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Sondheim and Authorship: *Assassins* as a Case Study

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
For the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Landon Lee Bain

Committee in charge:

Professor Nancy Guy, Chair

Professor Anthony Davis

Professor Sarah Hankins

2017

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

To My Family: The More That Things Change, the More They Stay the Same.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SIGNATURES.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF EXAMPLES.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS.....	viii
I. SONDHEIM: AUTEUR OR COLLABORATOR?.....	1
II. STAGING VIOLENCE ON BROADWAY.....	10
“The Show Will Live On:” <i>Assassins</i> at the Playwright Horizons Theater, 1990-91.....	16
“ That Was Then and This is Now:” <i>Assassins</i> at Studio 54, 2004.....	22
III. SONDHEIM’S MUSICAL VOICE IN ASSASSINS.....	30
IV. CONCLUSION.....	55
REFERENCES.....	58

LIST OF EXAMPLES

Example 1	47
Example 2	48
Example 3	48
Example 4	49
Example 5	50

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Sondheim and Authorship: *Assassins* as a Case Study

by

Landon Lee Bain

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Nancy Guy, Chair

The music and lyrics of Stephen Sondheim (1930-) have shaped and influenced American musical theater from the mid-twentieth century onward. Sondheim's vaunted career has been nothing if not diverse in scope and content; however, Sondheim has become particularly known for creating heady, intellectual, and often subversive musicals, incorporating complex music, tightly crafted lyrics, and conceptual innovations.

This penchant for innovation has earned Sondheim a reputation as something of an auteur, an artist with a singular vision and approach, which often overshadows the contributions of his collaborators. However, musical theater, by its nature, is a collaborative art form, and as such, to minimize the authorial input of Sondheim's collaborators is unnecessarily reductive and, ultimately, inattentive to the medium itself.

In this thesis, I explore issues of collaboration and reception history through the theoretical lens of authorship, using the musical *Assassins*, with music and lyrics by Sondheim and a libretto by John Weidman, as a case study. My analysis focuses on the 1990 off-Broadway production and the more successful 2004 Broadway revival, giving an account of the musical's evolution over time, examining the artistic contributions of Sondheim and Weidman's collaborators, and teasing out the possible reasons behind the disparate reception histories of both productions. Also of concern is the notion of Sondheim's "authorial" voice, musically speaking, and how, building upon the work of musicologist Steve Swayne, Sondheim's frequent use of intertextuality and stylistic imitation puts pressure on the notion of a singular musical voice.

I. Sondheim: Auteur or Collaborator?

The academic study of musical theater as a genre is, in some ways, just beginning to gain recognition as a serious area of scholarly inquiry. As Scott McMillin notes, musicals, often dismissed as light entertainment or crass populist theater, do not appear suitable subjects for textual analysis or serious aesthetic criticism.¹ McMillin, in addressing this issue, turns the tables on academia: “In my courses on musical theatre at Cornell University...I ask the students not to wonder if the musical is up to the standards of the university but if the standards of the university are up to dealing with the musical. Can we bring our ways of academic thinking to bear on this form of American drama?”² Indeed, McMillin argues that musical theater, as an enduring form of popular entertainment, requires no help from the university in terms of prosperity or recognition.³ This is not some austere, academic art form, which alienates the public and thus requires the conservationist efforts of scholars to endure – musical theater is a living, thriving artistic medium. As such, I agree with McMillin’s assertion that it is the responsibility of academics to adapt our methods to the task of studying musicals.

This proposition, however, is still a challenging one. Can we talk about *Show Boat* in the same manner that literary critics speak of *The Sound and the Fury*? Do the requisite analytical approaches still apply? Or, from a musicological perspective, can we

¹ McMillin, xi.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

approach musicals with rigor equal to that of a Beethoven symphony? Scholars with a more pluralist aesthetic orientation may roll their eyes at these comparative binaries, but the methodological challenges presented by musicals are undeniable. Perhaps the most prominent correlate genre to musical theater is that of western opera. Opera, itself at times denigrated as mere entertainment by critics and academics, has gone on to become an important scholarly topic. In the context of contemporary musicology, there is certainly no shortage of representation for opera scholarship.

Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama*, first published in 1956, proved pivotal in securing scholarly prestige for the contemporary study of opera. Kerman famously advanced the formulation of the "composer as dramatist," an ideal directly derived from Wagnerian theory, intended to counter what Kerman thought to be the ignorant claims of critics in the 1940's and 50's: "Dramatic critics of a pronounced literary bent...feel that because of a characteristic lack of detailed reference, music cannot qualify ideas and therefore cannot define drama in any meaningful way."⁴ Aside from Kerman's defense of music's ability to "articulate the drama" in opera, he was also concerned with what he saw as a lack of critical discretion in the programming of opera houses: "In our opera houses, art and *Kitsch* alternate night after night, with the same performers and the same audience, to the same applause, and with the same critical sanction. Confusion about the worth of opera is bound to exist when no distinction is made between works like *Orfeo* and *The Magic Flute* on the one hand, and like *Salome* and *Turnadot* on the other."⁵

⁴ Kerman, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Another of Kerman's goals, then, was to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were – to make a clear distinction between high-minded opera and those works which give opera a bad name.

Important as Kerman's text is in the history of the field, it cannot help now but sound dated in its advocacy of tired Wagnerian tropes about the unity of music and drama, and its dismissive remarks about works by composers like Puccini and Strauss. Fortunately, opera scholarship has largely moved beyond Kerman's text-centric analytic framework, embracing feminist approaches to opera criticism (McClary 1991, Smart 2004), the politics of race (Andre et al., 2012), performance studies (Smart 2004), and the historical and ethnographic study of performers and performance practice (Gossett 2006, Guy 2015). This list is, of course, only a miniscule cross-section of scholarly writing on opera since Kerman's monograph.

Scholarly work on musical theater (and to some degree, musical theater itself) has lived somewhat in the shadow of opera and opera studies, aspiring to the prestige of its more venerated relative, and following a similar trajectory of theoretical progression. Indeed, Joseph P. Swain's 1990 study of musicals, and in particular the music of musicals, explicitly follows Kerman's *Opera as Drama* as a theoretical model: "The perspective adopted in this survey, then, is one as old as the very idea of combining music and drama. The music of a good musical play informs the drama that contains it...this perspective is perhaps best articulated in modern times by Joseph Kerman in his

Opera and Drama.”⁶ Again, much like Kerman in the 1950’s, Swain’s goal was to defend musical theater from its detractors, to assert its musical and dramatic value, and to thereby make it a reputable academic subject. However, Swain’s analytic framework, like Kerman’s, was ultimately limited by an emphasis on the text as a unified whole, focusing foremost on how music contributes to and shapes the drama of the play. Though, it must be noted that Swain fully concedes that the focused nature of his study neglects much of the collaborative work that goes into creating a music theater production: “Collaboration in the musical theater meant not only that a composer might work with a lyricist and librettist, but also a director, an orchestrator, a choreographer, a set designer, and all the other technicians of the stage, to say nothing of actors and actresses.”⁷ Swain goes on to make an important and oft-repeated argument: that the contributions of these artists to the ontology of a music theater work are ultimately difficult to account for, because they are “more fragile and less easily transmitted than music and lyrics.”⁸ This is a difficult point to argue against – the very legibility and accessibility of scores, lyrics, and librettos make them logical starting points for those interested in studying musical theater, and thus the most valued components of a music theater work.

It is easier, then, in the study of a collaborative art form like musical theater, to speak of these more prescriptive components, and their respective author, or authors. Per McMillin, according to Wagnerian theories of dramatic unity, it is the responsibility of the author to unify the “radically discordant elements” of musical theater into a coherent

⁶ Swain, 1.

⁷ Ibid., 410.

