

MUSIC THEATRE INTERNATIONAL

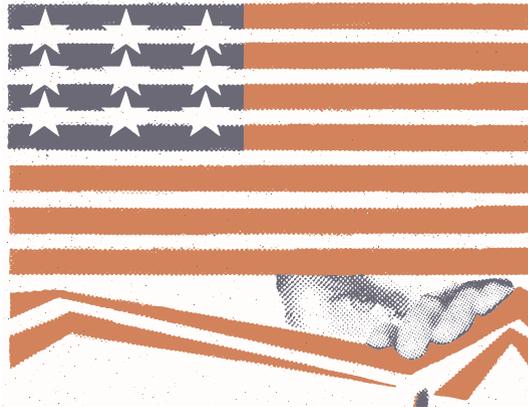
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Although we value all our clients, the twelve thousand high schools who perform our shows are of particular importance, for it is at these schools that music and drama educators work to keep theatre alive in their community. MTI shares with these educators the goal of raising the next generation of theatre artists and audiences. To help these educators, it has taken a leading role in theatre education by creating MTI THEATRICAL RESOURCES, a "theatrical tool box" designed to help not only ensure the success of each musical production, but also to establish the study of musical theatre as a permanent part of the school curriculum. These resources include: STUDY GUIDES designed to bring the study of specific shows into the classroom; MTI REHEARSCORES® which provide unlimited rehearsal accompaniment via an easy-to-use, fully interactive computer program on disk; professional TV SPOTS allowing companies to affordably advertise on television in local markets; LOGO PACKS to aide in poster and program design; TRANSPOSITIONS-ON-DEMAND to allow flexibility in casting and musical key changes; and VIDEO CONVERSATIONPIECES™ featuring video seminars with artists such as Martin Charnin, Stephen Sondheim and Scott Ellis discussing the creation of their shows from inception to production.

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Musicals are America's premiere contribution to the theatre and MTI is firmly committed to supporting and nurturing a musical theatre that will continue to develop and flourish into the next century.





ASAINSTM

**Music & Lyrics by
STEPHEN SONDHEIM**

**Book by
JOHN WEIDMAN**

From an Idea by Charles Gilbert

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About Assassins

America has lived with the terror of politics by assassination since 1835, when a deranged house painter attempted to murder President Andrew Jackson. *Assassins*, by lyricist-composer Stephen Sondheim and librettist John Weidman, is a kaleidoscopic musical theatre exploration of nine people who committed (or attempted to commit) political murder in America over a period of two centuries. *Assassins* opened at Playwrights Horizons in New York on January 27, 1991, under the direction of Jerry Zaks.

In the framework of a showbiz revue, *Assassins* gives voice to the nine characters' hopes, fears, and furies by exposing the twisted thoughts that make them such intriguing figures. Crossing barriers of time and space, the assassins commiserate with each other, explaining their actions with pride, pain, and dark humor. They become a chorus, united by their deeds and their tormented motivations. As the audience is pulled in and kept off-balance by the constantly changing pace and tone of the show, they see evil connect with evil. As the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, the individual assassins awaken to their collective identity, and come to personify an underside of the American dream where anybody can grow up to kill a President.

Assassins suggests that our leaders are the victims of frequent assassination attempts largely because American mythology promises everyone a right to their dreams; if these dreams are not attained, someone must be responsible. The nine assassins share a desperate need to reconcile their belief in this myth with their sense of personal hopelessness.

American assassins have tended to act as solitary figures. Often, rather than killing to advance or sustain a political cause, they have sought notoriety, however temporary, for themselves. Deluding themselves with fantasies that their one great deed will maintain or restore the perfect nation, they believe that they have righted a fundamental wrong by behaving in accordance with American ideals. In *Assassins*, the nine central characters sing "Another National Anthem" because they are denied entrance to the playing fields where the real anthem is sung.

Each character in *Assassins* was thrust into our awareness by committing a terrible act. While we might normally perceive them as freaks with no message for us, the time we spend with them in the show reveals them to be multidimensional people with problems who have more in common with the rest of us than we might like to acknowledge.

As we are drawn into the crazed complexities of the assassins' minds, we are forced to recognize the extent to which violence has become commonplace in our national life. As theatre critic Frank Rich stated in his *New York Times* review of *Assassins* (1/28/91), "there is a shadow America, a poisoned, have-not America, that must be recognized by the prosperous majority if the violence in our history is to be understood and overcome."

The Characters in Assassins

JOHN WILKES BOOTH (1838–1865): Assassinated President Abraham Lincoln during a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theater, Washington, D.C., April 14, 1865.

CHARLES GUTEAU (1838–1882): Assassinated President James Garfield in the waiting room of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station, Washington, D.C., July 2, 1881.

LEON CZOLGOSZ (1873–1901): Assassinated President William McKinley during a public reception at the Temple of Music Pavilion at the Pan American Exposition, Buffalo, New York, September 6, 1901.

GIUSEPPE ZANGARA (1900–1933): Attempted to assassinate President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt as Roosevelt greeted well-wishers in Bayfront Park, Miami, Florida, February 15, 1933.

SAMUEL BYCK (1930–1974): Attempted to assassinate President Richard M. Nixon; hijacked a commercial jetliner that he intended to crash-dive into the White House, Baltimore-Washington International Airport, February 22, 1974.

LYNETTE SQUEAKY FROMME (1948–): Attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford as he left the Senator Hotel, Sacramento, California, September 5, 1975.

SARA JANE MOORE (1930–): Attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford as he left the St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco, California, September 22, 1975.

JOHN HINCKLEY (1955–): Attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan as he left the Washington Hilton, Washington, D.C., March 30, 1981.

LEE HARVEY OSWALD (1939–1963): Assassinated President John F. Kennedy from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963.

THE BALLADEER: A Woody Guthrie/Pete Seeger-style folk singer.

EMMA GOLDMAN: Turn-of-the-century anarchist agitator and feminist.

