ASSASSINS

BOOK BY JOHN WEIDMAN
MUSIC AND LYRICS BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM
DIRECTED BY JAMES BUNDY

yale repertory theatre

2017 STUDY GUIDE
In Stephen Sondheim’s book *Look, I Made a Hat*, he recollects the process of writing *Assassins*, which he describes as “a book musical masquerading as a revue, featuring nine of the thirteen assassins who have attempted to kill the president of the United States.” He encountered the idea in 1979 after reading a musical called *Assassins* by Charles Gilbert, Jr., for a short-lived venture called the Musical Theater Lab. Gilbert’s musical focused on the story of a Vietnam veteran who becomes disillusioned and decides to kill the president, but it also had a scene with a presidential shooting gallery that captured Sondheim’s imagination. Nearly a decade later, Sondheim and John Weidman—a musical book writer—were dreaming up something new to create together, and Sondheim remembered Gilbert’s piece. The pair wanted to make their own *Assassins*—something wildly different than the 1979 musical. After talking to Gilbert and asking permission to use the title and the image of a shooting gallery, Sondheim and Weidman began to write their musical.

Sondheim looks back on his process writing the music and lyrics while imagining the piece to be a “kaleidoscopic revue of assassins through the ages” and imagined the piece to be a “dreamlike vaudeville, skipping backward and forward in time...incorporat[ing] a number of theatrical modes, from burlesque to melodrama.” He hoped that “the score would consist mostly of pastiches of different American musical styles.” What resulted was “something...complicated and dangerous—it was a collage.”

Weidman and Sondheim’s *Assassins* opened Off-Broadway at New York City’s Playwrights Horizons in late 1990. The musical had many productions across the country and abroad, but it did not premiere on Broadway until 2004, when it ran at Roundabout Theatre Company in a production starring Neil Patrick Harris and Michael Cerveris.

—AMY BORATKO

**GLOSSARY**

**Book Musical:**
Often thought of as a “traditional musical,” a book musical incorporates music and lyrics to tell a plot-driven story. All elements are integrated to shape a unified narrative. The book (known as a libretto in opera) is the written script or “play text” of the musical.
Examples: *Sweeney Todd, Annie*

**Burlesque:**
While often linked to very bawdy and risqué entertainments, the term also means an absurdly or comically exaggerated imitation of something—a grotesque parody or satire.

**Melodrama:**
A theatrical form that was popular in the United States in the 19th century. Melodrama features exaggerated characters, like dastardly villains and noble heroines, and wildly exciting plots to evoke emotion in the audience.
INTRODUCTION TO ASSASSINS

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—AMY BORATKO

**Pastiche:**
A piece of art that imitates another work, style, or artist.

**Revue:**
A multi-act theatrical event that contains sketches, songs, dances, and jokes. Revues often include parodies and can be satirical. Examples: *Side by Side by Sondheim*, *Ziegfeld’s Follies*

**Vaudeville:**
A form of entertainment, popular in late 19th-century and early 20th-century America, that features a mixture of acts—from burlesque comedy to songs to dances.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS


**JOHN WEIDMAN** has written the books for a wide variety of musicals, among them *Pacific Overtures* (Tony nomination, Best Book), *Assassins* (Tony Award, Best Musical Revival), and *Road Show* (Lucille Lortel nomination, Best Musical), all with scores by Stephen Sondheim; *Contact* (Tony nomination, Best Book; Tony Award, Best Musical), co-created with director/choreographer Susan Stroman; *Happiness*, score by Scott Frankel and Michael Korie, directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman; *Take Flight* and *Big* (Tony nomination, Best Book), scores by Richard Maltby Jr. and David Shire; and the new book, co-authored with Timothy Crouse, for the Lincoln Center Theater and Roundabout Theatre revivals of Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* (Tony Award, Best Musical Revival; Olivier Award, Best Musical Production). Since his children were preschoolers, Weidman has written for *Sesame Street*, receiving more than a dozen Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Children’s Program. From 1999 to 2009 he served as President of the Dramatists Guild of America.
**John Wilkes Booth**

1838-1865

**Character Background:**
John Wilkes Booth was an actor in the middle of the 19th century who was devoted to the Confederacy and deeply upset by General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox during the Civil War.

