

Backstage

The Stories Behind the Assassins

By Pamela Sommers
Special to The Washington Post

No doubt many of us have found ourselves alternately fascinated and repulsed by those who have assassinated or attempted to assassinate our presidents. Such was definitely the case when Kizzy Heffner, dramaturge for Signature Theatre's production of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical "Assassins," began researching the lives of Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinckley, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, Leon Czolgosz and the five other troubled individuals portrayed in the show.

"Prior to this project, the only character I really knew about was Oswald, thanks to a professor I had who was into proving that he did not act alone," she says. But after poring over numerous periodicals and books—James W. Clarke's "American Assassins" proved particularly helpful—"I found I could really sympathize with some of them. The characters became so much more human."

She cites as an example John Wilkes Booth, who, she feels, "got pegged as a very frustrated actor, and so jealous of his famous brother and father that he tried to gain attention for himself [by assassinating Lincoln]. But according to my research, he got glowing reviews for his acting after the first few years. And he made his Southern sympathies very clear—he believed Lincoln was destroying the country. In fact, he curtailed many of his acting commitments to give more time to the war effort."

Heffner can even muster up a certain amount of pity for Sara Jane Moore, who made an attempt on Gerald Ford's life.

"Did you know she was an informant for the FBI?" Heffner asks, then starts spewing out facts. "She was married five times, had four children—three of whom she put on a bus and sent to her parents without telling her parents—couldn't hold down a job. So she turned to the street scene of San Francisco, and got involved with a lot of activists and street people. The FBI ended up contacting her because she had connections with these types."



Charles Guiteau, left, assassinated President Garfield in Washington in 1881, and Leon Czolgosz killed President McKinley in New York in 1901.

And why did Moore try to shoot the president?

"It was for her an act of contrition for her betrayal of these street people," Heffner suggests. "She didn't really want to do it. On her way there she tried to get caught speeding, in the hopes that she'd get pulled over and they'd see her gun. She even tried to leave the scene once, but she was hemmed in by the crowd."

The cast of "Assassins" has benefited from Heffner's digging, and some have holed up in the Library of Congress themselves. She believes any and all background material has helped in the building of credible stage figures, as the performers "find incidents from their character's childhood or adolescence to help motivate them to do what he or she did later on."

And Heffner's research has led to other projects. A stack of assassins' statements she'd sent to Signature's artistic director, Eric Schaeffer, was transformed into a series of mysterious missives sent to members of the press. (A cream-colored card boasting a quote such as, "I killed the President because he was the enemy of the good people—the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime," signed, Leon Czolgosz, would appear in the mailbox weekly.) She has also organized an exhibit in the theater lobby made up of biographies, photographs of both the assassins and their targets, quotations from and about them, and other pertinent information.

Though "Assassins," at Arlington's Gunston Arts Center, is already sold out, the exhibit, also at the center, is still open to the curious. And maybe a ticket holder won't show up.

Ambitious 'Kentucky Cycle'

The Kennedy Center has announced that Robert Schenkkan's

epic "The Kentucky Cycle" will run from Nov. 7 to Dec. 5 in the Eisenhower Theater, a risky but admirable venture indeed. Comprising nine episodic plays, the critically acclaimed work chronicles 200 years—1775 to 1975—in the life of three warring families whose home is Kentucky's Cumberland Plateau. Dark, even tragic in both style and content, it features a 20-member ensemble portraying colonists and Native Americans, slaves and slave owners, Civil War soldiers, coal miners and managerial types.

A potential problem is the six-hour running time (the play is performed in two separate parts). According to a Kennedy Center spokeswoman, scheduling has not yet been hammered out. Options under consideration include consecutive-evening packages (probably Monday-Tuesday) or a matinee-evening arrangement with a box dinner during intermission. The center is hoping there are enough theatergoers willing to summon up the requisite endurance—those folks whose tastes run to "Nicholas Nickleby," "Shoah" and Wagner's "Ring" Cycle.

Curtain Calls

After a successful run at Sidwell Friends Auditorium, Interact Theatre's innovative interpretation of "H.M.S. Pinafore" sails into The Theatre in Washington, Va., tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 3. Call 703-675-1253... Two productions of "Twelfth Night" are ending their runs this weekend: the Mount Vernon Players' version tonight at 8 at the Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church (call 202-347-9621), and the Four County Players' outdoor rendering at the ruins of a 175-year-old mansion in Barboursville, Va., tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 5 (call 703-832-5355 or 800-768-4172).