ASSASSINS

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

50TH ANNIVERSARY

WILLPOWER!
A supplement to Yale Rep’s Assassins Study Guide, this TOOLKIT is designed to further engage your students in our production of this musical by John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim. The following pages include theatre games and exercises to prepare students for seeing live theatre, as well as activities and lessons geared specifically to this production of Assassins. Each lesson can be adapted for use either before or after seeing the play.

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ASSASSINS
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An ensemble is commonly known as a group of musicians, actors, or dancers who perform together. In theatre productions, ensemble theatre is an approach to acting that aims for a unified effect achieved by all members of a cast working together on behalf of the play, rather than emphasizing individual performances. In Assassins, the colorful cast of historical characters inhabit a surreal world created by the collective group of actors on the Yale Repertory Theatre stage.
LESSON: Building an Ensemble for Performance

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the production aiming for with the ensemble technique in *Assassins*?
2. What are some of the choices that the director and/or production team made that contribute to the ensemble?
3. What unifying affect is achieved by the *Assassins* cast?
4. What are some techniques and strategies you could use to create an ensemble, if you were directing the play?

**Ensemble Building Game: GROUP JUGGLE**

One person starts by tossing a soft ball or a small stuffed animal to a specific player who, in turn, tosses it to a player of her choosing. Inform players that they are establishing an order. That is, every time they toss the ball, they will toss it to the same person. This continues until each person in the circle has caught the ball once, and a random sequence is established. If you have a large group, players may wish to raise their hands until they’ve caught the ball during the first round. After the sequence has been established, play a couple of rounds (going in the exact same order), and then introduce a second and third ball of different colors and sizes into play and establish an order for each new ball. **Variation:** introduce one ball that goes in the opposite direction.

**Ensemble Building Game: BIG WIND BLOWS**

(Ideally requires chairs or some way of marking places.) Someone in the center declares something that is true about themselves. For example: “A big wind blows for everyone who loves to sing.” Then, everyone who loves to sing must run from their places and find a new place. Someone is then stuck in the middle again. Vary the truisms to include interests, life experiences, and personal background information.
Witness Stand Activity: ASSASSINS ON THE HOT SEAT

Divide the class into groups of 4 or more, and have each group choose one of the assassins from the show that it finds intriguing. Each group will then be responsible for researching background information about that assassin with the goal of preparing a class presentation in the form of an imagined few minutes from the assassin’s trial, with group members playing the assassin, a defense attorney, a prosecuting attorney, and a witness (or several, depending on the size of the class and the size of the group). Give students time to research, prepare, and present, and have the class play the jury for each presentation to determine if the assassin is guilty or not.
Physical Debate Activity: PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

A statement that has two possible responses about the musical Assassins—agree or disagree—is read out loud (see below for examples). Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions while sitting in the hot seat (i.e. a chair set up in the middle of the room). Students are required to cite textual evidence from the Assassins script to support their claims and can hold the texts in their hands during the discussion.
Physical Debate Activity: PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS (continued)

Ten statements about Assassins

1. Fromme received too harsh a sentence for her assassination attempt because she was under the influence of cult-leader Charles Manson.

2. Shooters Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and John Hinckley, Jr. have a lot in common.

3. John Wilkes Booth loved his country.

4. The desire for fame was a driving force behind many presidential assassinations.

5. No one who assassinates a U.S. president can possibly believe in the American Dream.

6. Emma Goldman made assassin Leon Czolgosz believe that shooting President McKinley was just.

7. Only successful assassinations have substantial effects on American history.

8. Sam Byck made recordings for famous Americans because he saw himself as their equal.

9. The Balladeer serves as the voice of the American people in the musical.

10. Giuseppe Zangara was motivated by purely selfish concerns.

Writing Activity: WRITE AN ESSAY

Use the physical debate activity as a jumping off point for an argumentative writing assignment. Have students brainstorm, choose a topic, research, and write an argumentative essay with reliable and cited sources.
Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s *Assassins* score spans several musical eras. From American folk music to barbershop quartets and soft-rock ballads, the musical presents a collage of styles and genres of music.

Listen to the music from *Assassins*.