**Presidential Target:**
Abraham Lincoln

**The Scene of the Crime:** Booth snuck into Lincoln’s box at Ford’s Theatre on April 14, 1865, while Lincoln and his wife were watching a play, and shot the president in the back of the head. He jumped out of the box shouting “Sic semper tyrannis” (“thus always to the tyrants”), said to be what Brutus uttered as he killed Julius Caesar. Lincoln died the next day.

**The Aftermath:**
Booth fled the theatre and escaped on horseback. He evaded capture for twelve days, but Union soldiers finally tracked him to a barn in rural Virginia. The soldiers set the barn on fire and then shot Booth inside the burning barn. *Assassins* picks up Booth’s final minutes, as the soldiers close in and he tries to get his companion David Herold to write his final words.

**Giuseppe Zangara**

1900-1933

**Character Background:** Giuseppe “Joe” Zangara was an Italian bricklayer who emigrated to the United States at the age of 23. He suffered from stomach pain for most of his adult life, which some say led to mental delusion and depression.

**Presidential Target:**
Franklin D. Roosevelt

**Murder in Miami:** On February 15, 1933, President-elect Franklin Roosevelt was giving a speech in Miami, Florida. Zangara joined the gathered crowd carrying a .32-caliber revolver. Zangara, however, was a short man, only five feet tall, and he had to stand on a chair to get a shot at the President-elect. He fired five times at Roosevelt but missed completely. Instead, he hit Chicago mayor Anton Cermak and a bystander. Cermak died of an infection three weeks later.

**The Aftermath:**
Zangara was initially convicted of four counts of attempted murder, but when Cermak died, the charges were upped to first degree murder, and he was sentenced to death. Upon receiving his sentence, Zangara reportedly said, “Put me in electric chair! I no care!” Zangara was electrocuted on March 10, 1933, after spending only 10 days on death row.

COSTUME SKETCHES BY ILONA SOMOYGI.
Assassins follows the nine men and women who assassinated—or attempted to assassinate—American presidents. The musical does not have a chronological plot. Rather, all the assassins find themselves in an unnatural, dream-like space called “limbo.” The space transforms with each scene—sometimes it is a neutral place, like a saloon where assassins from different eras can talk to each other, and sometimes it is a very specific location, like the scene of an assassination. Here is an introduction to each assassin, and a plotting of where his or her musical number falls, both in real historical time and in the musical.

—RACHEL CARPMAN

LEON CZOLGOSZ (“CHOAL-gosh”) (1873-1901)

CHARACTER BACKGROUND: Leon Frank Czolgosz was an American steelworker and anarchist. He saw injustice in American capitalism, where the wealthy exploited the working class. He looked to Anarchism, in particular the movement’s figurehead, radical Emma Goldman, for guidance, but he was never fully embraced by the anarchists.

PRESIDENTIAL TARGET: WILLIAM McKinley

ASSASSINATION AT THE EXHIBITION: Inspired by a political shooting in Italy, Czolgosz set his sights on President William McKinley. On September 6, 1901, Czolgosz stood in line to meet the President at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. When he reached the head of the line, he shot McKinley twice in the abdomen. McKinley died eight days later.

THE AFTERMATH: Czolgosz was convicted of murdering McKinley, despite his lawyers’ attempts at an insanity defense. He was electrocuted on October 29, 1901. Emma Goldman wrote an impassioned defense of Czolgosz, in which she compared him to Brutus in Caesar’s assassination. The rest of the Anarchist movement, however, was not eager to embrace him. Assassins imagines Czolgosz’s brief interactions with Emma Goldman, and the pivotal moment at the Pan-American Exhibition as Czolgosz waits in line to meet McKinley.

SARA JANE MOORE (1930–)

CHARACTER BACKGROUND: Sara Jane Moore had a life of fits and starts. She was a nursing student, a Women’s Army corps recruit, and an accountant. She was divorced five times. She turned to revolutionary politics in 1975.

PRESIDENTIAL TARGET: GERALD FORD

NEAR MISS: On September 21, 1975, Moore was picked up by San Francisco Police. They found she had a handgun on her and confiscated it, but then they released her. The next morning, Moore bought a new gun and joined a crowd outside of the St. Francis Hotel, where President Ford was entering a vehicle. Moore raised her arm and shot at the President, narrowly missing him. She tried to shoot again but was blocked by a retired Marine.

