

STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S

ASSASSINS



STUDY GUIDE

Written by Stephanie Lim & Jade Cagalawan

DIRECTED BY SNEHAL DESAI • MUSIC DIRECTION BY MARC MACALINTAL

FEBRUARY 17-MARCH 20 2022

ASSASSINS SYNOPSIS

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Fascinated by the sheer frequency of assassinations that have occurred historically and globally, Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins* follows nine prominent figures who have attempted, successfully and not, to change the course of history in the United States. Here, the assassins' motives are examined as they each journey towards the promise of an American Dream.

Although assassins are generally understood to be solitary events, the show brings together the characters through scenes and musical numbers that put the assassins, their lives, and their actions, in direct conversation with one another. If America promises everyone a right to their dreams, who is responsible when those dreams are not attained?

- 1990-91 @ Playwrights Horizons : ran 3 months (73 performances), directed by Jerry Zaks
- 1992-93 @ Donmar Warehouse, UK: ran 3 months (76 performances), directed by Sam Mendes
- 2004 @ Roundabout Theatre Company (Studio 54): ran 4 months, directed by Joe Mantello
- 2007 @ Long Beach Armory (Cal Rep, CSULB): directed by Joanne Gordon
- 2021 @ Classic Stage Company: ran 2 months, directed by John Doyle.



BEFORE THE SHOW... REFLECT

What are some movies, television shows, podcasts and more that you can name where it focuses on a serial killer, assassin or cult leader? Why do we as the audience have a deep fascination with these subjects?

"Nobody at the end of the show should feel that we have been excusing or sentimentalizing [the assassins]. We're examining the system that causes these horrors. The US Constitution guarantees the pursuit of happiness. It doesn't guarantee the happiness. That's the difference. These are people who feel they've been cheated of their happiness, each one in a different way."

Stephen Sondheim interview in *The Telegraph*, 2014.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES

- American Dream: the disillusionment & conviction that individual action can create change.
- Mass communication and media: its affect on celebrity culture and the reinforcing of ideals surrounding "Americanness" and identity.
- American identity: the assassins as simultaneously social outcasts AND a product of the society and culture

ASSASSINS DEFINED

Believed to come from the Arabic *hashshāshīn*, the term *assassins* is traditionally used to describe social outcasts, rejected from society and associated with strange ideas and actions.

Since 1776, there have been over 25 recorded assassination attempts on our presidents, 4 of which redefined the course of American history. While assassins are generally disregarded as maniacs with little in common, Sondheim & Weidman's musical asks, "Why do these dreadful events happen *here*, with such horrifying frequency, and in such an appallingly similar fashion?" In other words, *in what ways are these assassins particularly American?*

CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNINGS

Trigger Warnings: Gun shots using live firearms, Racial Slurs

Content Warnings: Depictions of Death, Racism, Stalking, Haze/Fog

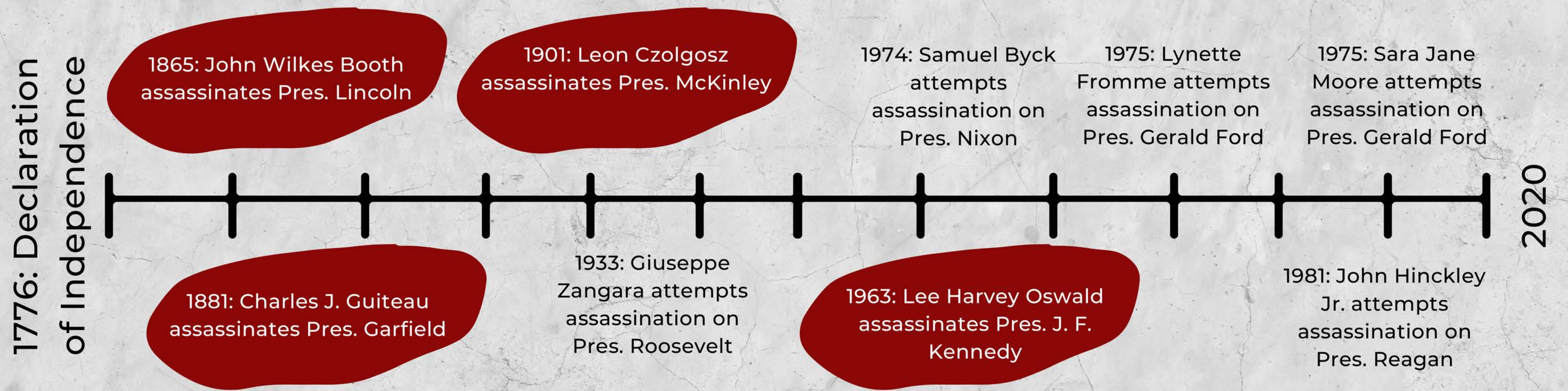
A content warning is a verbal or written notice that precedes potentially sensitive content, allowing for the viewer to prepare themselves so that they are able to engage or disengage with the content. Trigger warnings are of a more serious nature that may cause a physiological and/or psychological response, such as anxiety. There may be overlap between the two.

