

It's murder getting to see Sondheim's 'Assassins'

NEW YORK (AP) — It's the hottest theater ticket in New York and one of the most controversial. But what else would you expect from a Stephen Sondheim musical called "Assassins," a show about the men and women who have tried to kill presidents of the United States?

In the past, Sondheim has provided the music and lyrics for some of Broadway's most unconventional and innovative musicals. Such shows as "Anyone Can Whistle," "Company," "Follies," "Pacific Overtures," "Sweeney Todd" and "Sunday in the Park With George" extended what the American musical theater could accomplish. "Assassins" might do the same — and despite its bizarre subject matter, the show has theater buffs clamoring to get into the theater.

The musical's two-month engage-

ment, which ends Feb. 16, has long been sold out. Each day a line forms at the boxoffice window of Playwrights Horizons, the off-Broadway theater company presenting the show at its small, 140-seat theater. Would-be theatergoers wait for cancellations or ticket returns for the musical, which opens officially Sunday night after five weeks of preview performances.

On some recent afternoons, if those hopefuls had glanced through a pair of curtained glass doors into the lobby, they might have seen Sondheim himself meeting with other members of the musical production team to discuss changes in the show.

They are a distinguished group of participants. The book for "Assassins" was written by John Weidman, Sondheim's collaborator on "Pacific Overtures." The director is Jerry

Zaks, a two-time Tony winner who supervised Lincoln Center Theater's successful revival of "Anything Goes" as well as its current hit, "Six Degrees of Separation." Paul Gemignani, working in "Assassins" with only two other musicians, has conducted all of Sondheim's most recent shows, including "Into the Woods," "Sunday in the Park With George" and "Sweeney Todd."

Sondheim has been reluctant to talk about the musical before it opens. So has the rest of the company. But some details have become known. The 90-minute show, performed without an intermission, takes as its leading characters nine presidential assassins, successful and otherwise.

They range from the famous, such as John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald, to the obscure, like

Samuel Byck who in 1974 attempted to assassinate President Nixon by hijacking an airliner with the intentions of crashing the plane into the White House.

Even a few presidents are put on stage. There's no Lincoln or Kennedy, but actor William Parry gets to play both President James A. Garfield, assassinated in 1881 by Charles Guiteau, and President Gerald Ford, stalked by both Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme and Sara Jane Moore in 1975.

The 16-member cast contains no obvious boxoffice stars but includes many New York theater veterans. Victor Garber, an alum of Sondheim's original production of "Sweeney Todd" and who played Jesus in the movie version of "Godspell," stars as John Wilkes Booth. Terrence Mann, who was Broadway's first Rum Tum Tugger in "Cats" and Javert in "Les Misérables," appears as Leon Czolgosz, the man who killed President McKinley.

Annie Golden, who appeared in the movie version of "Hair," is Squeaky Fromme, while Sara Jane Moore is played by Debra Monk, who appeared in and helped create "Pump Boys and Dinettes" and "Oil City Symphony." Jace Alexander, son of actress Jane Alexander, has been cast in the pivotal role of Lee Harvey Oswald.

The big question is what happens to "Assassins" after its run at Playwrights Horizons ends? Depending on the reviews, the musical could transfer either to a larger theater off-Broadway or even to Broadway. RCA already has expressed interest in an original cast recording. Whatever the show's reception, "Assassins" certainly will have theatergoers talking about it for a long, long time.

Three honored at playwrights fest

NEW YORK — Three new playwrights were honored Monday as winners of the 21st Century Playwrights Festival, a group dedicated to encouraging students to enter the field of dramatic writing.

Each of the winners — Jonathan Marc Sherman, 22; Michael Sean Dillon, 23; and Thomas G. McClellan, 34 — received a \$2,100 cash award and were sponsored for membership in the Dramatists Guild.

The winners, whose cash prizes were funded by a grant from the Phillip Morris Co., were selected from among 300 entries representing more than 135 colleges.

Sherman won for his play "Jesus on the Oil Tank," while Dillon was feted for "Alligators." McClellan's play was entitled "Blackout."

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