LESSON: Music

Discussion Questions:

1. What themes or ideas do you hear being expressed in the lyrics?

2. Are those themes and ideas still relevant today?

3. Do any of them show up in any of the music you listen to in your free time? How are the concerns of the music you like similar to or different from the concerns of this music?

Choose a song from the *Assassins* score that resonates with you.

Find a contemporary song that expresses the same ideas, feelings, or moods, and share it with the class. Explain why the two songs are similar citing lyrics and other musical elements. Why are these songs relevant to your life and society today?
Corresponding Common Core Standards

**Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards:**

+ Engage effectively in collaborative discussion
+ Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media formats
+ Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning
+ Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details

**Common Core Reading Standards for Literature:**

+ Cite the textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text
+ Determine the meaning of words or phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meaning

**Common Core Reading Standard for Literacy in History/Social Studies:**

+ Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source

**Common Core Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies:**

+ Conduct short research project to answer a question
+ Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources
Everybody’s
Got the right
To be happy.
Don’t stay mad,
Life’s not as bad
As it seems.
If you keep your
Goal in sight,
You can climb to
Any height.
Everybody’s
Got the right
To their dreams...

—Assassins by Weidman and Sondheim

Discussion Questions:

1. Does everyone have the right to be happy or does everyone have the right to pursue happiness? What is the difference between these two ideas?

2. What is the American Dream and where did the concept originate?

3. Is the American Dream realistic? Does it work for everybody?

4. How has the American Dream changed over time?

Writing Activity: Write a poem (or a song)

Ask your students to use their poetic grasp of language to seek out and express the heart and soul of the American Dream. Using primary sources from the Library of Congress, have students track different views of the American Dream. They can write a few short poems that highlight different aspects of the American Dream, or synthesize them into one longer poem that expresses what the American Dream used to be and what they think it is now.
Some questions to guide the research:

- What is the American Dream?
- How has the American Dream changed over time?
- How do diverse populations within the same country view the American Dream?
- How have significant historical events affected the American Dream?
- How will new opportunities of the 21st century challenge the American Dream?

Tips for using the Library of Congress Collections:

- There are many ways to search the American Memory collections. Learn to work with keywords and work within a specific collection of resources.
- Check out the “About this collection” section before you get started
- Search the collections by type and read the search tips chart.
- Use the search tips list
- Within each collection, browse the indexes of authors, subjects, and titles.

Some collections that demonstrate different elements of the American Dream:

“California as I Saw It”: First-person narratives of California’s early years, 1849-1900
loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/

*Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940-1941*
loc.gov/collections/todd-and-sonkin-migrant-workers-from-1940-to-1941/

Hispano Music and Culture from the Northern Rio Grande: the Juan B. Rael Collection:
loc.gov/collections/hispano-music-and-culture-from-the-northern-rio-grande/
LES SSON: The American Dream

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1940
loc.gov/collections/hispano-music-and-culture-from-the-northern-rio-grande/

Pioneering in the Upper Midwest: books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820-1910
loc.gov/collections/pioneering-the-upper-midwest/

Poet at Work: Recovered Notebooks from the Thomas Biggs Harned Walt Whitman Collection
loc.gov/collections/harned-whitman-collection/

Supplemental Reading

Novels and Plays about the American Dream

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith

*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

Poems about the American Dream

“Let America Be America Again” —Langston Hughes

“America” —Claude McKay

“Shine, Perishing Republic” —Robinson Jeffers

“I Hear America Singing” —Walt Whitman
“America, America!” —Delmore Schwartz

“The New Colossus” —Emma Lazarus

“To make America the greatest is my goal” —Muhammad Ali

“The Firebombers” —Anne Sexton

“América” —Richard Blanco

“If in America” —Ed Bok Lee

“An American Sunrise” —Joy Harjo

“Escape from the Old Country” —Adrienne Su

**Full resource available at:**

loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/american-dream/index.html
From the beginning of the production process for Yale Repertory Theatre’s
production of *Assassins*, scenic designer Riccardo Hernandez was interested in a
surreal sense of limbo—an abyss in which the assassins congregate, socialize, and
collectively ruminate on their violent acts. Hernandez creates a sort-of psychotic
carnival with high-tech videos and projections. The set is also covered with carnival-
like lights chasing each other. The stage floor is made of metal sheeting, reminiscent
of industrial settings like prisons and industrial warehouses—creating an image of
an America in decline.