To learn more visit:

<https://howlround.com/responsible-theatremaking>

TIMELINE

Below are the 9 assassination events represented in the musical.
For a more comprehensive timeline of assassination attempts in the United States, [click here.](#)



MUSICAL STYLES & INFLUENCES

The original structure of *Assassins* was meant to be a “dreamlike vaudeville” using different modes to go back and forth in time. The show today, as Sondheim describes it, is “a book musical masquerading as a revue” (*Look, I Made a Hat* 111). The musical numbers thus signal to audiences where and when we are in history at any given moment.

Sondheim is considered by many to be a **master of pastiche**, or the imitation of particular styles and genres. This is demonstrated through the musicality of the show's characters, each of whom embodies a specific era and set of values--as if each assassin is a different sonic or musical representation of the setting. These choices humanize rather than glorify the assassins.

The first part of the show is filled with pastiche, including various references to folk songs, a la patriotic riffs. Later in the show, a musical shift will occur when pastiche is thrown away and the assassins no longer carry on in their musical Americanness.

BALLADEER & PROPRIETOR

The 9 assassins and townspeople represented in *Assassins* are also joined by the **Proprietor** and **Balladeer**. Throughout the musical, these two figures loom over the lives and events portrayed on stage. While the Proprietor frequently acts as different versions of the press and is shown leading assassins to their final moments, the Balladeer serves as a pseudo storyteller, helping specifically to accentuate the first three successful assassinations--Booth, Czolgosz, and Guiteau.

Musically, the Balladeer embodies the quintessential sounds of Americana, channeling the styles of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. The Proprietor, on the other hand, adds intrigue, allure, and sometimes seduction (or a corruption) to these familiar sounds.

Listen to music through the years, as well as Sondheim's musical allusions and influences, in [this playlist](#).

“They sing our songs. We identify with them. And this makes us . . . terribly uncomfortable.”
Steve Swayne, *Hearing Sondheim's Voices*



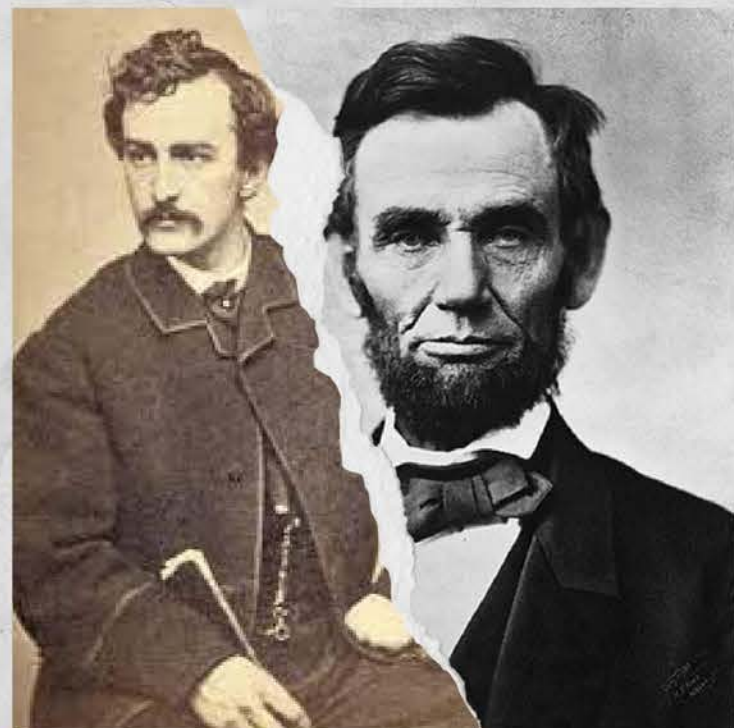
PAY ATTENTION TO:

- The ways that characters take on familiar and popular musical styles
- How the Balladeer and the Proprietor influence, interrupt, and interact with the assassins and with each other through music
- How and where the musical styles begin to shift in tone (i.e. from optimism and patriotism to darker, more sinister sounds)