THE AFTERMATH: Moore plead guilty to the assassination attempt and was sentenced to life in prison. During her incarceration, Moore escaped from a Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia but was caught hours later. Moore was released on parole in 2007. In addition to the imagined meeting with Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme (Moore and Fromme are the only two female would-be Presidential assassins in United States’s history), Assassins imagines Moore’s relationship to her new gun.
CHARLES GUITEAU ("gih-TOE") (1841-1882)

CHARACTER BACKGROUND: Charles Guiteau was a Midwestern boy who never really fit in. He tried being a member of a religious cult, a lawyer, and finally an author. He wrote a speech supporting James Garfield, and when Garfield won the presidency, he felt he was entitled to a job in the administration. He was turned down.

PRESIDENTIAL TARGET: JAMES A. GARFIELD

A SHOOTING IN THE STATION: On July 2, 1881, Guiteau shot Garfield, as the president prepared to board a train at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, DC. Garfield died of his wounds eleven weeks later.

THE AFTERMATH: Guiteau went on trial in the autumn of 1881, where he claimed that he was insane at the time of the shooting. The trial became a media spectacle, and Guiteau’s wildly erratic behavior during the trial was widely publicized. Guiteau was found guilty and executed by hanging on June 30, 1882. He was reportedly excited to be the center of attention at his own hanging, smiling and waving at the crowd, and reciting a poem he composed, “I am Going to the Lordy.” Assassins expands the moment right before Guiteau’s death, inserting episodes from his life into his final poem.

JOHN HINCKLEY JR. (1955–)

CHARACTER BACKGROUND: John Hinckley Jr. watched the film Taxi Driver as a college student, in which Jodie Foster plays a child prostitute and Robert De Niro plays a disturbed cabbie who plots to assassinate a presidential candidate. Hinckley became obsessed with Jodie Foster. When Foster enrolled at Yale University, Hinckley moved to New Haven to be near her. When he couldn’t get her attention, he fantasized about doing something big enough to earn a place in history and her love.

PRESIDENTIAL TARGET: RONALD REAGAN

HOSTILE HOTEL: On March 30, 1981, Hinckley fired a revolver six times as Ronald Reagan exited the Hilton Hotel in Washington, DC. The shots wounded several bystanders, and one bullet ricocheted off a limousine and hit Reagan in the chest. Everyone survived their injuries, though press secretary James Brady was left partially paralyzed.

THE AFTERMATH: Hinckley was arrested at the scene but was found not guilty by reason of insanity. The verdict created a national uproar and led to reforming state and national insanity defense laws. Hinckley was confined to a hospital in Washington, DC. He was permitted to make short visits to his parents starting in 1999 and was finally released altogether in September 2016. He lives with his parents in Williamsburg, Virginia. Assassins expands Hinckley’s obsession with Jodie Foster, putting it in counterpoint with Fromme’s love for Charles Manson.

LYNETTE “SQUEAKY” FROMME (1948–)

CHARACTER BACKGROUND: Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme was a cult member and a member of the Manson Family. She became obsessed with Richard Nixon and attempted to kill him in 1975. Later, she attempted to assassinate President Reagan in 1981.

THE AFTERMATH: Fromme was convicted of attempted assassination in 1981 and served 20 years in prison. She was released in 2000 and now lives in a nursing home.

ASSASSINS

Assassins expands the moment right before Guiteau’s death, inserting episodes from his life into his final poem. The Ballad of Guiteau

COSTUME SKETCHES BY ILONA SOMOYGI.
**CHARACTER BACKGROUND:** Lee Harvey Oswald joined the Marines at the age of seventeen. He was discharged at 20 and tried to live out his communist ideals. He first tried to defect to the Soviet Union but grew bored of Soviet life and returned to the US, where he began political organizing in defense of Cuba.

**PRESIDENTIAL TARGET:** JOHN F. KENNEDY

**A DARK DAY IN DALLAS:** On November 22, 1963, Oswald climbed to the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository where he worked in Dallas, Texas. At 12:30pm, Kennedy’s Presidential motorcade passed the Book Depository, and Oswald fired three shots out the window. The President was killed instantly, and another shot seriously wounded Texas Governor John Connally.

