

Like Elvis, he's history

Post-'63 generation lives just beyond JFK's grasp

By David Arnold
GLOBE STAFF

Every night that Mark Schmitt, 19, stepped out on stage during a recent run of Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins" he could feel the hate.

His character in the Brandeis University production was Lee Harvey Oswald, killer of dreams for the generation in the audience, but little more than a player in history for Schmitt and the 40 percent of the American population not yet born on Nov. 22, 1963.

On this eve of the 30th anniversary of Kennedy's death, there is a generation of young Americans moving into power for whom events in Dallas evoke all the personal pathos of events at the Baltimore and Potomac Railway Depot - where

President Garfield was assassinated in 1881.

To many of the generation of under-30s, Kennedy is the PT boat commander whose reign fell somewhere between Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of Allied forces, and George Bush, commander of the sound bite. But don't push them for details.

"College students today consider Kennedy a figure from The Dark Ages, someone from 'way back there,'" said Jerold Auerbach, professor of American history at Wellesley College.

Auerbach, 57, said he is old enough to have felt the shock of President Kennedy's death and the "genuine sadness" of Bobby Kennedy's

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death five years later. But you need to add yet another five years before many of today's college students were born - students such as Schmitt, for example.

The Brandeis sophomore played Oswald in Sondheim's black comedy at the university's Merrick Theater from Oct. 26 to Nov. 7. He struggled with the generation gap just beyond the footlights.

"The minute I stepped on stage, I felt the audience turn against me. It wasn't like I was a fictional character in a horror movie like Freddie Kreugger. I was a real-life villain," said Schmitt.

"It's the intensity of the animosity that got me. The more I tried to make the audience like me, the more they hated me," said Schmitt, a native of Belmont who was born 11 years after Kennedy was killed and, like the rest of his generation, knows Kennedy only through the

hearts of his parents: a man who taught them it was OK to hope - only to be cut down.

"I think my generation is afraid to build leaders up because it does not want to be hurt," he said.

Other college students had different views of Kennedy. Some compare the myth of JFK to that of Elvis.

"Greater dead than alive" is how Mark Henderson, a Northeastern junior and political science major, put it. "Today's media would have eaten Kennedy up and spit him out, what with all his hanky-panky."

At Wellesley College, Alice Park confessed to knowing little about Kennedy's accomplishments as president, but more than she wanted to know about his death.

"My image of him is dominated not by how he led, but the reaction to how he died," she said between bites on a snack at the Schneider Center.

She said she feels the media still give inordinate attention to the Kennedy assassination, a thought to which

student Wendy Miles on another campus added: "This is because the media is still run by the over-30 crowd."

Miles is a Boston University freshman from Austin, Texas. A friend of her mother's, she explained, was in Dallas 30 years ago today, but not at the motorcade.

At this point, a nearby student asked: "Isn't Dallas where Jimmy Carter came from?"

In fact, a college student's presidential horizon today pretty much begins at George Bush, according to Joseph Boskin, a history professor at Boston University.

"And even then, you're not going to find much substance," Boskin added.

The professor this week said he got numerous questions from students about Kennedy – but not about the Cold War, nuclear test bans or the civil rights movement.

"My students wanted to know my thoughts about who killed JFK," he said.



Mark Schmitt (holding rifle) plays Lee Harvey Oswald during a recent performance of Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins."

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