JOHN WILKES BOOTH & THE ASSASSINATION OF PRES. ABRAHAM LINCOLN

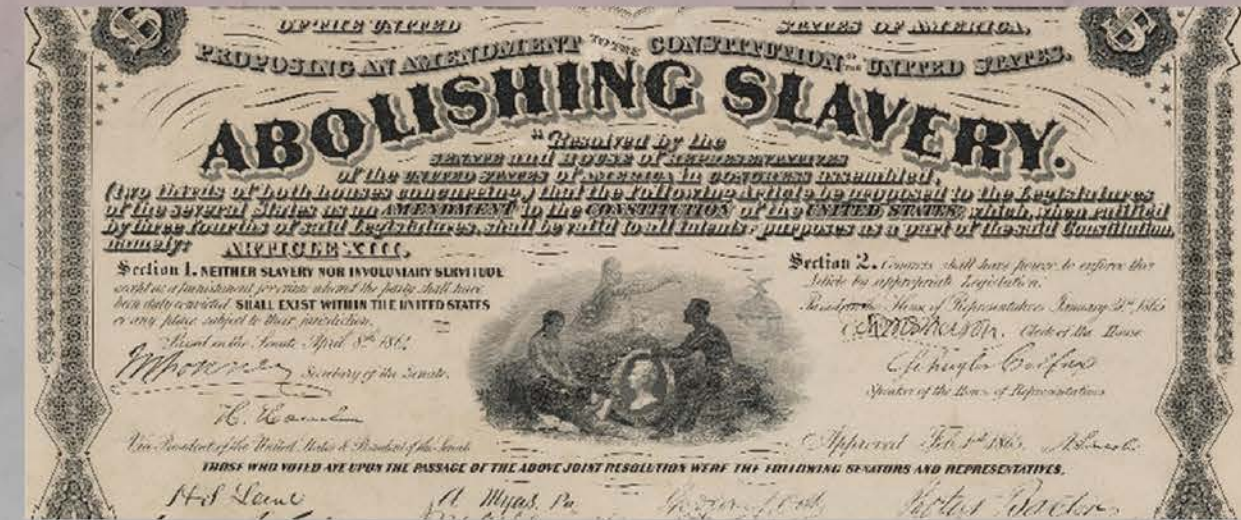
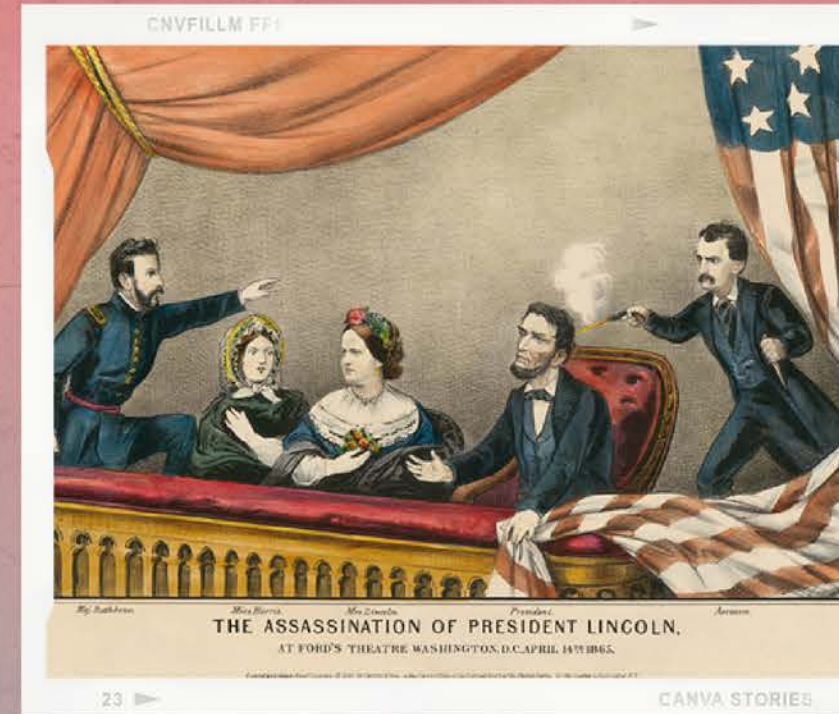
"This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it....Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember it or overthrow it"

- President Abraham Lincoln



Part of a well-known theatrical family, Booth was a prominent celebrity of his time. He was vain, egotistical, and outspoken about both his pro-slavery and anti-Lincoln stance. Lincoln, the country's 16th president, was best known for his issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which formally freed slaves within the Confederacy. For Booth, the assassination of Lincoln was intended to save the Confederacy from collapse, to stop citizenship for Black people, and to bring down the government.

What was originally a plan to kidnap Lincoln became the infamous assassination event we know today, during a performance of Our American Cousin at Ford's Theatre in Washington DC. During the assassination, Booth famously shouted, "Sic semper tyrannis! The South is avenged"—thus always to tyrants.



THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

- Emancipation Proclamation signed in 1862
- Lincoln wins re-election in 1864 with 55% popular vote.
- 13th Amendment abolishing slavery is signed in 1862.
- Ku Klux Klan is founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in late 1865.
- The four year long Civil War ends on April 9, 1865.

CHARLES J. GUTEAU & THE ASSASSINATION OF PRES. JAMES A. GARFIELD

"The president's tragic death was a sad necessity, but it will unite the Republican Party and save the Republic. Life is a fleeting dream, and it matters little when one goes."

-Charles Guiteau, in a letter found at the assassination

THE ASSASSINATION.

Bold and Probably Successful Attempt Upon the Life of President Garfield.