THE PROPRIETOR of a shooting gallery at a carnival.

DAVID HEROLD: One of John Wilkes Booth’s confederates; aided Booth in his attempted escape.

A BARTENDER

BILLY: Sarah Jane Moore’s nine-year-old son.

PRESIDENT JAMES GARFIELD

PRESIDENT GERALD FORD

VARIOUS REPORTERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, TOURISTS, BYSTANDERS, ETC.

Plot Synopsis

Assassins opens in a fairground shooting gallery, with calliope music playing. Amidst flashing lights, we see a series of male target figures, dressed in the fashions of the past two hundred years, trundle by on a conveyor belt. The fair's prize shelf, in addition to the usual array of stuffed toys and souvenirs, includes a sexy life-sized doll, money, elaborate scrolled documents, books, newspapers, and fancy jars of colored liquid. The Proprietor stands behind the counter. Leon Czolgosz, a scruffy, sullen laborer in his late twenties, shuffles in sadly. The music changes to a slow, disgruntled beat.

The Proprietor advises Czolgosz that he can chase his blues away by killing a President, pointing out that assassination is a skill at which even rank beginners can excel ("Everybody's Got the Right"). As Czolgosz picks up a gun, John Hinckley, a soft, plump, 21-year-old, ambles aimlessly in. The Proprietor convinces him that he can improve his love life and impress his dream girl by shooting a President. They are joined by Charles Guiteau, who enters furtively, dressed in black. His shoes are polished, but he wears no socks. The Proprietor says he can overcome failure by killing a President, and he steps up to the shooting gallery. He is soon joined by Giuseppe Zangara, a tiny, angry man, who groans and rubs his stomach. The Proprietor promises that shooting a President will relieve his pain. The next arrival is Samuel Byck, in a dirty Santa suit, carrying a sign that says, "All I Want for Christmas Is My Constitutional Right to Peaceably Petition My Government for the Redress of My Grievances." As the Proprietor encourages him to pick up a gun, Lynette Fromme, a small, intense girl wearing red religious robes, and Sara Jane Moore, a bright-eyed, heavy-set, middle-aged woman, enter. The Proprietor signs them up after Moore has a great deal of difficulty finding the proper change in her purse. John Wilkes Booth appears, accompanied by the faintly sinister music we heard at the beginning of the show. The Proprietor introduces him as the group's pioneer and distributes ammunition. Booth leads the assembled assassins through the end of the song, proclaiming:

Rich man, poor man,
Black or white,
Pick your apple,
Take a bite,
Everybody
Just hold tight
To your dreams.
Everybody's
Got the right
To their dreams.

As the assassins take aim, we hear "Hail to the Chief," and Lincoln's arrival offstage is announced. Booth excuses himself and a shot rings out. Booth shouts, "Sic semper tyrannis!"

In Scene 2, the Balladeer sings the story of John Wilkes Booth (“The Ballad of Booth”). We see Booth and his accomplice David Herold hiding in a tobacco barn in rural Virginia. Booth knows he is about to be captured and is trying to write his justification for his actions in his diary. His statements that his actions were politically motivated are juxtaposed with the Balladeer’s comments that Booth’s motives actually have to do with his own personal problems. As Booth is shot by a Union soldier, he throws the Balladeer his diary, begging him to tell his story to the world. The Balladeer recites Booth’s version of events as Booth shoots himself. As Booth dies, the Balladeer concludes that Booth was a madman who left behind a legacy of butchery and treason. He points out that, ironically, in trying to destroy Lincoln, Booth actually elevated him to legendary status. The Balladeer points out the futility of the assassin’s actions, saying:

Hurts a while,
But soon the country’s
Back were it belongs,
And that’s the truth.
Still and all...
Damn you Booth!

In Scene 3, Booth, Hinckley, Czolgosz, Byck, Guiteau, and Zangara are gathered in a bar. In the course of the scene, we begin to gain insight into each of their twisted lives. Booth continues to encourage them to become the masters of their own fates.

Scene 4 is introduced with a radio report that Zangara has attempted to assassinate Franklin D. Roosevelt. In “How I Saved Roosevelt,” members of the crowd speak into microphones telling the radio audience their distorted impressions of the event they have witnessed; everyone is convinced that he or she personally saved the President’s life with some seemingly inconsequential action. We see Zangara strapped into the electric chair. He sings of his refusal to be scared, stating that he didn’t care whom he killed as long as it was one of the men who control all the money. He actually meant to kill Hoover, but the weather in Washington was too cold. He is furious that as an “American nothing” he doesn’t get any photographers at his execution. Assassin and crowd are both concerned with their media images. The lights dim, rise, dim and go out as Zangara is electrocuted.

In Scene 5, we hear the anarchist Emma Goldman speaking offstage as Leon Czolgosz listens, enraptured. He introduces himself to her after the speech and declares that he is in love with her. She encourages him to redirect his passion to the fight for social justice. She refuses to allow him to carry her bag, saying, “they make us servants, Leon. We do not make servants of each other,” but he insists on carrying it anyway.

Scene 6 witnesses Squeaky Fromme and Sara Jane Moore meeting in a public park. Fromme smokes a joint and speaks of her obsession with Charles Manson, the mass murderer. She declares herself his lover and slave. Juggling her purse, a Tab, and a tub of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Moore says she is a narc for the FBI or used to be; has been a CPA; had five husbands and three kids; and suffers from amnesia. Fromme insists that Manson is going to emerge as king of a new order and make her his

queen. Moore is sure she knew Manson when he was much younger. The scene ends as they both give the portrait of Colonel Sanders on Moore's bucket of chicken the evil eye, then blast it to pieces with their guns. The next scene (7) is a barbershop quartet for Booth, Czolgosz, Guiteau, and Moore ("Gun Song"), in which they comment on the power of a gun to change the world.

