

CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles Times

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 1994

'Assassins': Sondheim's Killer Musical Comedy Hits the Mark

THEATER REVIEW

By DON SHIRLEY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Francisco Martin Duran, who is accused of shooting up the north side of the White House while President Clinton was inside, was indicted on a charge of attempted assassination on Thursday.

It happened to be the same day that the mind-boggling "Assassins" opened at Los Angeles Theatre Center's small Theatre 4.

Perhaps someday composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and playwright John Weidman will add Duran to their chorus line. He would join John Wilkes Booth, John Hinckley, McKinley assassin Leon

Czolgosz, Garfield murderer Charles Guiteau, wanna-be F.D.R. killer Giuseppe Zangara, would-be Nixon assaillant Sam Byck and the two women who tried to shoot Gerald Ford—Squeaky Fromme and Sara Jane Moore.

Near the top of "Assassins," this motley lineup admonishes us to hold onto our dreams. "Everybody's got the right to be happy," they sing. It's a free country, right?

Is this musical comedy material? A crackerjack staging by Los Angeles Repertory Company proves that it is. Sidesplitting and sobering in equal measure, this is the most provocative musical in years.

Sondheim and Weidman attack American solipsism with a vengeance. The notion that you can do anything you want—ignoring consequences to others—has been en-

Please see 'ASSASSINS,' F8

HIGHLIGHTS

READY, AIM, FIRE: Sidesplitting and sobering in equal measure, "Assassins," by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman, is the most provocative musical in years, and Los Angeles Repertory Co. does it justice at Los Angeles Theatre Center. Reviewed by Don Shirley. **F1**



FRANCINE ORR / For 'The Times'
Lee Harvey Oswald (John Allee, kneeling), aiming his rifle, is about to join the "club" of President killers in the musical comedy "Assassins" at L.A. Theatre Center.

'ASSASSINS'

Continued from F1

couraged by hundreds of self-help philosophers and in plenty of musical theater numbers. Yet look what it leads to here.

The show doesn't buy any literal conspiracy theories. But it does present the band of President-shooters as a club whose members support each other across the decades whenever the going gets rough. The club encourages new applicants, such as Lee Harvey Oswald (ashen-faced John Allee), to join in making history.

The extreme individualism that the show challenges also creates ripe material for comedy. A variety of delusions crosses this stage:

- The political zealotry of Booth (dashing Tom Zemon)
- The lovesickness of Hinckley (morose Steve Jackson Wilde) and Fromme (blissed-out Bridget Hoffman)
- The plebeian rage of Czolgosz (fiery-voiced Sean Smith)
- The self-promotional careerism of Guiteau (dapper Alan Safier)

- The inchoate sickness of Zangara (red-faced Gary Imhoff)
- The mad-housewife routine of Moore (daffy Jean Kauffman)

- The ignored bonhomie of Byck (hilarious Paul W. Carr, appropriately dressed as Santa Claus).

This rich panorama of characters becomes even richer by bringing them face to face with each other and with such onlookers as Emma Goldman (Pamela Tomassetti) and Gerald Ford (David Holladay).

Sondheim's ingenious impressions of popular American music capture the assassins' can-do sentiments to perfection, and Kay Cole's musical staging, Paul Baker's musical direction and Thomas Griep's five-person band (kept in shadows at the rear) do justice to this audacious score.

Meanwhile, a Balladeer (tenor Timothy Smith) periodically pops up to suggest that the assassins act out of crazed and isolated impulses that don't seriously affect the progress of the country. Not so, reply Sondheim and Weidman. They contend that the crackpots feed on the same American dreams that inspired the Presidents.

Many of the New York critics didn't like "Assassins" in 1991. Many of the London critics did in 1992. This production uses a song added for London, "Something Just Broke," just before the show ends, it's sung by common folk recalling the moment they heard a President had been shot. Presumably it's designed to make the show a tad less bitter; the only other song sung by every-day non-assassins, "How I Saved Roosevelt," presents the bystanders at the attempted shooting of F.D.R. as a pack of glory-seekers whose motivations are uncomfortably close to those of some assassins.

"Something Just Broke" is pretty, but remembering what you were doing when a President was shot is a cliché. Audiences shouldn't need this kind of intellectual coddling. Besides, the show lasts two hours without an intermission, in one of the most cramped seating configurations in town. A brief trim would help.

Peter Ellenstein's staging also uses a different opening setting from those in New York and London. Here a young boy (Matthew Bartilson) picks a U.S. flag off the floor, exits and is followed on stage by a relatively innocent-looking

huckster (Christopher Carroll), dressed for the Fourth of July. The man pushes a cart of the kind that dispenses hot dogs or ice cream in the park. But we quickly learn that this cart contains guns.

In the other productions, this guy ran a carnival shooting gallery specifically designed as a kill-the-President game. That indeed sounds like overkill. Here the evil crops up in otherwise benign circumstances, which supports the show's theme.

Robert L. Smith's backdrop is a blank slate—a set of translucent sliding Japanese screens. Booth's silhouette descends a staircase before he actually appears, increasing the ominous sense of occasion at this dreadful, wonderful show.

■ "Assassins," Los Angeles Theatre Center Theatre 4, 514 S. Spring St. *Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 and 7 p.m. \$18-\$25. (213) 485-1681. Running time: 2 hours.*

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 1994

Los Angeles Times