An Insane Foreigner Makes His Name Infamous

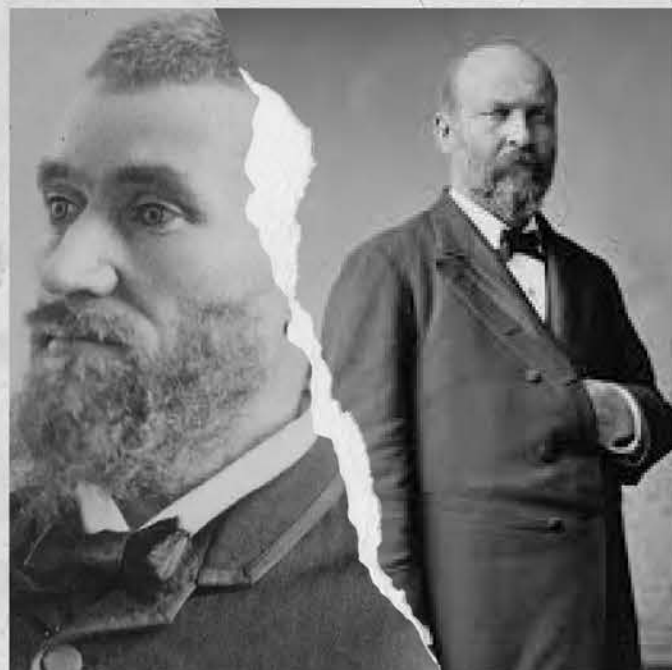
And Plunges a Nation into Grief and Sorrow.

1.35—President Garfield's strength is increasing every minute, and he is quite cheerful. Physicians announce that as soon as his pulse reaches seventy, another attempt will be made to probe for the bullets.

The President continues to improve.

THE DETAILS.

At 9.30 o'clock this morning when President Garfield was at the Baltimore and Patomac depot, with his party, waiting to take the train, he was shot twice by a man within two feet of him. The President's friends rushed to him as he fell, and Blaine called for Rockwell, Station Agent



Guiteau had tried and failed in several job prospects, including law, bill collecting, and theology. He later took to writing speeches, such as those in support of the Republican party, and eventually became convinced that he had aided in Garfield's presidential victory. He believed he deserved (and would repeatedly ask for) a political appointment—French consulship—and was rudely rejected by Garfield's Secretary of State James Blaine.

Guiteau saw Garfield's death as a way to re-unite the party. Guiteau carried out his assassination at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station, where Garfield and Blaine and Garfield later died from an infected wound where he had been shot. At Guiteau's execution, he read a poem he wrote titled, "I am Going to the Lordy," which forms part of the lyrics sung by Sondheim's Guiteau.



THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

- American Association of the Red Cross is founded.
- Tennessee segregated black passengers on railroad, a year after Tennessee's 1875 "Jim Crow" law was found unconstitutional.
- The word "boycott" enters the English language after an incident in Ireland involving a British Army captain (Charles Cunningham Boycott); a politician suggests ending communicating rather than using violence to bring about change.

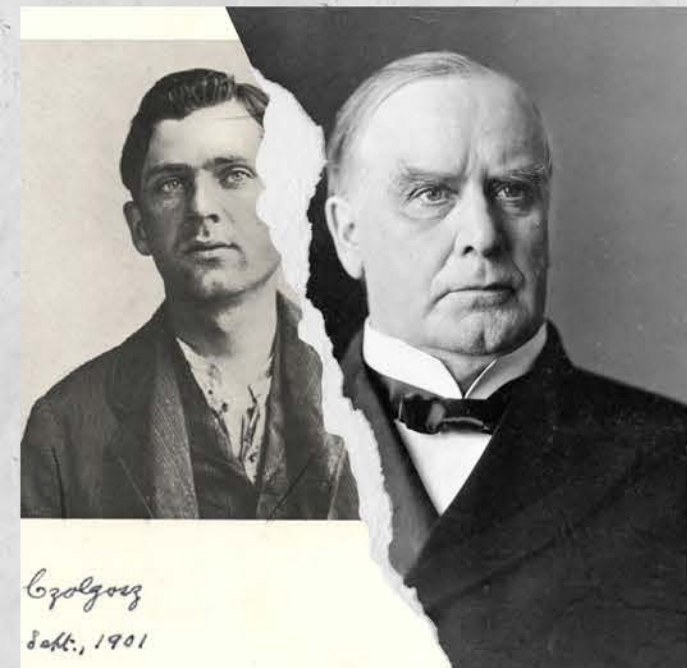
1900

LEON CZOLGOSZ & THE ASSASSINATION OF PRES. WILLIAM MCKINLEY

"I don't believe in the Republican form of government, and I don't believe we should have any rulers. It is right to kill them... I killed President McKinley because I done my duty. I didn't believe one man should have so much service, and another man should have none."
-Leon Czolgosz