In Scene 8, we see Czolgosz at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, watching President McKinley shaking visitors' hands in the Temple of Music Pavilion ("The Ballad of Czolgosz"). The Balladeer traces Czolgosz as he works his way down the receiving line of fairgoers who see only the positive elements of McKinley's image. When Czolgosz finally reaches the head of the line, he shoots McKinley.

Samuel Byck in his soiled Santa suit sits on a park bench in Scene 9, with a picket sign and shopping bag. He drinks a Yoo-Hoo and talks into his tape recorder. He is sending a message to the composer Leonard Bernstein, begging him to save the world by writing more love songs. By the end he is accusing Bernstein of ignoring him just like the other celebrities with whom he has tried to communicate.

In Scene 10, Squeaky Fromme and John Hinckley are in Hinckley's rumpus room exchanging thoughts about their loved ones, Charles Manson and Jodie Foster. Fromme mocks Hinckley, saying that he doesn't even know Foster. Hinckley orders Fromme to leave. After she goes, he sings of his love for Foster ("Unworthy of Your Love"). In limbo, Fromme sings the same song to Manson. Hinckley starts shooting at a photo of President Ronald Reagan that is projected on the back wall. The picture keeps reappearing as Fromme mocks Hinckley's inability to kill the President.

In the following scene (11), Charles Guiteau gives the clumsy Sara Jane Moore tips on shooting and tries to kiss her. When she rebuffs him, he assassinates President Garfield. Scene 12 shows Guiteau standing at the foot of the gallows reciting a poem, "I Am Going To The Lordy" (which the real-life Guiteau did in fact write on the morning of his execution). The Balladeer describes his trial and execution ("The Ballad of Guiteau") as Guiteau cakewalks up and down the gallows steps.

In Scene 13, Squeaky Fromme and Sara Jane Moore are implementing their plan to assassinate President Gerald Ford. Moore has brought along her nine-year-old son and her dog, whom she accidentally shoots. The President, also clumsy, comes along, and in spite of his attempts to assist her, Moore fails to assassinate him. Fromme's gun doesn't go off, so both attempts are botched.

In Scene 14, Samuel Byck is in his car on the way to the airport to hijack a plane, which he plans to crash dive into the White House. He recites a disjointed litany of complaints about contemporary American life and then announces the killing of the President as the only solution.

In Scene 15, crowd noises supply a slow, wordless lamentation for the victims of the assassins as Czolgosz, Booth, Hinckley, Fromme, Zangara, Guiteau, Moore, and Byck review their motives. They all ask for the prize they expected as the result of their actions. The Balladeer replies that their actions didn't solve their problems or the country's. There is no prize. The assassins, newly united with a common purpose,

reply that there is a different song stirring in America (“Another National Anthem”) that continues to grow louder and louder, sung by all Americans who believe themselves dispossessed by the dream. As long as it’s possible for the mailman to win the lottery, there is always the chance that you can get a prize. They insist:

If you can’t do
What you want to,
Then you do
The things you can.

In Scene 16, Lee Harvey Oswald is preparing to kill himself in a storeroom on the Sixth Floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Booth interrupts him and tries to convince him to murder President Kennedy instead. He summons Guiteau, Czolgosz, Zangara, Fromme, Moore, Byck and Hinckley from the shadows, telling Oswald that by joining them, he can at last be part of something (“November 22, 1963”). The assassins who preceded Oswald say he will bring them back; those who come after him say he will make them possible, by once again making assassination a part of the American experience. His act can give them historical power as a unified force, not as a bunch of isolated nuts. Oswald refuses. Booth entices him with the statement that when Hinckley’s room is searched after his assassination attempt on President Reagan, Oswald’s writings will be found. Booth summons up the voices of Arthur Bremer (who attempted to assassinate Governor George Wallace), Sirhan (who assassinated Senator Robert Kennedy) and James Earl Ray (who assassinated Reverend Martin Luther King), telling Oswald that he holds the key to the future in his hands. Oswald again refuses. The assassins implore him to act so their own acts can be reborn. He can free them from being footnotes in a history book. They say they are his family. Oswald crouches at the window and shoots...

In Scene 17, the shocking impact of Oswald's deed is expressed by American citizens who gather together onstage and sing a ballad describing where they were when they heard President Kennedy had been shot (“Something Just Broke”).

In Scene 18, the assassins reappear in limbo singing (“Everybody’s Got The Right: Reprise”). All of their guns go off at once—Blam!!

Themes and Topics to Explore

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics suggested by *Assassins*. Below, you'll find avenues for exploring each theme and topic. They take the form of *Questions* - designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show, and *Assignments* - designed to be researched and written out of class.

Important Assassinations In History

Assassination was with the world for centuries before the phenomenon became part of the American scene. Historically, assassins killed public figures out of clear political motivations. Willing to die for their beliefs, the twelfth-century hashashin in Syria, who are the source of the word "assassin," coolly and relentlessly formed teams to commit murder solely for political reasons.

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore the role of political murder in Periclean Athens, Republican Rome and Medieval Europe.
- Explore the role of political murder in Europe between the mid-1500's and the mid-1600's, including the deaths of Sir Thomas More, Mary Queen of Scots, King Henry III of France, King Henry IV and Charles I, William the Silent (of Orange) and the attempted assassinations of Elizabeth I.
- Explore the role of political murder around the world in the years preceding World War I in 1914, including the deaths of King Carlos of Portugal, King George I of Greece, President Francisco Madero of Mexico, Prince Ito Hirbumi of Japan and King Alexander I and Queen Draga of Serbia.
- Investigate the deaths by assassination of one of the following individuals. Who was the assassin or assassins? What was their motivation? How was the assassination carried out? What were the political consequences?

Julius Caesar
Thomas à Becket
James I of Scotland
Marat
Count Bernadotte
Leon Trotsky
Admiral Darlan
Trujillo

Diem
Lumumba
Ghandi
Faisal
Zapata
Anwar Sadat
Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo
in 1914

Political Violence in American History Before the Lincoln Assassination

As a nation created through colonial rebellion and geographic expansion, the United States has inevitably experienced violent acts and uprisings. However, during the colonial period of American history, there were no attempts to assassinate prominent representatives of the British crown. Riots and duels between adversaries were the primary forms taken by violent behavior.

