

Theater review

Sondheim's 'Assassins'

Playwrights Horizons
Through Feb. 16

by ROBERT OSBORNE

NEW YORK — Stephen Sondheim's latest musical, "Assassins," is a raging disappointment. Offbeat, it is. Controversial, it is. Daring, it is. Good, it isn't. Irresponsible, it may be.

There's every possibility this Sondheim will be snuffed out quickly, despite the fact there's not a seat to be had during its limited tryout run at this 139-seat off-Broadway house. Except for diehard Sondheim fans who'll want a gander at anything done by the composer-lyricist, there's little here that will satisfy or attract most theatergoers.

The show is a 90-minute musical kaleidoscope focusing on nine notorious figures of history who either killed, or attempted to kill, U.S. presidents from Lincoln to Reagan.

Presented in the often jaunty, irreverent style of a satirical revue, "Assassins" bounces back and forth from blithe-but-cynical moods to a black, deadly serious nature; it also mixes characters from different eras. John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated President Lincoln in 1865, shows up in the Dallas Book Depository to encourage Lee Harvey Oswald to pull the trigger on President Kennedy in 1963. "Squeaky" Fromme, who attempted to shoot President Ford in 1975, sings a duet with John Hinckley, the man who for the love of Jodie Foster tried to murder President Reagan in 1981.

Mixed in with all this, and especially alarming, is the overriding message that comes through in Sondheim's lyrics and John Weidman's book: Assassins may be misguided souls but, hey, as in the words

ASSASSINS

Director Jerry Zaks
Music-lyrics Stephen Sondheim
Book John Weidman
Set design Loren Sherman
Costume design William Ivey Long
Lighting Paul Gallo
Musical director Paul Gemignani
Choreography D. J. Giagni
Cast: Victor Garber, Patrick Cassidy, Terrence Mann, Jonathan Hadary, Greg Germann, Eddie Korbich, Lee Wilkof, Annie Golden, Debra Monk, Jace Alexander, Joy Franz, Lyn Greene, John Jellison, Marcus Olson, William Parry, Michael Shulman

of the song that opens and closes the show, "Everybody's Got the Right (to a Dream)."

While a troubador-narrator (excellently done by Patrick Cassidy) counters with the suggestion "Guns don't right the wrongs, and soon the country's back where it belongs," more emphasis is given to the theory "All you have to do is squeeze your little finger and you can change the world."

Non-commercial material has, of course, always appealed to Sondheim, as witness his "Sweeney Todd" (about a gruesome barber whose victims ended up cooked into pies). But "Assassins" goes too far over the edge for its own good; it preaches but doesn't advance any new or interesting arguments, only confusing and inflammatory ones.

The show, in its present form, is not without its assets. The cast is superb, down to the last player, and each member makes the most of the provocative material. Victor Garber is a particular standout as Booth, cutting a dashing figure as the 19th century actor, passionate to the end about his political convictions.

But the assets do not include
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Sondheim's music or lyrics, at least on the first hearing. That questionable opening-closing song is the most ineffectuous of the group but the rest of the score seems mediocre, at best.

The book by Weidman also deserves its share of pans, although "Assassins" is clearly acknowledged as Sondheim's baby. There may be some subtle anti-assassination declarations in his script but, if there are, they're too well hidden for most audiences to discover.

If the play means what it seems to be saying — "Do it for fame," "Follow your dream," "If you keep your goal in sight, right or wrong, then you'll have an effect on the world" — then it may be even more irresponsible than it seems at first sight.