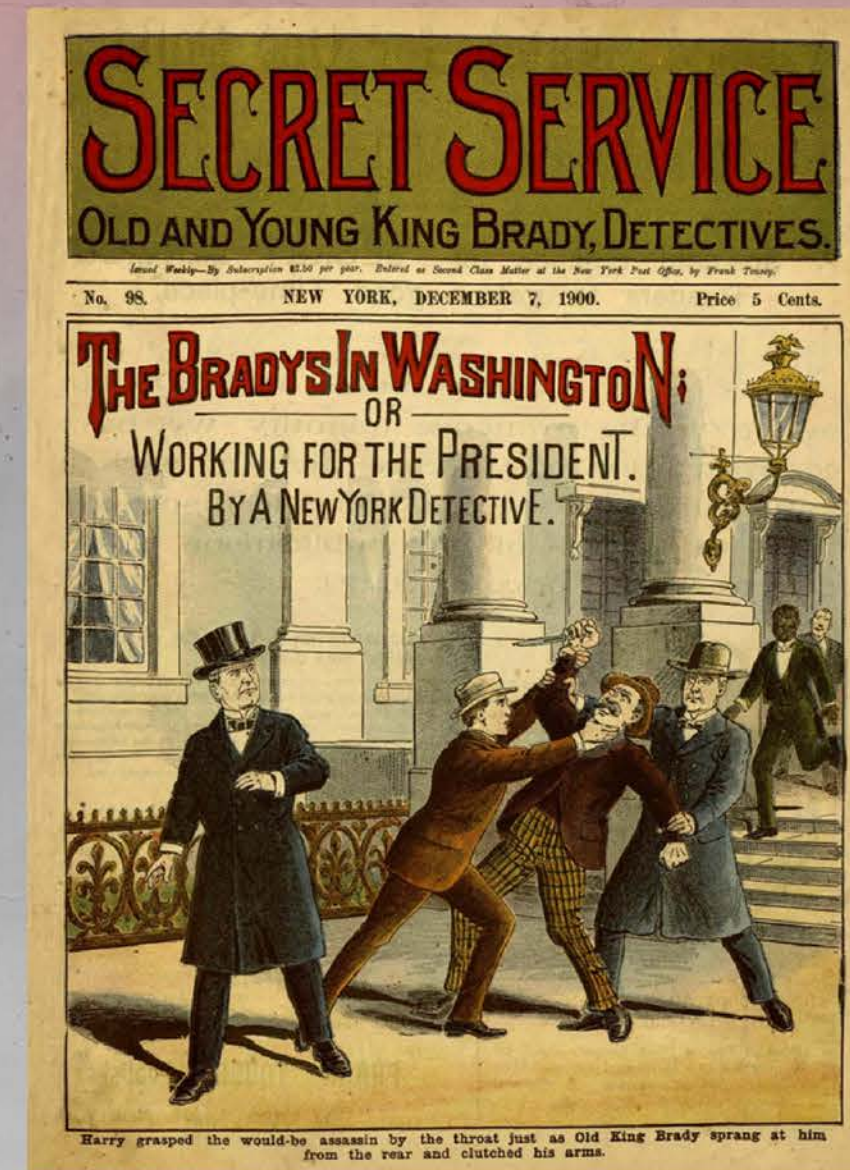
Born in Michigan to Polish-Catholic immigrant parents, Czolgosz had little formal education and began working in factories as early as 12 or 13. Coming of age during national social instability, he would go on to experience an economic depression—the Panic of 1893. Czolgosz became increasingly interested in anarchism: he was especially captivated by activist and writer Emma Goldman, attending her lectures and briefly meeting her (as is dramatized in the show). He was also fascinated with Gaetano Bresci, who assassinated Italy's Umberto I in 1898, using the same type of .32 caliber Iver Johnson revolver that Bresci used.



While shaking hands with the public at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York, Czolgosz shot the newly re-elected McKinley twice. Several days later, McKinley died of a gangrene infection, and his death prompted what we know as today's protection of the president by the Secret Service. At his execution by electric chair, Czolgosz stated, "I killed the President because he was the enemy of the good people... the working men of all countries!"

THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

- The first Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Henri Dunant for his humanitarian efforts (as founder of Red Cross and his inspiration for 1864 Geneva Convention).
- Secret Service (originally established in 1865 as part of the Department of the Treasury to protect against counterfeiting of US currency) is asked to expand responsibilities to protecting the president after McKinley's death.
- President McKinley led the nation to victory in the Spanish-American War, raised protective tariffs to promote American industry, and maintained the gold standard for US currency.