The first assassination attempt made on the life of an American president was in 1835 when Richard Lawrence, a house painter who believed he was King Richard III, attempted to kill President Andrew Jackson.

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Why do you think there were no assassinations in America before 1835?
- What sets assassination apart from riots as a form of protest? What do these acts have in common?
- What sets assassination apart from duels as a form of protest? What do these acts have in common?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore examples of early violent outbreaks in the United States, such as the outbursts of the Regulators of North Carolina in the 1760's and the activities of the North End Mob and the South End mob in Boston during the Boston Tea Party era. What issues were at stake? What form did the violence take?
- Explore the practice of dueling between gentlemen of honor. What were the conventions of dueling? Explore famous duels between political adversaries, such as the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton in 1804, which resulted in Hamilton's death. Investigate the duel between David S. Terry, Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court and U.S. Senator David C. Broderick, which resulted in Broderick's death.
- Read accounts of the attempted assassination of President Andrew Jackson in 1835. How did Americans of Jackson's day react to this first assault on the life of an American president? Write about the attempted assassination as if you were covering it for network television today.
- Acts of civil violence often precede and follow major military conflicts. Explore the violence that preceded the Civil War in America; specifically investigate the mobbing and killing of Elijah P. Lovejoy, an abolitionist newspaper editor in 1837, South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks' severe beating of abolitionist Charles Sumner with a heavy cane in the Senate Chamber on May 22, 1856, and John Brown, the abolitionist terrorist's raid on Harper Ferry in October, 1859.

John Wilkes Booth

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- John Wilkes Booth appears in *Assassins* as an attractive yet frightening character who goads the other assassins to fulfill their dreams of violence. Why do you think Booth is given this role of leader to the others?
- While in hiding, John Wilkes Booth wrote: "I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for. And yet I, for striking down a greater tyrant, am looked upon as a common cutthroat." In *Assassins*, Booth claims that he had to kill Lincoln for destroying the country. But the Balladeer responds that Booth might have killed the President because he drank too much or got bad reviews. How do you respond to these two viewpoints?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Investigate the history of John Wilkes Booth with the goal of formulating your own opinion about his motivations.
- The citizens of Lincoln's day suspected that John Wilkes Booth was part of a much larger conspiracy. Explore the suspicions that Booth was a certified spy for the Confederacy whose conspiracy was supported by Confederate operatives. Investigate other conspiracy theories surrounding the Lincoln assassination, such as the possibility that his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, his vice-president, Andrew Johnson or his fanatically pro-abolitionist Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, were directing the assassins.

The Impact of the Lincoln Assassination

The first assassination of an American president, Booth's murder of Abraham Lincoln, forever changed our country. Assassination became an instrument of change, not a casual killing.

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What do you think the realization that assassination could be used as an instrument of change meant to Americans in 1865?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore the specific, immediate ways in which Lincoln's death affected American history; for example, Lincoln's hopes for a peaceful reconciliation between North and South were dashed.
- Investigate the outburst of assassinations throughout America during Andrew Johnson's presidential term and Ulysses S. Grant's presidential term.

- Research the assassinations of Czar Alexander II of Russia and President James Garfield, which both occurred in 1881.
- Research the lives and presidencies of either President James Garfield or President William McKinley, who were both killed by assassins. What kinds of presidents were they? What did their deaths mean to the country in terms of political change?

The Kennedy Assassination

Years after the event, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, continues to provoke questions. Did Lee Harvey Oswald act alone or was he part of a conspiracy?

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- In *Assassins*, the authors suggest that Oswald was part of a conspiracy that is quite different than the type of conspiracy described in the film “JFK.” According to *Assassins*, who were Oswald’s conspirators? What was the goal of their conspiracy?
- What is your first memory of hearing about the Kennedy assassination? Have you always believed that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin? Where did you get the information that caused you to believe one way or another on this issue?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Read in depth about the Kennedy assassination. Report on some of the conspiracy theories surrounding the event.
- Report on the assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald. How did this act contribute to the conspiracy theories surrounding President Kennedy’s death?
- Write your own interpretation of the death of President Kennedy based on your research. Who pulled the trigger (or triggers) and why?

Other American Assassinations

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Investigate the assassination or attempted assassination of one of the following individuals. Explain the significance of the individual who was the target of the attack. Who was the assassin—or were there several assassins? What was their motivation? How was the assassination or attempted assassination carried out? What were the political consequences?

Huey Long
Martin Luther King
Robert F. Kennedy
Malcolm X

The attempted assassination of Theodore Roosevelt by John N. Schrank

The attempted assassination of Governor George Wallace by Arthur Bremer

The attempted assassination of President Richard M. Nixon by Ahmed Rajet Hamer and his sons

Assassins: Political Murderers or Vengeful Misfits?

Assassins presents a group of men and women who were generally portrayed as solitary misfits, vengeful towards society and craving recognition, rather than as individuals who were motivated primarily by political interests.

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Do you agree with this portrayal of the assassins? Do you personally see assassins as drifters or loners? Are they part of each of us?
- Do you think they were also affected by the political context of their times?
- How were the nine assassins similar? How were they different? What kinds of social breakdowns influenced their actions?
- If we viewed the assassins as nothing more than individual psychopaths, would we let ourselves and our society off the hook?
- What can we learn about ourselves as a society by examining the assassins and their sense of isolation and rage?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Choose one of the nine assassins included in the show, or another assassin from history. Read about him or her in depth. Write an essay in which you analyze his or her motivations. Was the assassin acting as a social misfit seeking recognition and vengeance, acting from pure political concerns or both?
- Many assassins had tried to better themselves before resorting to assassination. Explore this aspect of an individual assassin's life. (Charles Guiteau or James Earl Ray would be good examples.)
- Explore past attempts to explain the behavior of assassins in other parts of the world and in America by historians, psychologists and sociologists. Summarize your findings.