**THE AFTERMATH:** Oswald escaped the Book Depository but was arrested later that day for the shooting of a Dallas police officer. The Captain on duty recognized Oswald as a Book Depository employee and arrested him for the assassination of the President as well. Oswald was interrogated for two days. As the police were transporting him to the local jail on November 24, a night club owner named Jack Ruby shot Oswald in the abdomen. Oswald died later that day. Kennedy’s assassination has been the source of many conspiracy theories and detailed analysis over the past five decades. Assassins draws to a close as all the assassins, led by Booth, perhaps Oswald’s most natural predecessor, converge on the young man, convincing him to vent his frustration and take his place in history.

**QUEAKY’’ FROMME (1948–)**

**CHARACTER BACKGROUND:** Lynette Alice “Squeaky” Fromme was a California woman who, at age 19, fell in with the murderer-conspirator Charles Manson. In the 1960s, she was a member of the commune Manson led in California, called the Manson Family. After Manson and other family members were convicted of the murder of actress Sharon Tate and others in 1969, Fromme remained absolutely loyal to him and even attempted to obstruct the course of his trial.

**PRESIDENTIAL TARGET:** GERALD FORD

**CAPITAL CRIME IN CAPITOL PARK:** On September 5, 1975, Fromme went to Sacramento’s Capitol Park and aimed her Colt .45 at President Gerald Ford. The gun was loaded, but there was no cartridge in the chamber so the gun did not go off.

**THE AFTERMATH:** Fromme was arrested immediately. She was convicted of attempting to assassinate President Ford and given life in prison. Throughout her incarceration, she maintained her loyalty to Manson. She escaped from a Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia in 1987 to try to see him. Fromme was granted parole in 2009. She now lives in upstate New York. Assassins imagines meetings between Fromme and Sara Jane Moore, who both attempted to shoot Gerald Ford but never actually met, and expands on Fromme’s undying devotion to Charles Manson.

**SAMUEL BYCK (1930-1974)**

**CHARACTER BACKGROUND:** After a brief military career, Philadelphia-born Samuel Byck had a hard time holding a job. By his early 40s, he suffered from bouts of depression and focused on Richard Nixon as the source of his troubles. He also sent rambling tape-recordings of himself to scientist Jonas Salk, Senator Abraham Ribicoff, and composer Leonard Bernstein.

**PRESIDENTIAL TARGET:** RICHARD M. NIXON

**ATTEMPTED HIJACKING:** Byck decided to assassinate President Nixon by hijacking an airplane and crashing it into the White House. On February 22, 1974, Byck stormed a plane on the runway of Baltimore/Washington International Airport. He shot a police officer and the pilots of the plane before sealing the aircraft door. A standoff with local police ensued, but before the police could gain entry, Byck fatally shot himself.

**THE AFTERMATH:** Byck’s recordings describing the event surfaced after his death. He was also found with a homemade gasoline bomb in a briefcase. Assassins imagines the contents of Byck’s tapes, addressed to Leonard Bernstein and...
Two months before rehearsals began, James Bundy—who is the Artistic Director of Yale Rep and the Dean of Yale School of Drama—was already deep into preparations for directing his first musical. He spoke with Literary Associate Rachel Carpman about the process of creating this production of *Assassins*—from building a surreal space for real historical figures to the repercussions of the 2016 election.

Rachel Carpman: We don’t often produce musicals at Yale Rep, and in recent seasons, we’ve concentrated on brand-new musicals. What made you want to direct a musical revival this year?

James Bundy: You know, as I looked at Yale Rep’s history, we’ve actually done lots of musical revivals, particularly of Brecht/Weill musicals, and we’re about as far now from the composition of *Assassins* as Yale Rep was from the compositions of those works at that time. And, our theatre has this historic connection to Sondheim, having done *The Frogs* in 1974. We also wanted to do something of scale, and we wanted to do something that featured music. Then on top of that, with the anger and resentment we’re particularly noticing this election and post-election season, it seemed to me that, whatever happened, in the spring of 2017 we would either be experiencing backlash against a woman elected president or we would be governed by the mentality of white male resentment and entitlement. It seemed like this piece just captured something so extraordinarily important and terrifying in the American psyche that it would be relevant no matter what happened.

RC: What draws you to this musical as a piece of theatre, outside the context of this political moment?

