

THE VIEW FROM PAGE 361

The author of the musical on which Assassins is based
reflects on the story of its evolution
by Charles Gilbert

A phone call from a friend tipped me off when Meryle Secrest's book was published two years ago. "Did you see the new Sondheim biography?" he asked. "Take a look at page 361." Seeing my name in that account of the genesis of the Sondheim-Weidman musical "Assassins," I felt slightly giddy at the thought of having become a part of theatrical history, a minor supporting character whose story was now a footnote to great man's career.

Back in November of 1977, I was a young director and composer fresh out of grad school, searching for a subject for an original work which would enable me to bring together many of the elements of the musical theater which excited me. Among the then current musicals which had me in its thrall was Pacific Overtures, a work whose fusion of theatrical inventiveness and intellectual penetration seems to me the very model of a modern major musical.

Browsing in the stacks of the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, I found a collection of biographical sketches of different individuals who had either killed or attempted to kill an American President. The book contained bits of verse, journal excerpts, courtroom testimony and other fragments in which the assassins, in their own words, attempted to explain what led them to commit their crimes. My senses tingled as I turn the pages: this was something big. I drafted a short proposal for William Turner, artistic director of Theater Express, a Pittsburgh "alternative" theater for whom I was working as music

director. With Bill's encouragement, and under his direction, my idea grew to a quirky, full-length musical entitled *Assassins*, produced by Theater Express, first in a workshop and then in a mainstage production in 1979, funded in part by a grant from the Ford Foundation's New American Plays program.

"Step right up!" shouted a sideshow barker. "Hit the Prez and win a prize!" In a memorable scene from that production, the stage was transformed into a surrealistic shooting gallery, where politicians, secret agents and bystanders jerked around the stage like figures in a demented cuckoo-clock. Gathered at the shooting gallery were many characters whose names will be familiar to those who know the Sondheim-Weidman *Assassins*: John Wilkes Booth, Charles Guiteau, Leon Czolgosz, Giuseppe Zangara and Squeaky Fromme were included, along with Arthur Bremer (whose memorable line "My penis made me do it!" is from a poem in his book *An Assassin's Diary*), Sirhan Sirhan and John Schrank. Not present were John Hinckley, who hadn't happened yet, and Sam Byck, who somehow escaped my attention.

Also conspicuously (but significantly) absent from the cast was Lee Harvey Oswald, whose desparate act on that infamous November morning remains a vivid memory for many Americans. Unquestionably, in any drama about assassination in America, Oswald has to be the star, and though he failed to appear among the *dramatis personae* in my musical, his story turned out to be the very heart of the piece.

I decided to create a fictional assassin modeled on Oswald, and to use the events leading up to that momentous gunshot as the narrative through-line for my

musical. My fictional assassin was a down-and-out drifter caught up in a web of conspiracy, which gave me the chance to indulge in ironic paranoid fantasies, like a chorus of G-men singing "We Serve The Hoove". In exploring the sentimental, sympathetic side of this melancholy character, I also wrote some of the most heartfelt material in the musical, including a stanza that still pleases me more than twenty years later:

Sometimes it's hard to fight the feeling of falling.
The edge is appalingly near,
As days and dreams and dollars disappear.

Reading them with the benefit of hindsight, the reviews for Assassins in Pittsburgh seem strangely prophetic. In the Tribune (1/23/79), Evey Lehner wrote "Gilbert has come up with an idea for a theatrical experience that is innovative and could turn into a remarkable piece, with work." The challenge of finding a theatrical form which could successfully convey the thematic richness of its subject and the colorful personalities of its characters proved to be too difficult for this tyro dramatist, even though I continued to work on the piece after its Pittsburgh premiere. In the early 1980's, I heard about a new program sponsored by the Musical Theater Lab in New York designed to pair up novice musical theater writers with mentors, and I sent a copy of the revised script of Assassins as part of the supporting materials for my application. Though I was chosen as a finalist for the program, it died a-borning, and the script and tape that arrived by return mail went onto the shelf as I turned my attention to other matters.

