

RCA Keeps 'Assassins' Alive

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Sondheim's Latest Bypasses Broadway for Recording Studio

By KARI GRANVILLE
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NEW YORK—It was a musical about sociopathic killers, staged in a venue so small that its "orchestra" was a three-piece band. Few saw it, and many who did were unkind in their assessment (one audience actually booed). When its brief run came to a close, a hoped-for shot at Broadway did not materialize.

So only one possible explanation exists for the hit treatment accorded the musical "Assassins" last week, when the show's actors were brought back together with a 30-piece orchestra to record the cast album: It's a Sondheim.

No other name on Broadway could transform this occasion—documenting a show of such obscure appeal—into a big event. The press is summoned, onlookers flutter about and an air of import fills the 44th Street studio.

And inside, there is also a sense of mission: to capture in a sound recording what the reviewers and many others seemed to have missed in the theater. Among the true believers in the studio, the conviction is that "Assassins," which was dismissed as shallow and plainly strange, was in fact a visionary work of art whose lyrical charms will now be presented to posterity, Broadway run or no.

"Most people took the trip we asked them to come on, and by the end of the show they had been entertained, provoked and disturbed," says John Weidman, who wrote the book for "Assassins." "Other people were unprepared to take that trip, and some of them were critics."

Taking that trip, a tuneful tour of



Sondheim, with broken ankle, follows the proceedings from control booth.

America's most infamous crimes, required more of the theatergoers' indulgence than is usually asked. The musical's point of departure was a carnival midway, where a barker exhorts John Wilkes Booth and John Hinckley, among others, to step right up and take aim at a President. The scene erupts into a toe-tapping anthem depicting the assassins as a group of American Dreamers, unfulfilled. "Everybody's got the right to be different," the song proclaims, "even if at times they go to extremes. . . ."

It is signature Sondheim, hummable history, but with an uncomfortably macabre twist, and questions of taste and propriety have dogged "Assassins" from its beginning. Sondheim may have pulled off the ultimate sleight of hand

with the entertainingly gruesome "Sweeney Todd," a musical about a murderous barber who made meat pies of his victims, and he revealed the dark side of happily-ever-after with his sardonic twist on fairy tales, "Into the Woods," but were presidential assassins and would-be murderers really suitable for musical theater?

Sondheim had no qualms about it some years ago when he came across a script entitled "Assassins" while serving on a jury for new works. And Weidman had no doubt when Sondheim suggested the subject to him a few years later. "There was an immediate spark," recalls Weidman, who had collaborated with Sondheim on "Pacific Overtures," "something inherently dramatic about a group of characters who had done something so vivid and appalling."

With permission from the other "Assassins" author, Sondheim and Weidman took off with the idea. Their lab was Playwrights Horizons, a nonprofit subscription theater, where the musical's nine-week run ended Feb. 16. The plan was to find financial backers and a larger home—Sondheim preferred it be on Broadway—for the show this spring.

But the money men balked. Regularly filling a 1,000-seat Broadway house is trickier than packing a 139-seat theater, even when "thousands and thousands" of potential theatergoers had to be turned away previously, according to Playwrights Horizons estimates. It was doubtful that "Assassins" could sustain much of an audience beyond the adventurous theater crowd and the intensely devoted Sondheim following. (The "Playbill" reportedly fetches up to \$200

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with collectors, and RCA's phones are already jingling with calls from Sondheim fans eager for the recording.) Two weeks ago, negotiations for a Broadway run fell apart.

One aspect of the show's life that was never in doubt was the original cast album. Sondheim has a standing invitation to the recording studio.

"Anything Steve feels worthy of presenting to the public, we feel is worthy of recording," says RCA executive producer Jay David Saks, who won a Grammy for his cast recording of Sondheim's "Into the Woods."

The "Assassins" number pegged for radio airplay (usually a musical's romantic ballad), "Unworthy of Your Love," takes the despair of unrequited love to graphic new depths. Imagine a lovesick John Hinckley and Lynnette (Squeaky) Fromme crooning a Top 40 ballad in which Fromme declares she'd do anything ("tear my heart in two," "drink poison," "feel fire," for example) to win Charles Manson's affection.

A bystander at the song's recording quips, "I'd say it's ready for radio, but is radio ready for it?"

Sidelined for the recording session by a broken ankle, Sondheim quietly stays put in a chair located in the rear corner of the control booth, his crutches propped nearby and an ever-present newspaper folded in his lap. He appears detached from the proceedings, until

the end of each take, when he makes his precise, sometimes minute observations and pronounces his verdict ("Terrific performance, exactly on the nose. . . . Make sure you say *working*, not *wor-kin*. . . .").

With the release of the cast album later this year, listeners will get a sample of "Assassins'" dramatic force. Saks has thrown out the cast-album rule dictating minimal dialogue to include a 10-minute scene leading to the show's finale, set in the Texas School Book Depository.

"This is a scene that builds in a way I've never seen before in a musical; it's absolutely chilling," Saks says, sitting in the empty studio halfway through the two-day recording session. "There's no way we could leave it out. It would have absolutely eviscerated the show."

Listeners will also get an earful of Sondheim's range as a composer. "Assassins" was written as a musical revue, and Sondheim's songs reflect the show's uniquely American nature by playing off of pop,

folk and marching-band themes.

"He's written in so many styles in one show," says Saks. "In this show, I find every song has a different character, derivative almost of a style. Yet every one of them is instantly recognizable as a Sondheim."

The last strains of the final take of "Unworthy of Your Love" hang in the air, and Sondheim is pleased with the effort. He lets the actors know they're finished by joking: "The president of RCA is here with a contract. Will you come in?" The control room erupts in laughter. Everyone is remarkably light-hearted, given the music's grim theme and the fact that, for now, this is "Assassins'" final performance.

"I think we would all feel really bad if there were no document of it," says one of the assembled, Andre Bishop, who helped nurture "Assassins" as artistic director of Playwrights Horizons. "My hope is that it will get done around the country [in regional theater]. Maybe that's the way it needs to find an audience outside of New York."