JB: When I first heard the original *Assassins* album, I didn’t think much about the show from a director’s perspective: to some extent I just thought, “what a cool idea.” The score is outstanding, encompassing a hundred and fifty years of American musical history. And I’m drawn to the theatricalism of the piece. In many book musicals the theatricality comes from the music and the dancing, but basically all the settings are realistic. This one expressly calls for a surreal environment, which is overlaid with a very specific historical lens, so there’s no shortage of theatricality. The impulses of both the authors are in keeping with the sense of adventure to which Yale Rep is drawn.

RC: How do you approach casting when you are creating historical figures?

JB: With reasonable care. It’s not like we’ve cast nine dead ringers for the assassins, but we were thinking about what people project, what their energy is, and roughly speaking what they look like. Still, I would say in every case we feel like we also picked the person who understood the character most intuitively.

RC: You mentioned that the play exists in a surreal environment, one that isn’t supposed to represent a real place but rather a dream-like space where normal rules—like time and physics—don’t always apply. How do you approach creating that environment with the designers?

JB: The writers give you so many ways in. On the one hand, the characters are all dressed in what they were wearing when they went to shoot whatever president they were aiming for, so you’ve got a bunch of people who are wearing clothes from a hundred and fifty years of American history who are all talking to each other—that’s inherently surreal. The stage directions keep repeating the word “limbo.” The opening music is a kind of refracted version of “Hail to the Chief.” Things that don’t happen in real life keep happening, like a bunch of people from different periods of history buying guns to go shoot at presidents. So the unreality of the piece is embedded in the text, and then the designers have to come up with an idea of what that means in terms of stagecraft. For us, one way in was through the kind of piecemeal understanding that many of us have of the American Dream, and the confusion between what’s available to us and what’s been promised to us. In many ways it feels that the piece is a constructed American Nightmare instead of an American Dream.
RC: What excites you most about going into rehearsal?

JB: I cannot believe that I get to listen to this music all day long for six weeks. I’m very excited about that. One of the things I love about singing onstage is that it’s like Shakespearean verse-speaking, in that you have to mean what you sing, and it’s amplified in impact by the orchestra. It takes unbelievable focus and physical investment to do it over and over again. I think it’s a stroke of genius of this particular work that while it’s this surreal world that’s filled with historical quotations and a real sense of both the spectrum of anger, resentment, entitlement, racism, narcissism, and madness that pertains to this cohort of assassins, at the same time, it’s a soulful expression of their pain, which is essentially codified in the music. That’s a genius achievement, to be able to put such unattractive characters into a piece about such horrible deeds and at the same time not just to invoke but also to truly give presence to their humanity.

RC: What do you hope students will take away from this show?

JB: Assassins is a thrilling and compressed way to experience a lot of American history in a short period of time, to get an appreciation of how violent our culture is, and also to learn about some people who were acting on issues that are still present in our contemporary dialogue. This recent election has been underreported in the sense that the American media is still unable to come to grips with our systemic racism and misogyny, and it’s going to take a while for even the New York Times to cop to it. This election is less about how forgotten working class white men are than it is about how unappreciative working class white men are about how the system is set up in their favor. Those are two different things, but if you look at the data, inner city dwellers in America get a fraction of the government support that rural white men do. People are capable of badly misreading the circumstances in ways that are dangerous to society, and that’s a lot of what this piece is about.

JAMES BUNDY is in his 15th year as Dean of Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre. In his first 14 seasons, Yale Rep has produced more than 30 world, American, and regional premieres, nine of which have been honored by the Connecticut Critics Circle with the award for Best Production of the year and two of which have been Pulitzer Prize finalists. During this time, Yale Rep also has commissioned more than 50 artists to write new work and provided low-cost theatre tickets to thousands of middle and high school students from Greater New Haven through WILL POWER!, an educational program initiated in 2004. In addition to his work at Yale Rep, he has directed productions at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Great Lakes Theater Festival, The Acting Company, California Shakespeare Festival, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and The Juilliard School Drama Division. A recipient of the Connecticut Critics Circle’s Tom Killen Award for extraordinary contributions to Connecticut professional theatre in 2007, Mr. Bundy served from 2007–13 on the board of directors of Theatre Communications Group, the national service organization for nonprofit theatre. Previously, he worked as Associate Producing Director of The Acting Company, Managing Director of Cornerstone Theater Company, and Artistic Director of Great Lakes Theater Festival. He is a graduate of Harvard College; he trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and Yale School of Drama.
ABOUT THE PLAY

Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s *Assassins* examines the stories of several presidential assassins and would-be assassins, placing people who lived at very different times in American history side-by-side: John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald; Leon Czolgosz and John Hinckley. Separated by time, but together on the stage, the assassins come to believe they share a common goal: to seize (by violent means) the American Dream they feel their country has promised. In the play, the American Dream is reimagined as an ironic, cynical tale; the assassins see America as a country that promises much but delivers little. When the assassins realize that the American Dream is, for them, a glitzy façade that hides a darker, more sinister truth, they feel hopeless, and resort to violence as a last attempt to claim power. “What do we do?!?” Sam Byck asks. “We do the only thing we can do. We kill the President.”