Media, Violence and Assassination

In *Assassins*, both Zangara and the crowd that witnessed his assassination attempt on Franklin D. Roosevelt are concerned about their media images. The media and the issue of assassination are linked in a variety of ways.

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Do you think the media are in any way responsible for the current level of violence in our society? If so, how?
- Should violence in films and television be controlled? How? What are the free speech implications?
- John Hinckley was obsessed with the actress Jodie Foster, who appeared in the film *Taxi Driver*, and Travis Bickle, the role played by Robert DeNiro in the same film. Bickle goes on a murderous rampage, stalking a Presidential candidate. The character of Bickle is thought to have been inspired by Arthur Bremer, who shot Governor George Wallace of Alabama, in 1972. In turn, Mr. Bremer is thought to have been influenced by books about John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, and Sirhan, the assassin of Senator Robert Kennedy. How do the mass media contribute to the act of assassination itself?
- Do you think the fact that television provides everyone with instant renditions of major assassinations over and over again, depicted in vivid detail, increases the number of potential assassins in America?
- Is there a danger that the line between media images and real life becomes blurred for potential assassins?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore the research about television and film as agents of violence. Report on your findings.
- Who has the power to alter the amount and nature of violence on network television? From cable television? Films? Books? Newspapers? What power does the public have in each of these situations? How could you have an impact if you chose to do so?
- Is there a difference between reporting on the violence that is actually happening in our society and presenting fictional violence in the media?

Can Assassination be Prevented?

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Do you think we have seen the end of assassinations of major political figures in the United States?

- Whether it occurs again or not, is the threat of assassination an ever-present force, a permanent shadow, on the U.S.?
- What kinds of figures in world and American politics do you think will be especially vulnerable to assassination in the near future?
- Are we moving towards the kind of world and domestic situation that heightens or lessens the feelings of being “on the outside” that seem to have motivated so many of the assassins?
- What do you think could be done to lessen the threat of assassination to American political leaders?
- Should the movements of our political leaders be restricted to keep them more remote from the threats of assassination? Should our leaders relate to the people more by media and less often in person? What would be gained by this? What would be lost?
- What are some of the possible consequences of having the leaders of a democracy remove themselves from direct contact with the people? What are others ways that assassinations and the threat of assassination turn our institutions away from democracy?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Is murder ever a legitimate instrument of national policy?
- Is the wealth and the unique richness of America also the cause of our undoing? Is it possible that a nation that promises so much must inevitably disappoint some of its citizens?
- Are there actions other than better protection for public figures and gun control that we can take as a society to remove some of the root causes of assassination? Think of the motivations of each of the nine assassins in the musical. How would our society have to change to prevent someone in their circumstances from taking such an action again?

The Gun as a Factor in Assassinations and as an American Symbol

John Hinckley said “Guns are neat little things, aren’t they? They can kill extraordinary people with very little effort.”

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Discuss Hinckley’s description of the gun as an equalizer.
- Discuss how the gun makes the assassin more than an equal, since his prey is unarmed.
- Discuss the role of the gun in our frontier history and its role in contemporary American life.

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Research the issue of gun control. Summarize the arguments for and against gun control. With which position do you agree?
- Whatever your stand on gun control is, describe the ways in which you believe American life would change if guns suddenly disappeared.
- Discuss the gun as part of the American desire for a fast, technological means of solving problems.

Assassination and the American Dream

According to *New York Times* theatre critic Frank Rich, the authors of *Assassins* see the characters they are writing about as “products, however defective, of the same values and traditions as the men they tried to murder.” He says that “these are the lost and underprivileged souls who, having been denied every American’s dream of growing up to be President, try to achieve a warped nightmarish inversion of the dream instead.”

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- Discuss this suggestion that the same kinds of drives and desires fuel both the men who become President and the men who plot to kill them.
- Discuss the collective power that the assassins have found at the end of the show to make a statement about their relationship to the American Dream.
- How does the sense of sadness we experience at the end of the show relate to the issue of the American Dream?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Choose an assassin or would-be assassin from the show. Research his or her life in depth. Research the life of that person’s assassination target in depth. Write an essay comparing how each of them fared at succeeding in sharing in the American dream.

Assassinations as Political Theatre

While *Assassins* formally puts the issue of assassination on the stage, Americans also tend to treat real assassinations as political theatre. Contemporary assassins become instant celebrities and often prominent historical figures.

Questions/Discussion Ideas

- Why are we so fascinated with assassins and would-be assassins?
- Unlike other murderers, do assassins of major political figures take on added significance because they are killing one of our authority figures?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Like theatre, assassinations have certain repeated elements of ritual in common. Select an assassination or assassination attempt from any point in world or American history and describe it as a piece of public ritual or political theatre. As you describe the parts of the “ritual” be sure to discuss the elements that are common to every act of assassination: the individual with a grievance, the target personality, the public setting, the weapon, the chase and the capture of the assassins; the mourning and funeral rituals; the trial; public assessment of motives; and conspiracy theories.

Turning History into Theatre

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- When theatre artists re-create and comment upon historical events, they must make a series of choices. These choices are made within a framework of poetic license. What is poetic license? What does it allow the theatre artist to do?
- What are some examples of poetic license taken by the authors of *Assassins*?
- What kinds of insights and connections do you gain as a result of the authors’ mixing and matching historical periods throughout the show?
- Imagine that you had read about the nine assassins in a history book. How would the experience have been different? What have the creators of *Assassins* added to the stories of the nine assassins that helps you to see them in a new way?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- If you were part of the creative team, and you were asked to add one more assassin to the story from any time in history, who would it be? Why? When would you introduce this character? What would it add to the meaning of the show?
- Select five assassins who are not included in the show from any point in history, and place them in a setting together. Try writing dialogue for them, allowing them to share their personal histories.