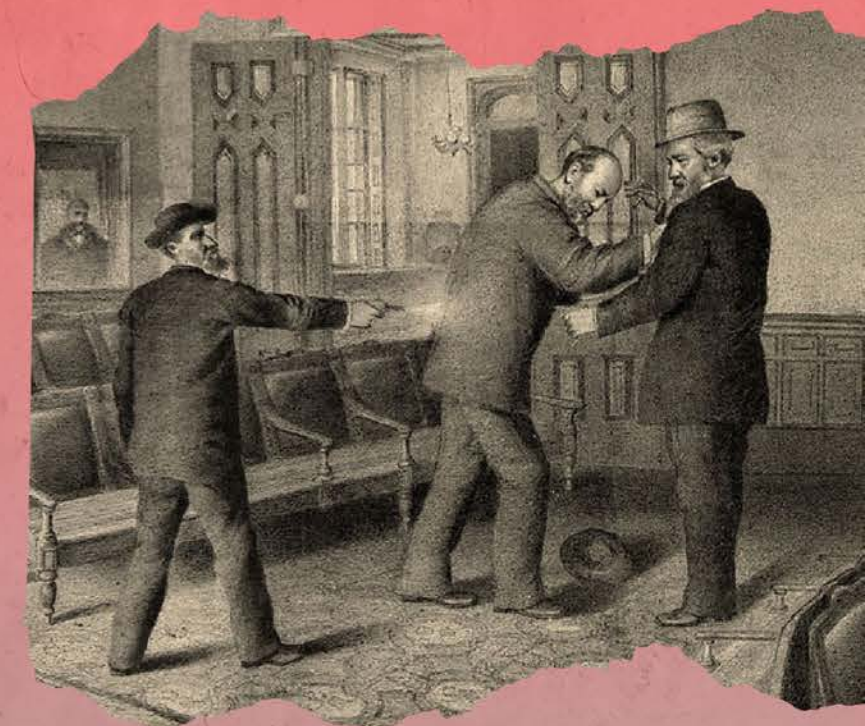


GIUSEPPE ZANGARA & THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON PRES. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT



An Italian immigrant and bricklayer from New Jersey, Zangara suffered from long-term abdominal pain, which insisted was the fault of the US government. Early in life, he was alienated and isolated from his own family and, during interrogations after his assassination attempt, Zangara cited early hostility towards his father, rich people, and authority figures.

FDR was delivering an impromptu speech at Bayfront Park in Miami, Florida when Zangara fired his first shot. An onlooker grabbed his arm, diverting the rest of his shots into the crowd. Zangara struck five bystanders, including Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who later died of his wounds. Charged with Cermak's murder, Zangara was sentenced to death by electrocution. His last words at his execution were, "Lousy capitalists...no pictures! Go ahead. Push the button."



📺 An alternate history of Zangara's actions forms the basis of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), adapted into Amazon Prime Video's 2015-2019 series of the same name. [See a trailer here.](#)

THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

- The Great Depression: The stock market crash in October of 1929 signaled the beginning of The Great Depression. The crash wiped out 40% of the value of common stock in the United States. Confidence in the economy evaporated, businesses closed, factories shut down, and banks failed. By 1932, one out of every four Americans was unemployed.
- FDR implements New Deal for economic recovery in the First Hundred days of his new administration.



LEE HARVEY OSWALD & THE ASSASSINATION OF PRES. JOHN F. KENNEDY



Born in Louisiana, Oswald was raised by a single mother and dropped out of high school, joining the Marines at 17. Oswald became interested in Socialism and Marxism, as well as Fidel Castro, openly discussing his views with fellow recruits. He defected to the USSR (receiving an “undesirable discharge”) and married Marina Nikolayevna Prusakova. Throughout his life, Oswald had attempted suicide and received psychiatric evaluations; he was said to be nonemotional, introverted, and not in control of his temper.

Oswald grew unhappy with life in Russia, moved his family back to the US, and settled in Texas. While working his job at the Texas School Book Depository, Oswald carried out his assassination of JFK while the President’s motorcade drove through Dallas from the airport. Charged with the murder of JFK and a police officer, Oswald was killed by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner. Oswald had taken the alias, “Alek J. Hidell,” a name found in his effects after the assassination.



The assassination event forever changed how news spread across the country, with [Walter Cronkite interrupting that evening's *As the World Turns* to share the breaking news](#). For several days, television stations devoted their (and the nation’s) attention to the event. Ironically, just as Oswald’s actions swiftly changed live television, Oswald’s own death was captured live.



📷 Check out [The Atlantic's special photography article "The World in 1963"](#) for a visual look at this year in history, as well as the [LA Times' photo essay about television reactions to the assassination](#).

THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

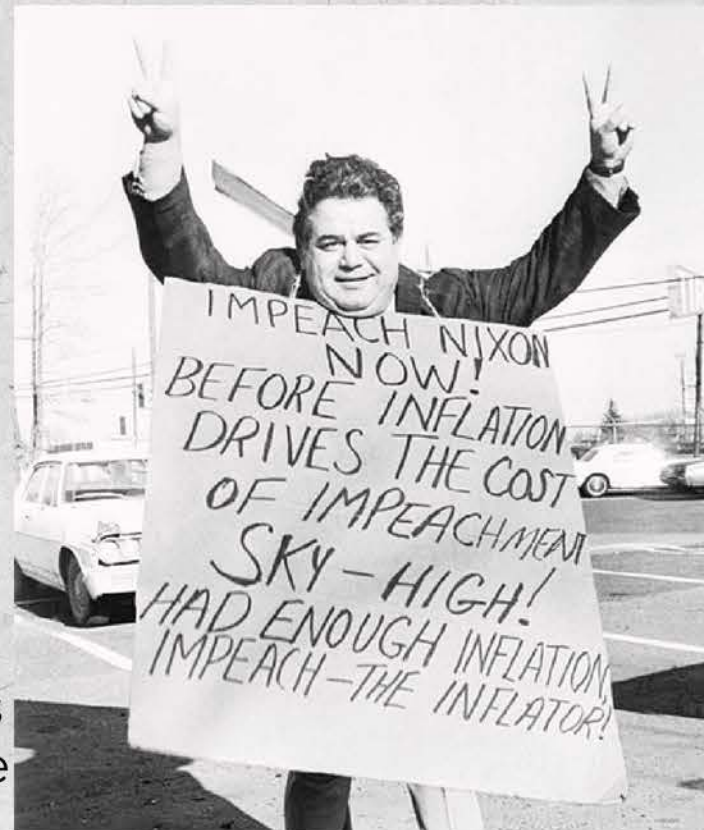
- The Cold War: From the end of World War II in 1945 to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union were in a Cold War. The Cold War pitted communism against capitalism. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in an arms race and both countries built a nuclear arsenal capable of mutually-assured destruction.

SAMUEL BYCK & THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON PRES. RICHARD NIXON



Growing up in South Philadelphia, Byck dropped out of high school to help support his family. He briefly joined the military, then married and had a family. Byck was a failed businessman, believed in government conspiracies, and suffered from severe depression. He sent rambling letters and tape recordings about the injustices he suffered to various celebrities and politicians, including Pennsylvania Governor Richard Schweiker, Senator Leonard Bernstein, and Nixon.

Two years prior to the assassination attempt, Byck had been investigated by the Secret Service for threatening the President and arrested twice for protesting without a protest (once while wearing a Santa Claus suit). The assassination plan was to hijack and crash a plane into the White House, which he explained in his recordings. He drove his car, with "Impeach Nixon" decals, to Baltimore-Washington International Airport, where he boarded a plane, wounded its pilot and killing the copilot; he was wounded by snipers outside the plane and then shot himself in the head.



Slain Hijacker Said To Have Planned To Crash Plane Into White House

Washington (AP)—More than a month before he was shot to death in a bloody skyjacking attempt, Samuel Joseph Byck had made up his mind to crash an airliner into the White House, columnist Jack Anderson says. Anderson says Byck tally shot a security guard and the co-pilot of a Delta Airlines plane, then killed himself after being wounded twice by a policeman. He also wounded the plane's pilot Reese Lofton who remains in critical condition at a kamakaze attack and a hijacking—to dramatize the outrage of one man over the Watergate mess," the columnist said. Mr. Anderson said Byck described his intentions with these words: "I will try to get the plane

- As with Zangara, an alternate version of Byck's actions is portrayed in [The Assassination of Richard Nixon \(2004\)](#).
- You can also listen to the actual audio tapes of Byck [here](#).

THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

Watergate Scandal: Watergate was a political scandal in the 1970s, stemmed from the June 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters. A Nixon fundraising group, the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, funded the break-in. After Nixon's re-election, evidence emerged of the involvement of high level administration officials in the break-in, and Nixon's personal involvement in the cover-up.

Richard Nixon was the first President forced to resign due to the Watergate Scandal.



THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS ON PRES. GERALD FORD



LYNETTE "SQUEAKY" FROMME

A devout follower of Charles Manson, Lynette Fromme was nicknamed "Squeaky" because of the sound she made. For Fromme, Manson was a lover, surrogate father, and a religious figure. Fromme acted in order to get Ford's attention about environmental pollution in the California redwoods, as well as to help incarcerated Manson followers. Fromme carried out her assassination attempt while the President walked from Senator Hotel to the California state capitol building, but her gun never went off.

SARA JANE MOORE

Moore lived many lives—nursing school dropout, Women's Army Corps recruit, businesswoman, and a member of the radical left. She married four times and had four children. Moore volunteered as a double agent between the FBI and San Francisco radical underground but was dropped after telling friends about being an informant. Fearing retribution from the left, Moore's assassination attempt outside San Francisco's Saint Francis Hotel was a way of making amends and demonstrating her solidarity with the movement.



Though Moore's actions are unrelated to Fromme's, both events took place in California and within 17 days of each other. In addition, both women escaped from Alderson Federal Prison in West Virginia (and were later caught), where they were serving life sentences. Moore and Fromme were released on parole in 2007 and 2009, respectively.