But how do Weidman and Sondheim justify having assassins who lived at different times and in different places interact with one another? The writers created a space they call “limbo” in which these characters can interact out of physical time and space. A non-realistic setting, “limbo” is something like purgatory: a waiting area where the assassins chat, argue, and relive their deadly experiences. Most of these assassins died long ago, but a few are still among us. From the beginning of the production process for Yale Repertory Theatre’s production of *Assassins*, scenic designer Riccardo Hernandez was interested in this surreal abyss as a central element of his design.

SNEAK PEEK: SET

A set, or scenic, designer creates the physical world of the production: the objects, furniture, and walls that help establish where a play or musical takes place and where the action unfolds. Sometimes, a designer makes a set that looks realistic—like a real room in a real house. Other times, the story doesn’t happen in a real space, so the artist must understand the themes and ideas of the musical to design the best space to support the action.

Here’s an analysis by production dramaturg Matthew Conway of Riccardo Hernandez’s set for Yale Rep’s production of *Assassins*—taking a look at the elements the designer incorporated into his design and what those elements might mean.

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ABOUT THE SET

The “limbo” of Hernandez’s design is much like a psychotic carnival. The walls of the theatre, covered in LED panels, provide a surface to show high-tech video, photographs, and animations that expand the world of the play. A massive panel hangs from the ceiling of the theatre. It, too, is covered in lights, but this time larger bulbs, carnival-like, chasing each other. This fabric-covered panel, tattered Americana striped red and white, yet still lit brightly, shows the assassins’ vision of America as a dream that is all glitz with no substance. Like a marquee calling us in to the shooting gallery at a fair, the lights on the wall draw the assassins in to enact violence on their targets.

The stage floor is made of metal sheeting, reminiscent of industrial settings like warehouses, where stories of the glory of American industriousness were born; of the prisons which now hold the most inmates of any country in the world; and of the ramps and stairs that children gleefully climb while in line for a fairground ride. This comparison, between industrial and innocent, between playfulness and danger, is at the heart of Hernandez’s conception of the scenic design.

The scenic world of Assassins presents the audience with a vision of America in decay. Once-great symbols of America (the flag, the factory) are in disrepair, and covered in lights that might blind temporarily, but do not fully cover up the rotting core within.

—MATTHEW CONWAY
The details of each assassination or attempt are as unique as each individual assassin; however, common themes unite the motivations of all of the characters in John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim’s musical. A desire to initiate political change, make a powerful mark on history, or seize the attention of the national zeitgeist (the defining mood) and the American populace drives the assassins to try to kill the President of the United States.

Alternately exciting and horrifying, Assassins offers a depiction of violence in American culture and the country’s historical fascination with guns. According to the Congressional Research Service, there are more than 200 million guns currently in the United States today—twice as many per capita as there were in 1968. In fact, the U.S. ranks number one in firearms per capita and has the highest homicide-by-firearm rate among the world’s most developed nations. The deadly mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 re-ignited a political debate on gun violence, school safety, and mental health. Despite a call for stricter regulations to curb gun violence, massacres have persisted and far too often comprise our national headlines. Dylann Roof’s mass shooting at AME Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015 and Omar Mateen’s massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, last summer signify the persistence of this issue.

However, a prevalence of guns in the U.S. is not a recent phenomenon. CBS News National Correspondent Lee Cowan observes, “Guns are so woven into the fabric of our founding that on the fourth floor of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, they have their very own vault. The bygone daily hunt for food played a significant role in that legacy. Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that “At the very beginning the wild continent abounded with edible game, and a colonizing people still struggling to control the wilderness and still living very close to the subsistence level found wild game an important supplement to their diet.”