⁸ Ibid., 411.

whole.⁹ According to this theory, it takes an artist, or artists, with immense creative vision to accomplish this. Names like George Gershwin or Rodgers and Hammerstein spring to mind, but in terms of contemporary music theater, perhaps no name carries with it more authorial weight than that of Stephen Sondheim.

The music and lyrics of Stephen Sondheim (1930-) have shaped and influenced American musical theater from the mid-twentieth century onward. Sondheim's vaunted career has been nothing if not diverse in scope and content; however, Sondheim has become particularly known for creating heady, intellectual, and often subversive musicals, incorporating complex music, tightly crafted lyrics, and conceptual innovations. This penchant for innovation has earned Sondheim a reputation as something of an auteur,¹⁰ an artist with a singular vision and approach, which often overshadows the contributions of his collaborators.

As Stephen Banfield notes in the introductory chapter to the recent *Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies* (telling titled "Sondheim's Genius"), "Throughout a working life of six decades in the musical theater, Stephen Sondheim has by virtue of this medium been both collaborator and auteur. Yet the name Sondheim has far outweighed those of his colleagues and his milieu in academic discussion."¹¹ Banfield attributes this to the uniquely "compelling "and "forceful" nature of Sondheim's "creative will," and

⁹ McMillin, 3-4.

¹⁰ My use of the term auteur in reference to Sondheim proceeds from film scholar John Caughie's definition of *auteurism*: namely, auteurism is the assumption that "a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director...in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist, a film is more than likely to be the expression of his individual personality...this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director's films." See: Caughie, 9.

¹¹ Banfield, 11.

the level of detail in his scores and lyrics, which engenders the obsessive scrutiny of connoisseurs and scholars.¹² Ultimately, Banfield argues, “let us not begrudge Sondheim his following or deplore his self-justificatory obsessiveness so long as he continues to inhabit and be buffeted around the dirty, messy, imperfectly collaborative world...of modern musical theater.”¹³

Banfield makes a persuasive, if somewhat breathless, case for Sondheim the auteur, especially for those who already think of Sondheim an exemplary artist – I include myself among that group. Indeed, Sondheim’s name is the first word of this thesis, and arguably its focus. However, as I have already emphasized, musical theater, by its nature, is a thoroughly collaborative art form, and as such, to minimize the authorial input of Sondheim’s collaborators is unnecessarily reductive and ultimately inattentive to the medium itself. What happens if we focus on a more distributed authorship, and by extension more on collaboration, when approaching a so-called Sondheim musical?

For one thing, it becomes apparent how powerful a signifier a name can be. As Michel Foucault argues, an author’s name serves to structure discourse: “it points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture...the name of the author remains at the contours of texts – separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence.”¹⁴ Thus, the very name Sondheim carries with it a discursive power, dictating how we talk

¹² Ibid., 11, 19, 23.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Foucault, 284.

about these musicals as discrete texts, or works, how we define them aesthetically, and how they relate to other works, both in the “Sondheim canon” and in musical theater more broadly. The power of the name, then, is intimately tied to notions of the work, and of the “work-concept,” as defined by Lydia Goehr (2007). If we begin to pull at the strings of a name, and thereby at auteurist conceptions of authorship, the notion of the work as discrete entity bearing the stamp of a singular author begins to unravel. This opens the opportunity for new ways of approaching these musicals, attentive to issues of collaboration, reception history, and modes of production often ignored by a singular focus on Sondheim.

