

Assassins @ Fly North Theatricals

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by John Weidman

Running July 1 - 23, 2022 @ The .ZACK Theater

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Fly North Theatricals' production of *Assassins* is the first Stephen Sondheim musical I have seen live since his passing late last year, and boy howdy, does this show hit different now. *Assassins* is the most controversial show that Sondheim ever scored: sensitive subject matter, vulgar language, and a complete disregard for its audience's sensibilities and expectations. It's an abstract musical revue (I think?) that tells the stories of nine people who, throughout history, have attempted to assassinate the President of the United States – from John Wilkes Booth to John Hinckley. The assassins are gathered in a space between spaces that transforms the act of murderous vengeance into a national pastime. Here, time is bent into a Mobius double reacharound where the assassins can share the stage, interact, and even inspire one another to Kill the President. With the sharp uptick of mass gun violence, not to mention the ever-increasing number of threats, indignations, and degradations being made against democracy the world over, *Assassins* is a musical that leaves you out of breath from how insanely ironic it treats such a dark topic.

John Weidman's script specifies that *Assassins* should take place inside of a carnival, with the assassins competing against each other to see who is the best shot at the Presidential Shooting Gallery. Even Sondheim's score has a carnival sound, with orchestrations of calliope, banjo, marching drums, and a lot of brass and reeds. However, director Bradley Rohlf takes Fly North Theatricals' production in a completely and utterly different direction; so different, in fact, that it's brilliant.

This production reframes the show as a panel at PresCon, a political convention that has existed for as long as the United States has been a country, giving anyone who can pay the price of admission an inside look at what it takes to be the President. Every audience member is given a name badge that titles us as "President," and the ushers are our Secret Service agents; an extension of the show's theme that Presidents are still ordinary people like you and me, people who can become victims of gun violence at any moment.

As the "Presidents" all walk in, the convention's staff all attend to various booths around the intimate .ZACK black box theater that you can interact with: there's a meet and greet with John Wilkes Booth, a merch table, a tarot reading, a game of Battleship (to test your aptitude in foreign affairs, of course), and a table where you can join PresCon's Secret Society. A screen on the small .ZACK stage projects the PresCon schedule, with events such as a lecture on press conference etiquette hosted by Anthony Scaramucci, a workshop on making tin foil hats, a screening of "Medea's Witness Protection," a class that teaches you how to speak

conversational Reptillian, and many more. It's all very tongue-in-cheek, very satirical, and very, very funny.

The PresCon staff clarifies before the show that the titular guests of the *Assassins* panel are actually being portrayed by cosplayers, that they're not the real people. This adds another layer of meaning that serves as the inverse to the audience being Presidents: just as anyone can be a victim of gun violence, anyone can be a perpetrator of gun violence, too.

The *Assassins* panel begins with a song from our moderator, the convention's Proprietor. In most productions, the Proprietor is portrayed as a gruff carnival barker; here, Eileen Engel plays the role as a toothy convention hostess who persuades the guest assassins to come up and Kill a President by preying on their insecurities: their loneliness, their debts, their illnesses. The Proprietor is the human representation of the mythologizing and radicalizing of the American Dream. She's kind of like Mephistopheles from Faust, but somehow way more demented.

Throughout the opening number, the Proprietor gives each assassin children's toy guns, a commentary on the extent to which guns have been commodified in America. Each gun is indicative of the assassins' personalities: John Wilkes Booth's is made of antique wood, Charles Guiteau has a gag "Bang!" flag gun, Sara Jane Moore has a water pistol (which is used to great comedic effect). As the assassins begin to tell their stories, an attendee of the convention walks up to the stage and acts as a Balladeer, singing in counterpart to each assassin. The Balladeer is the audience's surrogate, representing the general public's perception of each assassin. Stephen Henley plays the Balladeer as a discontented Zoomer who learns about each assassin by looking them up on his phone, the screen of which is shared with the audience using really creative projections designed by director Bradley Rohlf. Engel as the Proprietor and Henley as the Balladeer make for great comic foils, and they both gracefully lead the audience into a twist ending that had me on the edge of my seat.

The cosplayers are absolutely electric onstage as the assassins, all with excellent voices courtesy of musical director Colin Healy, who also conducts a lush 11-piece orchestra in a balcony above the .ZACK. Jordan Wolk portrays John Wilkes Booth (assassin of Abraham Lincoln) with a deep vulnerability and a passion that makes us forget he was a disgusting monster in real life. Bradford Rolen as Charles Guiteau (assassin of James Garfield) brings a delightfully manic energy to the role, as well as some impressively acrobatic physical comedy. Eli Borwick as Leon Czolgosz (assassin of William McKinley) is appropriately imposing and formidable with a resonant bass voice that never breaks, even when he goes into a righteous fervor.

Despite Ryan Townsend's Giuseppe Zangara (attempted assassin of Franklin Roosevelt, instead killing Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak) spending the show hunched over in pain from Zangara's severe intestinal adhesions, his beautiful tenor is crystal clear and his energy is unflinchingly aggressive. Sarah Lantsberger plays the dual roles of Sam Byck (attempted assassins of Richard Nixon) and Emma Goldman (the radical anarchist who inspired Czolgosz to assassinate McKinley); Lantsberger's captivating performance makes the tenuous connection

between these two characters feel very cohesive. Jaymeson Hintz is inspired as a very soft-spoken take on John Hinckley (attempted assassin of Ronald Reagan); he never raises his voice for a second, not even in the moments when he's angry, and it makes his obsessive personality even more unsettling. Avery Lux as Lynette Fromme and Kimmie Kidd-Booker as Sara Jane Moore (both of whom attempted to assassinate Gerald Ford at separate times) are a wonderful comic duo that give their roles a depth beyond the stereotypes of doomsday hippie and frazzled housewife, respectively. 6th-grader Layla Mason has a brief cameo as Billy, Sara Jane Moore's son who acts like the kind of kid who purposefully pushes their parent's buttons; Billy's reaction to his own mother pulling a gun on him is appropriately confident under Mason's portrayal.

Contributing to the convention setting are Eileen Engel's costumes, Tony Anselmo's lights, and Colin Healy's media and sound design; the sound design is especially notable because the acoustics of the .ZACK are very unforgiving, so trying to balance the orchestra with the actors is a tall task, compounded by the fact that the theater's audience sightlines are not ideal.

Fly North Theatricals' production of *Assassins* is a show that grabs hold of you the very second you step into the theater, and it never lets you go, even after the panel is over. The direction that it takes with the material is absolutely genius, reminding us of how much social media has changed everything about celebrities, politics, and guns in America. It's a stunning production in the most literal sense of the word; I actually did a slow clap at the curtain call, I was that shocked by it. Right here, right now is the place and time to see this brilliant reimagining of a Sondheim cult classic.

However, a word of caution: I attended this production with someone who has a balance disorder, and the bright lights of the convention space before the show were very disorienting. Regarding anyone who is photosensitive, audience discretion is advised.