Assassins as Musical Theatre

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- *Assassins* has been described as cross between a *book musical* and a *revue*. What is a book musical? What are some examples of great book musicals? What is a revue? What are some examples of revues?

- Writing in the *New York Times* on January 28, 1991, critic Frank Rich said that *Assassins* is an “anti-musical about anti-heroes.” What do you think he meant by this statement?
- In an article in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times* on March 10, 1991, writer Caryn James stated that the singing and dancing assassins embody our glib accommodation to violence and become pop icons. “*Assassins* returns these criminals to us in a new pop-cultural form.” She finds the idea that the nation’s violent history is an acceptable subject for a musical tragicomedy shocking. Do you agree?
- If the musical stage is not an appropriate forum for this subject, what is?
- Would *Assassins* have been as effective as a straight play without music?
- What other kinds of subject matter like *Assassins* do you think can be effectively presented through the medium of musical theatre?

The Role of Music and Lyrics in *Assassins*

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- How are American musical forms such as spirituals, folk music, patriotic marches, and soft-rock ballads used and commented upon in the score? Why do you think the composer made these choices? How do these choices contribute to the meaning of *Assassins*?
- Sunday *New York Times* theatre critic David Richards says “watching *Assassins* is like receiving a death notice in the form of a singing telegram.” What is the impact of hearing music which seems pleasant on the surface from characters whose thoughts are homicidal?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Select one of the following songs:

“Everybody’s Got The Right”
 “The Ballad of Booth”
 “How I Saved Roosevelt”
 “The Gun Song”
 “The Ballad of Czolgosz”
 “Unworthy of Your Love”
 “The Ballad of Guiteau”
 “Another National Anthem”
 “November 22, 1963”
 “Something Just Broke”

1. Summarize the contents of the song.
 - a. What do we learn about the world in which *Assassins* takes place from this song?

- b. What do we learn about the character or characters who sing the song and their personal philosophies?
- c. What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from the song?
- Can you think of another place in the show where a song might fit? What would a title for the song be? Who would sing it? What would it be about? In keeping with the idea that the music is a panorama of American music, what kind of music would it have? Try to write a few lines of the song lyric or music (or both!).

The Role of the Balladeer and Folk Music in Assassins

The Balladeer was created to represent the way in which myths about a people's history can be passed down through songs and tales. Throughout the show, he witnesses the assassinations and relates them to us in ballad form.

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- In our culture, tales are told most often through television, radio, newspaper and film, rather than a Balladeer. Is the process of myth-making the same?
- Discuss how history gets simplified through the transfer of myths from one source to another and from one generation to another.
- What kinds of information have we passed down through history using folk songs as our means of communication?
- Discuss the fact the folk songs and tales are often optimistic, and are often the result of perceived wisdom about an event rather than an accurate report.
- Why does the Balladeer disappear from *Assassins* in the last scene? How have his myths been transformed?
- Which point of view triumphs at the end of *Assassins*? The more open, optimistic perspective of the Balladeer or the National Anthem of the unified assassins?

ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Find folk songs from various eras in American history. Study their form and point of view.
- Write a folk song of your own about a current happening.

Plan Your Own Musical

- Select one of the nine assassins in the show or another assassin in world or American history and plan your own musical theatre work around him or her.

—Or—

- Choose another controversial topic that might seem as unlikely a choice as *Assassins* for a musical theatre piece and plan your own musical around that topic.
 1. Tell a story that you think needs telling now. Set your story in the present, the past or anytime in the future. Set it anywhere in the world or in another universe.
 2. Decide what kind of music your characters will sing. How will their music be influenced by your setting? Would the characters dance? How and why?
 3. Outline the story of your musical. Write some dialogue for the characters. Try to write one of the musical episodes.

Critical Analysis

ASSIGNMENT/WRITING PROJECTS

- Write a review of a performance of *Assassins*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:
 1. Did *Assassins* hold your interest? Why?
 2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience. Was there a narrator? What was the dialogue like?
 3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a single story or multiple stories? How did the multiple stories connect? Was anything about the story unexpected? How did *Assassins* begin and end?
 4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
 5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add to the meaning of the show?
 6. Discuss the effectiveness of the performers.
 7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
 8. Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

Appendix

The following background material on the creators of *Assassins* and the assassins themselves and the resource list below, are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

About the Creators

STEPHEN SONDHEIM wrote the music and lyrics for *Assassins*, *Into the Woods* (1987), *Sunday In The Park With George* (1984), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *The Frogs* (1974), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Follies* (1971, revised in London, 1987), *Company* (1970), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) and *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* (1962), as well as the lyrics for *Do I Hear A Waltz?* (1965), *Gypsy* (1959), *West Side Story* (1957), and additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). *Side By Side By Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me A Little* (1981) and *You're Gonna Love Tomorrow* (originally presented as *A Stephen Sondheim Evening* on March 3, 1983) are anthologies of his work as composer and lyricist. He composed the songs for the television production "Evening Primrose" (1966), co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and provided incidental music for Broadway's *Twigs* (1971), *Invitation to a March* (1961) and *The Girls of Summer* (1956). He won Tony awards for Best Score for a Musical for *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, *A Little Night Music*, *Follies* and *Company*. All of these shows won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, as did *Pacific Overtures* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, the latter also receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1985.

Mr. Sondheim was born and raised in New York City. He graduated from Williams College, winning the Hutchinson Prize for Music Composition. After graduation he studied theory and composition with Milton Babbitt. He is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, the national association of playwrights, composers and lyricists, having served as its president from 1973 until 1981, and in 1983 was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1990 he was appointed the first Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University.