But cultural norms also play a strong role. The country’s founding fathers specifically identified the need for access to guns as part of being an American citizen. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” Many Americans hold dear this private right for individual citizens to own firearms.

Pop culture images of guns permeate the everyday lives of Americans. The heroic American cowboy vanquishing the Wild West and challenging foes to duels infuses our folklore. The singular desire of beloved protagonist Ralphie Parker for a BB gun drives the classic holiday film A Christmas Story. He must have a “200-Shot, Range-Model Air Rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time” for Christmas.

Our gun culture remains rooted in tradition and a desire for control. The characters in Assassins describe their motivations for their acts within our gun culture:

“Think of all that it can do: Remove a scoundrel, Unite a party, Preserve the union, Promote the sales of my book, Ensure my future, My niche in history, And then the world will see That I am not a man to overlook!”
The musical also explores the motif of forgotten men and women in American society, madness, a deferred American Dream, and racism as other galvanizing factors. Assassins stops short of glorifying gun violence but humanizes the historical figures through ballads expressing a desire to be remembered and dialogue revealing a dissatisfaction with the political leadership of their time. Time and space coalesce, allowing a community of assassins to present the gun as a tool towards power and ascension. From John Wilkes Booth to Lee Harvey Oswald, Sondheim places all of these infamous assassinations and attempts together in one theatrical experience.

Assassins poses provocative questions about violence, power, and consequences. Are these characters heroes or infamous villains? Are their motivations valid and understandable or a sign of sheer madness? Do we still remember them today and will they be remembered 100 years from now? Is violence ever the answer to solve societal crises?

—JOCELYN PRINCE

7. constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-ii
9. achristmasstoryhouse.com/a-christmas-story-movie-facts/

1. **Choosing and Narrowing a Research Topic:** Begin your writing process with a brainstorming activity. Create a list of words or ideas, free-write without editing yourself, or draw and sketch visual images of our thoughts. Focus on your interests. Do you like engaging with politics, sports, culture, education, or technology? Tap into what you’re passionate about.

2. **Identifying Credible Sources:** A great general rule is to privilege books, magazines, academic journals, and newspapers over blogs and social media communication. Strong source materials like The New York Times and the African-American Review are peer reviewed and fact-checked, but many websites on the internet are not. Consider who created the material, the intended audience, and potential biases before using it as a source in your essay. Avoid plagiarism by citing ideas and quotations that are not your own.

3. **Structuring Your Essay:** Guideposts help your reader understand your argument. Establish a thesis—a statement that indicates what central idea you will discuss and prove in your essay. Introduce main points and sub-topic sentences at the start of each new paragraph. Begin your essay with an attention-getting introduction and end with a conclusion summarizing your main points and linking back to your thesis statement.
Stephen Sondheim’s musicals defy traditional boundaries. For example, they resemble opera in their scope, scale, and vocal difficulty. Sondheim lyrics tend toward wit and humor, despite ominous plots and dark subjects. These pieces take inspiration from a wide variety of sources and other works of art (or even art forms): they are rooted in fairy tales (Into the Woods) and melodrama (Sweeney Todd), French paintings (Sunday in the Park with George) and ancient Greek and Roman comedy (The Frogs and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum). And sometimes, they push so hard against the typical 20th-century Broadway musical form—with its linear plots; sentimental story arcs; and adherence to unity of time, place, and style—that they nearly break it.

What unifies such a complex pastiche or imitation? One answer: the music. Music can be used in a variety of ways in drama, from creating suspense to adding a sense of mood. In book musicals, music often hints at a character's sub-text or reinforces a character's emotion and maintains the same basic style throughout the production. In Assassins, Sondheim evokes a variety of musical styles from different time periods and contexts, but he does so in an interconnected way that still serves the overall storytelling. Every score Sondheim writes creates its own unique sound for the world of that show, and Assassins puts this extraordinary breadth on full display.

In this show more than any other, Sondheim uses music as a time-traveling tour guide for the audience. The styles of individual songs mark the time periods that the play depicts. The Balladeer, a singer who narrates the story of John Wilkes Booth’s 1865 assassination of Abraham Lincoln, croons along to a banjo he plucks in an old-timey, mid-19th-century American folk style reminiscent of Stephen Foster’s “O Susanna.” The bystanders from 1933 comment on Giuseppe Zangara’s attempt to assassinate Franklin D. Roosevelt while singing to a melody taken directly from John Philip Sousa’s 1896 march, “El Capitan.” Their voices are accompanied by brass and woodwind instruments of the traditional concert band that would have played the piece in the early 20th century. John Hinckley, Jr., who in 1981 tried to assassinate Ronald Reagan in order to get the attention of Jodie Foster, expresses his feelings for the actress through a 1970s style soft-rock ballad.

