

Musical 'Assassins' staged in Dallas

"Aim for what you want a lot — Everybody gets a shot. Everybody's got the right to their dreams."
 — "Everybody's Got the Right" from "Assassins"

By Jerome Weeks
 The Dallas Morning News

DALLAS — Although it was born of a revolt and later endured a civil war, the United States has no real history of revolution. We've had no Latin juntas regularly seizing power, no European coups, no massive class or ethnic insurrections.

What we have instead are elections — and a tradition of shooting the president.

"Our assassins are one of the things that set us apart from other countries. They're so peculiarly American," said John Weidman — who, with lyricist-composer Stephen Sondheim, is the co-creator of the musical "Assassins." The show received its first production outside New York last week at Theatre Three in Dallas.

"Assassins" is the first Stephen Sondheim musical that did not go directly to Broadway — after its

off-Broadway debut in January 1991. In addition, the cliff-hanging financial distress of Theatre Three forced the 31-year-old Dallas institution nearly to abandon the season-opening production — making "Assassins" both unique and endangered.

The subject also has undeniable reverberations. "Assassins," after all, is being staged on the heels of Oliver Stone's "JFK" — and in Dallas. Its material makes the show at once immediate, local, historic and provocative: The final scene of the musical takes place on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Only one other major Dallas stage production — "Jack Ruby, All-American Boy" at the Dallas Theater Center in 1973 — has directly addressed the events of Nov. 22, 1963.

Of course, many other countries have suffered through murders of their leaders. But their killers are rarely like ours.

"I was reading the other day about the assassination of the head of state of Algeria," Weidman said. And in the entire news

See 'ASSASSINS' / Page 24

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'Assassins'

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report of the bodyguard who shot
President Mohammed Boudiaf,
"nowhere did I read that the as-
sassin was, say, a lovesick guy try-
ing to impress a movie star, the
way John Hinckley Jr. was, or a
frustrated office-seeker who want-
ed to be ambassador to France,
like Charles Guitau," the 1881
assassin of James Garfield.

Since deranged house painter
Richard Lawrence pointed a gun
at Andrew Jackson in 1835 — the

gun misfired — 13 people have at-
tempted to kill the president of the
United States. That's approxi-
mately one every 12 years, al-
though it said a great deal about
recent American political history
that four of the 13 attempts have
occurred in the past 20 years.

Yet, as James Clarke argues in
his 1992 book, "American Assas-
sins," only two of the killers or
would-be killers — Leon Czol-
gosz, who shot William McKinley
in 1901, and John Wilkes Booth,
who shot Abraham Lincoln in
1865 — had something approach-
ing rational politics. In Booth's
case, it was the Southern cause in

the Civil War; with Czolgosz, it
was that of revolutionary anarch-
ism.

"I killed the President," Czol-
gosz said before his execution,
"because he was the enemy of the
good people — the good working
people. I am not sorry for my
crime."

In short, American assassins
tend not to be revolutionaries or
terrorists. "You can disagree with
the aims of the IRA (the Irish Re-
publican Army)," said Weidman.
"But if an IRA member takes a
shot at the queen (of England), he
has an articulated cause" deriving
from the long history of political
conflict between his organization
and her government.

In contrast, American assassins
generally have no larger cause
than their own sense of grievance
or need for attention. If they do
have any political consciousness,
Clark writes, it's mostly a matter
of seeking approval.

"No black man has ever tried to
kill the president, for instance,"
Weidman pointed out. "And only
Czolgosz could believably describe
himself as economically oppres-
sed."

Their bitter, formless nature is
one reason gunmen such as Arthur
Bremer (who shot George Wall-
lace) or Lee Harvey Oswald hold a

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