WOMAN SHOOTS AT FORD IN S.F. STREET

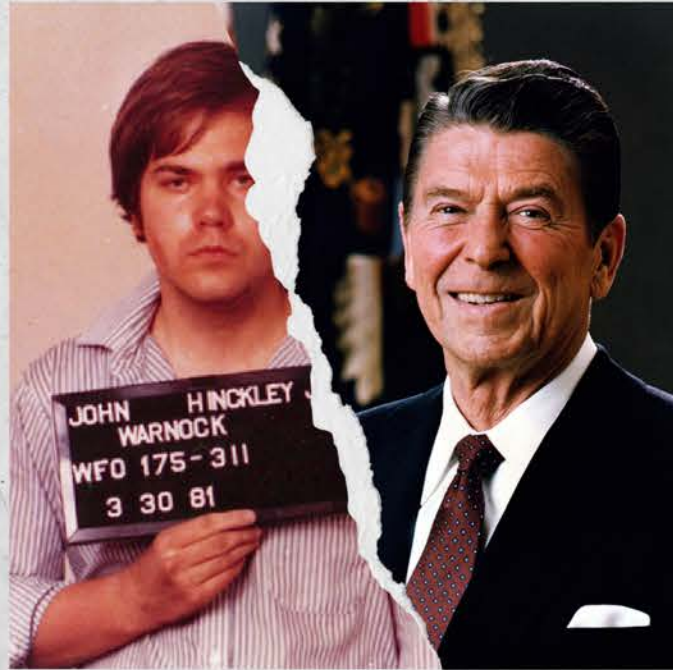


THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

Charles Manson led the "Manson Family", a commune in California in the late 1960s. The Manson Family consisted of anywhere between ten and fifty people at a time, mostly women who thought of themselves as servants to Manson and the other men in the group.

Manson believed an apocalyptic race war was beginning, which he called "Helter Skelter" after a Beatles song of the same name. He and his followers believed that specific murders would start the war, and committed a series of murders in 1969. Manson was convicted of conspiracy to commit the murders of Sharon Tate and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, murders committed by members of the Manson Family under his instruction. He was sentenced to death, but his sentence was changed to life imprisonment with a change in California state law. He died in 2017 at Corcoran Prison in Bakersfield, CA.

JOHN HINCKLEY & THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON PRES. RONALD REAGAN



Unlike many of the other assassins, Hinckley was raised in an affluent family. Coming of age in 1970s America, Hinckley “had two goals in life: to be rich like his father, and to be famous, unlike his father” (Clarke). Hinckley suffered from a delusional disorder and was socially and emotionally isolated growing up; he dropped out of college in 1976 and moved to Hollywood, supposedly working on his music while living off money sent by his parents.

Becoming obsessed with Jodie Foster after *Taxi Driver* (1976), Hinckley’s assassination attempt was done to impress her and gain her “respect and love.” The event took place as Reagan was entering a limousine outside the Washington Hilton in DC; Reagan was struck but recovered. Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, where he stayed for 34 years before being released in 2016. Foster later wrote in *Esquire* that Hinckley’s “greatest crime was the confusion of love and obsession.”



👉 You can read Hinckley's last letter to Foster [here](#).



Top left: Los Angeles Times Newspaper, Bottom Left: from animated TV series *American Dad*, Right: Jodie Foster on cover of *People Magazine*.



THIS YEAR IN HISTORY...

Jodie Foster's first significant film role was at age 13 in the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, for which she was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. After a highly successful child-acting career, Foster made a slow transition to adult acting roles, eventually becoming an award-winning star for her work as an adult, as well.

AFTER THE SHOW: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What connections do you notice between assassins? Why do you think Sondheim and Weidman put certain assassins "in conversation" with one another, such as Fromme/Moore, Fromme/Hinckley, and Booth/Oswald? How might these connections be fueled by the assassins' identity and values as American?
- In what ways does the spread of news and information shift throughout the show, such as how each assassination event is reported? In particular, how does "Something Just Broke" demonstrate how national grief is felt? Additionally, take note of the different political comics, news headlines, and more throughout this study guide. Take note of the phrasing used.
- Sondheim is known as the master of *pastiche*, or the imitation of other periods and styles. What musical phrases and moments in the show help to signal specific time periods within the show?
- How do the Balladeer and Proprietor represent different attitudes and approaches towards the American Dream?
- Since its 2004 Broadway run, productions of *Assassins* like ours frequently have the performer playing Balladeer also play Lee Harvey Oswald. What is the effect of this "doubling"? What other musicals utilize doubling, and to what effect?



SOURCES CONSULTED

- Character biographies sourced from MTI's study guide for *Assassins*, and National Park Service.
- "This year in history..." sections pulled from Milwaukee Rep, History.com, and MTI.
- Newspaper headline photos from RareNewspapers.com, Yesterday's Newspapers.
- Various photos from Wikipedia and The Smithsonian.
- Political Cartoons pulled from Library of Congress.
- American Red Cross Founding: <https://samoaglobalnews.com/american-red-cross-founded-may-21/>
- For more political cartoons on Nixon's impeachment: <https://thenib.com/richard-nixons-impeachment-herblock-cartoons/>