In pieces of musical theatre, the music might offer clues about what is going on in the story. Assassins takes this principle to a new level. Sondheim’s allusions to historical musical styles and real pieces, in combination with all of the subtle nuances and musical jokes in the score, make music an important dramatic tool in this show—and one that rewards careful listening.

WILL POWER!
Recommends

Stephen Sondheim draws inspiration from an astonishing range of musical sources in Assassins. If you find yourself humming to a particular song, here are some recommendations. Sondheim pulls from popular music of various eras as well as from his own robust body of work.

If you like

“If You Like”

“Ballad of Booth”

“How I Saved Roosevelt”

“Gun Song”

LISTEN TO

American Folk Music

Stephen Foster’s “O Susanna”

Don McLean’s “American Pie”

John Philip Sousa’s El Capitan and The Washington Post March

Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd (especially the crowds in “Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir”)

Sondheim’s Into the Woods Barbershop Quartets
IN DEPTH: DECONSTRUCTING ICONIC MUSIC STYLES
Within this system of musical and historical signals, Sondheim adds even more nuance. For example, the “Ballad of Booth,” does not sound quite like it came out of the 19th century, when Booth lived. The phrases are not the same length; the meter is not always regular. There are moments that surprise you, like when a note is held longer than you expect, or a new phrase begins before it feels like the music is ready. These are not mistakes; Sondheim is always playing with the audience’s expectations. Similarly, in the bystanders’ song to the Sousa march, the melody is modified. The music sometimes quotes the original piece directly, but also includes dissonant notes that are more characteristic of later 20th-century music. These moments remind us that the whole show does not depict a single world from any one time period of the past, but rather shows us elements from different time periods in order to tell a more complicated tale. Even Hinckley’s love ballad incorporates this kind of nuance. Hinckley was an amateur singer-songwriter in real life, and Sondheim subtly adds a “bad note”—a pitch that does not quite fit into the chords—into the introductory guitar accompaniment in order to imply that Hinckley might not have been a very good one.

—LYNDA A. H. PAUL

ASSASSINATING THE TYRANT

Julius Caesar had a long political and military career in Ancient Rome. He first rose to power as part of a triumvirate, or group of three leaders, but over time, Caesar usurped more and more power and ousted his rivals, until in 44 BC he declared himself dictator in perpetuity, or dictator for life. The Roman Senate had grown increasingly uncomfortable as Caesar amassed more authority and control over the Roman government. Sixty members of the Senate concluded that the only solution was to assassinate Caesar. When Caesar entered the Senate on March 15, 44 BC (The Ides of March), a group of Senators, including political leaders Lucius Junius Brutus and Marc Antony, attacked him with daggers. Caesar’s assassination, made even more famous in Shakespeare’s play Julius Caesar, epitomizes the overthrow of a tyrant—a ruler who uses their power oppressively—which is perhaps why more than one American assassin references this ancient event in the course of their own acts. Brutus’s supposed cry upon stabbing Caesar, “Sic semper tyrannis” (Thus always to the tyrants) has become a rallying cry against the abuse of power, while Caesar’s reported last words, “Et tu, Brute?” (You too, Brutus?) have come to represent personal betrayal.

—RACHEL CARPMAN

IF YOU LIKE
“Ballad of Booth”
“How I Saved Roosevelt”
“Gun Song”
“Ballad of Czolgosz”
“Unworthy of Your Love”
“Ballad of Guiteau”

LISTEN TO
American Folk Music
Stephen Foster’s “O Susanna”
Don McLean’s “American Pie”
John Philip Sousa’s El Capitan and The Washington Post March
Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd (especially the crowds in “Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir”)
Sondheim’s Into the Woods
Barbershop Quartets
John Williams’s The Cowboys Overture
Aaron Copland’s Billy the Kid
Claude Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s Cakewalk” (listen for this influence in the song’s refrain)

Find and listen to recordings of “Hail to the Chief.” As you watch Assassins, how, and in what ways, do you hear this music?