

Notes on *Assassins* from our Dramaturg, Julie Hegner

Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins* has had a somewhat bumpy road considering that it was written by one of America's most celebrated composers. It took two major productions and over a dozen years to get it to Broadway, and even then it did not have a long run. But despite its somewhat controversial subject matter, it remains a favorite among Sondheim fans and history buffs: a distinctly dark look at the shining promise of the American Dream.

Assassins opened Off Broadway on December 18, 1990 at Playwrights Horizons. The public interest was there: the entire run was sold out. It had a talented cast that included veteran actors Victor Garber, Terrence Mann, Patrick Cassidy, and Debra Monk. John Weidman, who had worked with Sondheim on *Pacific Overtures*, returned to write the book for *Assassins* and the collaborators worked well together. What the production didn't have was good timing. Operation Desert Shield, which had started on August 2, 1990, became Operation Desert Storm on January 17, 1991. With fierce patriotism sweeping the country, it was not a great time to stage a musical that gave presidential assassins a voice. *Assassins* closed on February 16, 1991, and was not transferred to Broadway.

It opened again at London's Donmar Warehouse in October of 1992, with a different cast and Sam Mendes directing. Some tweaks were made to the book and score for the production, but it was also a limited run—only 76 performances. Regional and local theaters performed the show afterwards, but it wasn't until 2001 that New York's Roundabout Theater Company decided to take it to Broadway. The events of September 11, 2001 changed that timeline, as the producers decided that the material was too contentious for a nation still grieving over massive terrorist attacks. *Assassins* finally opened at Studio 54 nearly three years later on April 22, 2004. The cast starred Michael Cerveris as John Wilkes Booth and Neil Patrick Harris as The Balladeer and Oswald, and featured the shocking images of the Zapruder film of JFK's assassination being projected on Oswald's shirt. It closed after 101 performances although it won five Tonys that year, including Best Revival of a Musical. At long last, *Assassins* had reached a level of success.

In a way, the show is *The Little Engine that could*. A show about assassins is not a likely candidate for success. The structure that Sondheim and Weidman chose for it, a vaudevillian musical revue, seems altogether too cheerful for the story being told, and critics weren't fond of the dreamlike aspect that allowed the assassins to speak to each other without respect for the decades that separated them in history. And yet somehow, it just works. The Sondheim score weaves together all types of American folk music: ballad, cakewalk, Sousa march, folk, etc., and the disjointed dramatic framework highlights the story of broken people who in turn feel that they must break America to cash in on some of its promise.

But what is it about this show that made it so taboo? Why did various producers feel that Americans either wouldn't appreciate or couldn't handle its story in times of national trouble? Yes, it's a show about the assassinations (and attempted assassinations) of various Presidents. It's dark, as Sondheim musicals tend to be. But it's also an exploration of what it means to be an American, particularly to be an American who believes he or she has been closed out of the promise of the American Dream. Sondheim knew it was a sensitive subject, but in an interview with *The New York Times* he declared "There are always people who think that certain subjects are not right for musicals...[w]e're not going to apologize for dealing with a volatile subject. Nowadays, virtually everything goes." Critic Frank Rich, in his review of the Playwrights Horizons production, said that the "characters most demonically demonstrate Mr. Sondheim's conviction that there is a shadow America, a poisoned, have-not America, that must be recognized by their prosperous majority if the violence in our history is to be understood and overcome." If that's the case, maybe times of strife are just when a production of *Assassins* is needed most. After all, those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.