Scholarly work on musical theater has begun to embrace this approach: the *Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (2011) contains chapters addressing the full spectrum of music theater production, reception, and criticism, including direction, set, costume, and lighting design, orchestration, acting, singing, and dance and choreography, as well as issues of audience reception, class, gender and sexuality, and race. Regarding issues of authorship and text, Jim Lovensheimer, in the second chapter of the handbook, notes that the critical interrogation of what constitutes a “text” and “author” in musical theater is one of the most pressing scholarly issues for those concerned with the academic study of the genre, and that any “solution” to this must be, by definition, interdisciplinary: “only when the seemingly disparate disciplines of literary theory, theater studies, and musicology are deployed to create a cooperative critical system is any

headway made toward reaching a satisfactory definition, or definitions, of ‘texts’ and ‘authors’ for use in studying the musical.”¹⁵

These complex issues of text, authorship, and collaboration are not solely confined to the world of musical theater, however. In his work on George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, musicologist Ryan Raul Bañagale approaches the *Rhapsody* not as a work, but rather as an arrangement, a mutable product of multiple authors in collaborative dialogue. Drawing on a term popularized by Deleuze and Guattari, Bañagale treats each arrangement of the *Rhapsody* “as its own plateau....no single plateau offers the ultimate or pinnacle interpretation of the larger landscape. Rather, it is only when they are taken together that a representative topography emerges. The arrangements addressed in this book remap the terrain of the *Rhapsody* in this way and ultimately reflect a broader vision of the work.”¹⁶

Using the methodological approach of Bañagale – substituting the idea of arrangements for that of productions – to address the issues raised by Lovensheimer, this thesis explores issues of collaboration and reception history through the theoretical lenses of authorship and text, using the musical *Assassins*, with music and lyrics by Sondheim and a libretto by John Weidman, as a case study. Chapter II focuses on the 1990 off-Broadway production and the more successful 2004 Broadway revival, giving an account of the musical’s evolution over time, examining the artistic contributions of Sondheim

¹⁵ Lovensheimer, “Texts and Authors,” 21.

¹⁶ Bañagale, 9-10.

and Weidman's collaborators, and teasing out the possible reasons behind the disparate reception histories of both productions.

Chapter III addresses the notion of Sondheim's "authorial" voice, musically speaking. I draw on Roland Barthes' notion of intertextuality to address this particular variety of authorship, somewhat distinct from the previous chapter's focus on more literal notions of collaboration and the process of production. As Barthes argues, a text is "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."¹⁷ Building upon the work of musicologist Steve Swayne, I argue that Sondheim's frequent use of intertextuality and stylistic imitation puts pressure on the notion of a singular musical voice. My analysis focuses on the song "Something Just Broke," its relation to the other songs in *Assassins*, its musical referentiality, its effect on the dramatic arc of the show, and its subsequent reception by critics and scholars. I conclude in Chapter IV by briefly discussing the legacy and influence of *Assassins*, and its continued evolution as a music theater work.

¹⁷ Barthes, 211.

II. Staging Violence on Broadway

The musical *Assassins*, with music and lyrics by Sondheim and a book by John Weidman, stands out among Sondheim's repertoire, and musical theater generally, for its sardonic take on violent and politically fraught subject matter. Giving voice to the would-be and successful killers of American presidents, Sondheim and Weidman present their disenfranchised antagonists in a surreal take on a carnival shooting game, with the assassins waiting for a turn to tell their story and the chance to take a shot at a president. Aside from portraying violent acts and giving voice to violent people, the musical arguably commits an act of symbolic violence against American nationalism, rendering the rhetoric of idealism bankrupt in the wake of disillusionment and failure, and taking aim at musical theater itself as complicit in the propagation of the American dream mythos.

In this chapter, I examine the various ways in which violence is "staged" in *Assassins*, beginning with an analysis of the 1990 off-Broadway production, and then focusing on the more successful 2004 Broadway revival, which was nominated for seven Tony Awards, and went on to win five. My use of the term "staged" here has multiple meanings: on the one hand, I am concerned with set design and staging, particularly Robert Brill's work on the 2004 revival. On the other hand, the term staging also encompasses direction, the use of diegetic sound, performative gesture, and the ways in which these disparate parts are sympathetic to, or push against the musical score. Building upon scholarly work concerning music, violence, and censorship by Martin Cloonan, Bruce Johnson, and Martin Scherzinger, and musical theater scholarship by Raymond Knapp and Lauren Acton, I attempt to theorize the portrayal of onstage