JOHN WEIDMAN wrote the book for *Pacific Overtures*, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, which was produced and directed on Broadway in 1976 by Harold Prince. More recently, he co-authored the new book for the 1987 Broadway revival of Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*, and wrote the book for *Assassins*, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, which was produced off-Broadway in 1991 under the direction of Jerry Zaks. Since 1986 he has written for the PBS children's show, *Sesame Street*, receiving five Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Children's Program. He is currently writing an animated feature film for the Walt Disney Studios with Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, and a new musical with Richard Maltby, Jr. and David Shire. Mr. Weidman is a graduate of Yale Law School and a member of the New York Bar Association. He lives in New York with his wife and two children.

About the Assassins

JOHN WILKES BOOTH: John Wilkes Booth, a member of a famous theatrical family, was one of the most highly paid and acclaimed actors of his day. A vain, egocentric man of considerable charm, Booth was a fierce advocate of the Confederacy who held Lincoln responsible for all he detested concerning the behavior of the North. He was in active collaboration with Confederate agents. Booth traveled to Canada in October 1864 to begin laying the groundwork for a plan to reverse the tide of Union victories with a group of desperate Southern agents. The original plan was to kidnap Lincoln, hold him hostage, and exchange him for ten of thousands of Southern prisoners of war. To assist him in carrying out this scheme, Booth recruited an experienced Southern spy, John Surratt; three former Confederate soldiers, Samuel Arnold, Michael O'Laughlin, and Lewis Payne; the blockade runner, George Atzerodt; and the feeble-minded David Herold. They attempted the kidnapping, only to discover that the President was not in the carriage they intercepted.

After this failed attempt and Lee's surrender announcement, Booth altered the plan. He decided that only by assassinating the Union's leaders could the federal government be demoralized and forced to agree to a negotiated peace. He would kill Lincoln and General Grant at a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre; George Atzerodt would murder Vice-President Andrew Johnson; and Lewis Payne and David Herold would slay Secretary of State Seward. Atzerodt decided not to kill Johnson at the last minute; Payne wounded not only Seward, but his son and three other occupants of the house; and Booth killed Lincoln, but not Grant, who had decided not to attend the theatre. Booth evaded capture for almost a fortnight as he escaped with David Herold from one hideout to another in a desolate swampy section of Maryland. He was at last tracked to an old barn. On April 26, 1865, the surrounding troops set fire to the building. Booth, having ordered Herold to give himself up for trial, apparently killed himself. John Surratt escaped by fleeing to Europe, was extradited back to the United States and was acquitted by a deadlocked jury. By that time his mother, Mary Surratt, had been convicted as an accomplice and hung on the same scaffold as Atzerodt, Herold and Payne.

SAMUEL BYCK: Byck was a 44-year-old Philadelphian who attempted to kill President Richard Nixon on February 22, 1974. At that time, Byck had failed in business, recently been divorced from his wife, and was living in a friend's modest home. In 1973, he had revealed his compulsion to be noticed and heard on public issues of the day (as well as his sense of persecution and isolation) in a series of angry letters to Senator Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania. On February 21, 1974 he dictated into a tape recorder a plan called Operation Pandora's Box. He said he planned to hijack a commercial jetliner, force the crew to fly towards the White House, kill the pilot, seize the controls, and steer the plane into the mansion, killing the President and other White House occupants as well as everyone on the plane, including himself. Byck sent copies of this tape, and others he had recorded previously, to composer Leonard Bernstein and a number of other celebrities. He then

drove his car, which was decorated with “Impeach Nixon” decals, to Baltimore-Washington International Airport, rushed the gate of an Atlanta-bound flight, and killed a security guard. He boarded the plane, wounded the pilot and killed the co-pilot, before being hit by sniper fire from outside the plane. He then shot himself in the temple.

LEON CZOLGOSZ: Czolgosz was the quiet, studious son of Central European immigrants to Michigan, who later lived in Pennsylvania and Cleveland, Ohio. At the time Czolgosz was growing up in America, circumstances were hard everywhere, and violence frequently erupted during strikes against railroads, mines and steelmakers. After Czolgosz’ mother died when he was 12, violence and dispossession totally enveloped him. He worked in factories and mills as a young man, joined a Socialist discussion group and read Utopian writing. Although he and his family were industrious and ambitious, they never seemed able to realize the American dream. He had a nervous breakdown in 1898 and spent his days on his father’s farm reading anarchist literature. Treatment didn’t help his condition.

He read about the assassination of King Humbert of Italy in 1900 and took a clipping describing the incident to bed with him for weeks. He was particularly taken with the speeches of Emma Goldman, and actually had a brief interview with her in the summer of 1901. On September 6, 1901 when he was twenty-eight, he shot President McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. McKinley, who was immensely popular, had just begun his second term. After his arrest, Czolgosz wrote, “I don’t believe in the form of government and I don’t believe we should have any rulers. It is right to kill them. I fully understood what I was doing. I am willing to take the consequences.” He was killed in the electric chair six weeks after McKinley’s death.

LYNETTE ALICE (“SQUEAKY”) FROMME: On September 5, 1975, Fromme aimed a pistol at President Gerald Ford as he was walking from the Senator Hotel to the California state capitol building in Sacramento. She had once belonged to Charles Manson’s band of followers and was infatuated with the convicted killer. She saw Manson, who was a former lover and surrogate father, as a religious figure and perceived the Tate and LaBianca murders as part of his holy crusade. She aimed the pistol at Ford so that Manson could testify at her trial and have another chance to explain his vision to a court. Fromme was found legally responsible at her trial and sentenced to life imprisonment.

CHARLES JULIUS GUTEAU: Guiteau was a self-styled politician, theologian, and lawyer, who fatally shot President James A. Garfield less than four months after Garfield’s inauguration. Guiteau, who was 39 at the time of the shooting, was born in Illinois and attended the University of Michigan for a brief time. With the encouragement of his father, who was deeply religious, he joined the Oneida Community in upstate New York. However, he disagreed with the governing theories of the Oneida elders and moved to New York City at age 24 with dreams of beginning his own newspaper.