Shuffling inattentively through my mail on a spring afternoon in 1988, I doubt I was looking for the letter that would change my life. Still, there was no mistaking the

signature at the bottom of the page. It was a letter from Stephen Sondheim, inquiring about the status of Assassins and wondering if I would consider letting him write a work based on my idea. Even now, the word "improbable" seems far too lame a description for this turn of events. His intended collaborator? The same John Weidman with whom he wrote Pacific Overtures, the work which had so inspired me a decade ago. I assented and they set to work.

My admiration for the skill and imagination of the authors continued to grow as I watched their new musical take shape. Though Sondheim politely declined my offer to collaborate with him on the piece, he and Weidman seemed interested in my comments and we discussed their musical at several points during its development. In particular, I recall a letter I wrote in which I questioned the fact that the "bystanders" were not heard from after the middle of the play, which seemed to skew the piece toward the assassins' point-of-view. I thought it was important to acknowledge that every assassination is not just an intimate transaction between perpetrator and victim but also a national tragedy that affects millions. The addition of the song "Something Just Broke" in the London production successfully addressed this issue and adjusted the ideological balance of the musical.

In the winter of 1990, I was in the throes of recruiting students for a new musical theater program at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. My wife was in the final weeks of pregnancy, about to give birth to our second son. And at Playwrights Horizons in New York, the Sondheim-Weidman Assassins was about to open. All three events were smashingly successful, though none were without their complications. In particular, Assassins, at the time of its opening, seemed out of

step with the temporary patriotic fervor inspired by Operation Desert Storm. Audiences and critics, while impressed by the skill of its creators, found the dark subject matter of Assassins too disturbing, and the money needed to transfer the show to Broadway eluded its would-be producers.

And yet the work managed somehow to escape obscurity. A successful London production appeared in the winter of 1991, and noteworthy productions were staged to considerable acclaim in Washington, D.C. and other American cities. Colleges, in particular, seemed to embrace the work, a venue that seemed entirely appropriate given the thought-provoking nature of the material.

Bringing the project full circle, I directed the Philadelphia premiere of Assassins in 1994, and found that ideas and images from my original script added an extra dimension to my interpretation of Sondheim and Weidman's work. For instance, I thought that the character of the Proprietor in the first scene bore a resemblance to a character in my musical called the Fat Man, a silent and ominous figure who occupied a central role in the conspiracy to enlist my fictional assassin and kill the President. I thought it would be interesting to make the Proprietor more of a recurring presence, and decided to return to his shooting gallery at several points in my production of Assassins, including the hallucinatory moments leading up to "Another National Anthem" and the final reprise of "Everybody's Got The Right," where, in the play's final moment, he silently held out a gun to the first row of the audience with an enigmatic smile that asked, "Who's next?"

While the ultimate success of Assassins is largely

attributable to the creative brilliance of its authors, who have fashioned a unique and remarkable piece of musical theater, I would like to think that part of this work's persistence is the result of the potency of its subject matter. In his initial letter to me, Sondheim said he was "haunted" by the idea of my musical, and my return visits to the material as teacher and director confirm that the subject still haunts me, too. It remains deeply stirring to revisit this dark side of the American dream, disturbing to contemplate the thin line which separates the assassin and the "average" American.

I am often asked my opinion of the Sondheim-Weidman Assassins, and my feelings are those I imagine that a parent would have upon re-meeting a child he has given up for adoption. The "family resemblance" is clear to anyone who knows the history of the work's development, and yet this Assassins is unmistakably the creation of its adoptive parents: their sophistication and their loving nurture are evident in every detail. As I write this, with the prospect of a New York revival of Assassins becoming increasingly likely, I am hopeful that more theatergoers will have the opportunity to meet this wayward progeny of mine and reflect upon the remarkable circumstances that led to the creation of this uniquely American musical.