the love of actress Jodie Foster. He teams up musically with Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme (a terrific Bridget Hoffman) in "Unworthy of Your Love." Squeaky sings about the message of her mentor Charles Manson and Hinckley sings about his unrequited love for Foster. "She doesn't answer my calls," he bemoans, while Fromme doesn't know if she's upset over her mascara or the bombings in Cambodia.

When Fromme meets Sarah Jane Moore (an off-the-wall Jean Kauffman) — who, a week after Fromme's attempt, also tried to assassinate Gerald Ford — the two become comic characters while the undercurrent of their convictions is frightening.

Of course, the final focus on these misfits is to encourage the most disillusioned of all Lee Harvey Oswald (John Allee) to actually shoot JFK. "Through you and your act we are revived and given meaning... connect to us," they sing to him. And history is rearranged one more time and a brief moment in time relived.

As complex as the integrated stories sound, Weidman's book keeps it simple and the program notes give background of the assassins, making the play easy to follow.

Musically, there is a Balladeer (Timothy Smith) who ties the personalities together, as the assassins find each other. Direction by Peter Ellenstein moves the two hour,

one act along briskly and compels us to get involved in this examination of our own history. In the 99-seat space, Robert L. Smith's set of white, shoshi screen moving panels and atmospheric lighting keep our focus on the action. The set is dominated by a staircase leading up to a catwalk. Doug Spesert has chosen historically correct costumes that also signify economic status of the individuals. Kay Cole has incorporated some wonderful musical staging and choreography that brings some levity to this heavy topic. Paul Baker's musical direction of five in the pit, along with the terrific voices, add a fullness to the typical lush music of Sondheim. As original as the music is, one can hear strains of *Sweeney Todd* and *Pacific Overtures* especially in the group numbers.

*Assassins* is Sondheim at his most cynical and he has fun playing with our minds as we laugh not only at them, but with his group of assassins. He and Weidman incorporate their usual sick humor into the drama as we begin to understand not only these disillusioned people, but question how could America create them. It is our own failure that we do not recognize or acknowledge these lost people in the same way we don't acknowledge the homeless outside our own doors. These are the people who have fallen between the cracks of a system, a system that can look forward to more assassinations when they are least expected. Right up to the final scene when the guns are in your face, *Assassins* reminds us that: "Angry men don't write the rules, and guns don't right the wrongs." This is a brilliantly and tightly executed production of a very difficult subject. It is a performance that should not be missed.

(Note: Bring a pillow to sit on as the solid stack chairs for the audience have got to be the most uncomfortable seating arrangement in L.A. As one audience member said afterwards, "The seats should be shot.")

L.A. Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles. Thurs.-Sat. at 8pm., Sun. at 2pm and 7pm. Tickets Fri.-Sat. \$25. Thurs. and Sun. \$18. Parking \$5. For reservations call (213) 485-1681.)

**TIN**

**REVIEW**

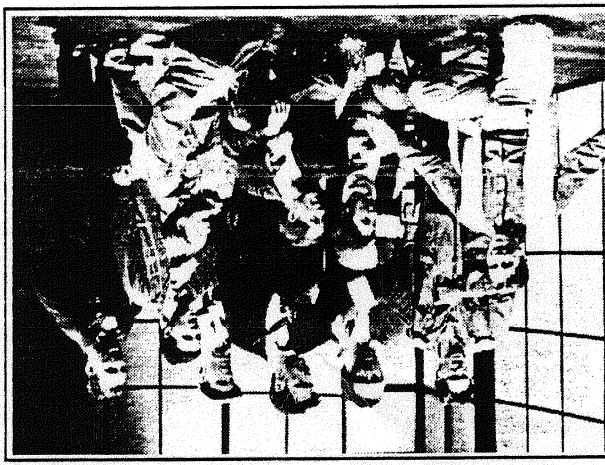
**THEATER**

Reviewed by Rob Stevens

**BEST**

**BET**

Zemon. Timothy Smith's all-American Balladeer provides perfect contrast and both men are in very fine voice. Also delivering strong performances are Sean Smith as Leon Czolgosz and Paul W. Carr as Samuel Byck. Bridget Hoffman as "Squeaky" Fromme, Jean Kauffman as Sarah Jane Moore and Alan Safier as Charles J. Guiteau provide some comic relief amid the dark dealings. Hoffman teams up with Steve Jackson in Wilde's John Hinckley in the show's beautiful love ballad "Unworthy of Your Love," sung to Charles Manson and Jodie Foster. The scene set on Nov. 22, 1963, that caps the production is one of the most chilling and terrifying in musical theater. Booth, along with his fellow assassins, attempts to convince Lee Harvey Oswald (John Allee) to "move his little finger and change the world." They succeed and so does this memorable production.



Composer Stephen Sondheim and playwright John Weidman's dark look at the underside of the American Dream is finally making its local debut thanks to the Los Angeles Repertory Company and director Peter Ellenstein. The production is not without its flaws, but they are minor. The major annoyance is Robert L. Smith's scenic design of Japanese screens, more appropriate for "Pacific Over-tures." Gone is the honky-tonk carnival midway and the inherent sleazy atmosphere; the opening number is staged with the Proprietor dispensing guns from his little ice cream cart rather than at a shooting gallery. But then the show catches fire with "The Ballad of Booth," passionately delivered in an impassioned, pained portrait of America's first presidential assassin by Tom

**Assassins**  
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Los Angeles  
Through Dec. 31;  
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