Those dreams disintegrated rapidly. He ended up living in poverty in Hoboken, New Jersey. His life was an unending stream of failure, debt, and petty crime. He launched one business enterprise after another, failing at them all. He wrote incessantly and obsessively pursued women, in spite of the fact that they constantly rejected him. Guiteau hung around Republican headquarters in New York during the 1880 Presidential campaign and moved to Washington on March 5, 1881. He began to bombard the White House with demands that he be appointed to a major diplomatic post in Europe, in exchange for what he imagined to be his services to the Garfield campaign. When his demands were ignored, he allied himself with the Stalwarts, who were represented in the administration by Vice-President Chester A. Arthur. Guiteau churned out numerous letters and drafts of speeches before the assassination, insisting that he bore Garfield no ill will but was convinced that Arthur had to become President for the good of the country. On the morning of July 2, 1881, Guiteau went to the Washington terminal of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad. He carried a recently purchased revolver, a statement to the White House, and a letter to General Sherman concerning his own need for troop protection while in prison. As Garfield prepared to board a train for Williamstown, Massachusetts, to attend his twenty-fifth class reunion at Williams College, Guiteau shot Garfield twice in the back at close range. Guiteau had a hired cab waiting to take him to jail, but was overcome before he could escape to the street. Garfield lived for 80 days before dying in September. Guiteau's demented state was in clear view during his long trial. He was hanged a year after firing the shots at the railroad station, in spite of his obvious mental incompetence.

JOHN HINCKLEY: Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan on March 30, 1981 as Reagan left a Washington Hotel and prepared to enter a limousine. The President was struck in the chest by one bullet and his chief press aide, James Brady, was struck in the head by a second. A plainclothesman was also shot.

Hinckley spent much of his time brooding over his grievances against his wealthy parents and an unresponsive society. He also wrote numerous letters to Jodie Foster, his favorite movie actress, who had appeared in the film *Taxi Driver*. At his trial, Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity and ordered to undergo treatment in a mental hospital.

SARAH JANE MOORE: Sally Moore lived a number of different lives—suburban matron, successful businesswoman and member of the radical left. She was married five times and abandoned three children at her parents' in West Virginia. Moore had volunteered to serve as a double agent between the FBI and the San Francisco radical underground. However, she had been dropped by the FBI because she had confessed to her friends in the Movement that she was an informer. After the murder of the black school superintendent of the Oakland school system by the Symbianese Liberation Army, she began to fear retribution from the left. Her fear and sense of isolation prompted her to fire a single revolver shot at President Ford outside the Saint Francis Hotel as he was about to enter a limousine. With this action, she was apparently attempting to do penance for her having sold out the Movement and to show solidarity with its goals. Moore was found legally responsible at her trial and sentenced to life imprisonment.

LEE HARVEY OSWALD: Oswald was a self-declared Marxist who was born in Dallas, Texas, on October 18, 1939. After serving in the U.S. Marines from 1959–1962, he lived in the USSR for more than two and a half years prior to returning to the United States in June 1962. After his return, he had distributed pro-Castro literature on the streets of New Orleans and tried unsuccessfully to obtain a visa to travel to Cuba. He deeply resented the high-level decision to change his Marine discharge to an undesirable discharge following his defection. He began working at the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas in October, 1963. Shots fired from the Depository on November 22, 1963, killed President Kennedy. Charged with the assassination and the subsequent killing of a policeman, Oswald himself was shot and killed by Jack Ruby, the operator of a Dallas nightclub, on November 24, 1963.

GIUSEPPE ZANGARA: Zangara, a 32-year-old Italian immigrant bricklayer, discharged a volley of pistol shots in the direction of Franklin D. Roosevelt's open limousine, which the president-elect was using as a rostrum for a speech he was giving at an outdoor rally. In the process, Zangara killed Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago and wounded four others. When confessing to the crime, Zangara insisted he had taken the action because he believed that authority, as personified by his hated father, the president-elect, and all rich people, was responsible for an agonizing stomach disorder that had plagued him since childhood. He had also contemplated killing the King of Italy or President Hoover. While his physical pain appeared to be his principal motivation, he also used, as a rationalization for his actions, anarchist rhetoric and a belief that Italian-Americans were objects of persecution. He died in the electric chair in Florida for the murder of Mayor Cermak, snarling defiantly to the end. His last words were, "Lousy capitalists...no pictures! Go ahead. Push the button."

Resources

Assassination

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Briggs, L. Vernon. *The Manner of Man that Kills*.

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Clarke, Asia. *The Unlocked Book: A Memoir of John Wilkes Booth by his Sister*.

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Kimmel, Stanley. *The Mad Booths of Maryland*.

Rosenberry, Charles E. *Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and the Law in the Gilded Age.*
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Beals, Carleton. *The Story of Huey Long.*
Bishop, Jim. *The Day Lincoln Was Shot..*
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Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life.*
Hanchett, William. *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies.*
Harris, Thomas O. *The Kingfish: Huey P. Long, Dictator.*
Jansen, Godfrey. *Why Robert Kennedy Was Killed.*
Kaiser, Robert Blair. *"RFK Must Die!" A History of the Robert Kennedy Assassination and its Aftermath.*
Leech, Margaret. *In the Days of McKinley.*
Manchester, William. *The Death of a President.*
Shulman, Alex. *To the Barricades: The Anarchist Life of Emma Goldman.*
Wexler, Alice. *Emma Goldman in America.*

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She has a string of musical lyricist-librettist credits: *On the Swing Shift* (Manhattan Theatre Club), *Heidi* (Theatreworks USA) and *Follow the Sun* (Hudson Guild), among others. She just completed work on *Love Comics*, a musical interpretation of the romance comics of the 1950's and '60's, with David Evans. Ms. Schlesinger also is working on *O'Henry's New York*, as well as writing lyrics for a new musical based on Frank Baum's *Queen Zixi of Ix*.

She is also the author of recent non-fiction works published by Random House/Villard, William Morrow, Avon Books and the Princeton Book Company.

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