**Design Activity: CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE SET FOR ASSASSINS**

Envision a different way to create the “limbo” environment for *Assassins*. What
would it look like? How would you use color, furniture and objects, or symbolic
images. Draw a sketch of the set. Include a legend or key to describe the elements
in detail.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you think Riccardo Hernandez’s set for Yale Repertory Theatre’s production
   of *Assassins* worked? Why or why not?

2. What are other symbols of an America in decline?
LESSON: Re-Framing Yale University Art Gallery Paintings

This lesson was developed from a Yale University Art Gallery-led session, as part of the Assassins teachers workshop. To arrange a visit to the Gallery, please visit Yale University Art Gallery’s website and email yuag.education@yale.edu for more information. For more details about the Gallery's education programs and about bringing groups of students, please visit artgallery.yale.edu/education-overview.

Corresponding Common Core Standards

**Common Core Writing Standards:**

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events

  *Use narrative techniques such as dialogue to develop experiences, events, and/or characters*

  *Use precise words, phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events*

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task


Painting #2: *Shadows of Liberty*, Oil on Canvas with Canvas Strips and Nails, 2016, Titus Kaphar (1976–). Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.
Visual Inventory Activity: GEORGE WASHINGTON PAINTINGS

Look closely at each painting for five minutes. Give a visual inventory of each painting.

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of things do you see in this painting? What else do you see?
2. What words would you use to describe this painting? What other words might we use?
3. How would you describe the lines in this picture? The shapes? The colors?
4. What does this painting show?
5. How would you describe the place or person depicted in this painting?

Writing Activity: CREATING ORIGINAL DIALOGUE FOR A SCENE

Create a dialogue between the two Georges. What would they say to each other in a 10-page exchange? Also include other characters, animals, and even objects from the paintings.

Physical Modeling Activity: MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE

Stand completely still in the same position as George Washington in painting #1 for one minute. How do you hold your head, arms and hands, and feet? How does this posture make you feel?
Study Guides

Below are links to study guides created by other theatres for productions of Assassins.

**Milwaukee Repertory Theater**
issuu.com/milwaukeerep/docs/assassins-guide

**Arden Theatre**
ardentheatre.org/media/2008_assassins_sg.pdf

**Roundabout Theatre Company**
roundabouttheatre.org/Roundabout/media/Roundabout/PDF/UPSTAGE/Assassins_Study-Guide.pdf

Books

All titles available in the New Haven Free Public Library system.

*The President Is Dead!: The Extraordinary Stories of the Presidential Deaths, Final Days, Burials, and Beyond*, by Louis L. Picone

*The Presidential Assassins: John Wilkes Booth, Charles Julius Guiteau, Leon Frank Czolgosz, and Lee Harvey Oswald*, by Jeffrey K. Smith

*Twenty Days: A narrative in text and pictures of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr.

*The Lincoln Assassination Encyclopedia*, by Edward Steers

*Destiny Of The Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and the Murder of a President*, by Candice Millard

*Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, by Vincent Bugliosi

*Killing Kennedy: The End of Camelot*, by Bill O’Reilly

*Rawhide Down: The Near Assassination of Ronald Reagan*, by Del Quentin


*Killing the President: Assassinations, Attempts, and Rumored Attempts on U.S. Commanders-in-Chief*, by Willard M. Oliver

Articles

“The Assassination of President William McKinley”
history.com/news/the-assassination-of-president-william-mckinley

“Ford escaped 2 assassination attempts/ both happened in California—one in capital, other in S.F.” sfgate.com/news/article/Ford-escaped-2-assassination-attempts-Both-2481771.php#photo-2637704
RESOURCES

“FDR escapes assassination in Miami”
history.com/this-day-in-history/fdr-escapes-assassination-in-miami

American Presidential Assassinations
pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANexperience/features/general-article/garfield-assassinations/

DVD/Online Resources

Yale Repertory Theatre Assassins
Dramaturgy Website
yrtassassins.wixsite.com/dramaturgy
Password: gottheright
NOTE: This website will be taken down by May 2017.

American Experience: Murder of a President
shoppbs.org/product/index.jsp?productId=85849946
DVD, PBS

Official Website of the Secret Service (includes historical information)
secretService.gov/