

THE ARTS

Assassins explores dark side through criminal mind

ASSASSINS

MIT Musical Theatre Guild.
August 26 & 27, September 2, 3 & 8-10: 8 p.m.
August 28 and September 4, 2 p.m.

By Adam Lindsay
STAFF REPORTER

The premises of Stephen Sondheim's musicals seem to be based on bar bets. "I'll bet you can't write an uproarious funny musical about cannibalism. Or animate characters in an impressionist painting. Tell a story in reverse chronological order. How about one about completely dysfunctional romances? Just how many fairy tale plots can you intertwine?" The master of modern American musicals has handled all of these brilliantly, and recently has tackled a poser: "Compose a revue of presidential assassins, and give *their* side of the story."

Sondheim thus gives the world "Assassins," which MTG has ably rendered and presented in Kresge Little Theater. The implausible basis of the musical results in a pastiche of American musical styles and a series of episodes in which potential killers are goaded on by their fellows to make their mark on history.

Following the example set by John Wilkes Booth (Richard Jamieson), America's down-trodden, disillusioned, and somewhat imbalanced attempt to rise above their stations in the ultimate crime within this country. History shows this group to be a motley bunch of characters, and John Weidman's clever book neatly exploits this, often to hilarious effect.

Time is suspended for these assassins as they live and meet at a run-down carnival and

shoddy bar. There they belly-ache about their miserable lives and how they wish to be someone. The proprietor of the bar (Carson Schutze G) offers them a chance by selling them firearms and encouraging them to take a shot towards that dream. Booth goes first and as he is cornered in a barn, tries to justify what he has done to opposing commentary by the Balladeer (Richard Damaso '95). Jamieson (as Booth) is a powerful presence on stage, and handles the character of both an actor and example to future generations quite well. Damaso's flexible tenor is as good as ever, though marred by the direction to adopt a pseudo-southern twang. It might be appropriate for the character, but it sounds silly with his clear voice when matched with his jerky movements on stage.

After Booth, others follow. In general, the successful assassins are more serious characters than the comedic attempted assassins. "Squeaky" Fromme (Erin H. Fujioka '96) and Sara Jane Moore (Jennifer Gasser), both of whom made attempts on Ford's life, are an especially funny comedic pairing. Although some of their comedy comes across as forced (most noticeably in their squeals when they realize that they know the same Charlie Manson), they provide ample comic relief.

Leon Czolgosz (Stephen Serieka) and Giuseppe Zangara (Jose I. Ortiz '92) are immigrants who killed McKinley and shot at FDR, respectively. Serieka shows a pathetic, lost soul in search of some way to make his mark. Ortiz's character is similarly lost in search of a way to improve his life, but has an impressively angry song as he is placed upon the electric chair. James Kirtley G, as Charles

Guiteau (Garfield's assassin), was very funny in his caricature of a self-deluding egotist.

Also of note is the character of Samuel Byck (David Reiley G), who tried to kill Nixon. Although the most outlandish of the characters (his assassination plan was to hijack a plane and crash it into the White House), he also speaks to us as an everyman, full of rage at where America is headed and confused about the casual lies we are fed every day. Reiley's monologues convey that anger, and get us outraged with him. He carries the buffoon with every bit of energy necessary to carry the audience with him into the final scene with the century's ultimate assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald (Derek Andrew Clark '90).

Sondheim's take on Oswald is quite different from Oliver Stone's. In the musical, Oswald is coaxed, nearly brow-beaten, into killing Kennedy by Booth, and then all the other assassins. They tell him of the immortality that truly awaits him: "Fifty years from now they will still be arguing about a grassy knoll." Clark, as usual, handles his character's conflicts and inner turmoils quite readily.

The closing number, "Another National Anthem," ends with the characters wondering what their promised reward will be, and warns the audience that there is always an undercurrent of dissatisfaction within the nation. The final fury of the killers is set bare for the audience, and the ensemble handles it very well. The direction is simple and effective, letting the actors express themselves by laying their emotions bare. It is a rewardingly unsettling moment, fueled by the ensemble's energy.



Daniel Peisach '90 handled the orchestra quite well through Sondheim's characteristi-

cally devious score. There was a better tone and higher quality playing than many of MTG's orchestras, due, in no small part, to the multiple talents of the woodwind players. Balance was a small problem early on, but either the orchestra or my ears adjusted, so it was not annoying later.

The set was at first befuddling, looking rather crowded and sloppily built on stage, but it eventually became clear that this was a 'concept' reflecting the squalor of these potential killers' lives. I warmed to it, though the designer might have gone further with the idea of decay, since it was not clear.

The lighting design was surprisingly inconsistent, considering the experience of designer James Grimm '94 in Kresge Little Theater. Although the numerous special effects — including a burning barn and a silhouetted carnival on the backdrop — were spectacularly done for a student production, the basic lighting was uneven and often put important scenes in shadow.

Although "Assassins" is a creditable production for MTG, it doesn't have the usual high-budget sheen characteristic of past summer shows. Everything is in place and as it should be, with a solidness throughout. One just shouldn't expect a glossy sheen over the couple warts. The musical itself is more desperate, and this urgency is reflected all around, without actors hiding behind flashy sets. Perhaps this is more appropriate for this musical, with the exposed players conveying more convincing anger. One should definitely see MTG's production for an example of a musical with more depth than a high-stepping kick line.

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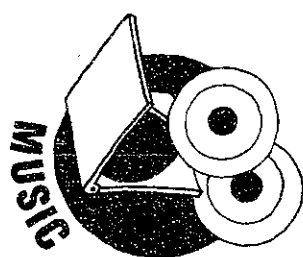
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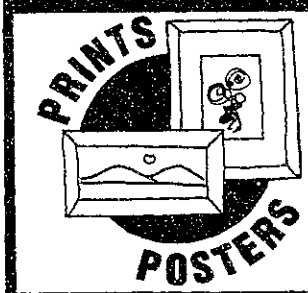
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