violence in *Assassins*, while also giving an account of the musical's evolution over time, highlighting the roles of the various collaborators involved, and teasing out the possible reasons behind the disparate reception histories of both productions. The portrayal of overt violence,¹⁸ or even of violent people, is a rare thing in the history of American musical theater, and musical theater more broadly. As musicologist and music theater scholar Lauren Acton notes, musicals are generally regarded as “lighthearted fare with accessible stories and music. Most stories are comic, rather than tragic, and happy endings are nearly universal.”¹⁹ Thus, Acton continues, when violence does occur in musicals, it “usually occurs within the constrained boundaries that delineate the real world from the world of musicals” and is most often wrought by the villain, or “outsider” character (Acton uses the character of Jud from *Oklahoma!* as an example).²⁰ Furthermore, violence and violent acts are rarely left unresolved, and violent people seldom go unpunished, in the world of musical theater.

But what about the idea of symbolic, or ideological violence? If, as Raymond Knapp argues, the central theme of the American musical is the formation, and propagation, of a unified national identity, portrayals of symbolic violence would appear to be counterproductive, even harmful.²¹ For example, a musical like *South Pacific* (1949), though tangentially connected to the physical violence of warfare via the use of the Pacific Theater as a setting, was controversial ultimately because it openly challenged

¹⁸ My use of the word “violence” here follows Lauren Acton’s definition: “I use violence as an umbrella term that includes physical, psychological, or emotional attacks, aggression, or any destructive act.” I would also like to add the notion of ideological or symbolic violence to this list, a variant of violence crucial to an analysis of *Assassins*. See: Acton, 43-44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

²¹ Knapp, 7-8.

American racism and structural inequality. When violence has found its way more successfully onto the musical stage, it has generally been in the context of plots far removed from the realities of American life and from any sort of sacrosanct ideology – for example, *Little Shop of Horrors* by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, which chronicles the campy exploits of a man-eating plant and its increasingly culpable owner, or Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s *Sweeney Todd*, a musical about a murderous London barber derived from Victorian popular fiction. Neither of these topics has much in common with the day to day lives of American audience members, and as such, though they are often called “dark musicals” or “black comedies,” theirs is a mostly inoffensive brand of onstage violence.

The violence of *Assassins* differs substantially from these examples. By giving voice to historical figures who attempted or succeeded in assassinating American presidents (i.e. John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, Charles Guiteau, Sara Jane Moore), and indicting the system and values which produced these individuals, rather than the individuals themselves, Sondheim and Weidman bring a more disturbing and historically grounded portrayal of violence to the American musical stage, one that portrays physical violence in a cavalier, darkly humorous manner while at the same time critiquing deeply held beliefs about national identity. This is the kind of violence that provokes discomfort or even anger from an audience – it moves beyond mere squeamishness or titillation.

Though violence in musical theater is relatively rare, music and violence are not such strange bedfellows. Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan argue that popular and vernacular musics have always, to some degree, engaged with representations of

violence, “narratives about violent people or violent acts.”²² However, they continue by arguing that “popular music’s fascination with violence has increased,” mirroring the teleology of an increasingly violent modernity: “the scale of twentieth-century violence and the mass mediation of music have intensified interest in the musical representation of violence and pluralized its manifestations and functional possibilities.”²³ They go on to argue that the delayed success of *Sweeney Todd* and *Assassins* is evidence of a growing audience interest in aestheticized violence:

Sweeney Todd, the Fleet Street barber who supposedly murdered his customers and cooked them into pies, was staged in the nineteenth century, but turned into a musical by Steven [sic] Sondheim in 1979 and in 2008 became a film musical starring Johnny Depp. His 1990 off-Broadway musical cavalcade of US presidential assassins (*Assassins*) enjoyed much greater success when revived in 2004. The history of such music is an instructive supplement to the growing aestheticization of violence.²⁴

While Johnson and Cloonan’s sweeping claim that popular music’s fascination with violence has grown in tandem with increasing manifestations of violence in modernity begs to be contested, it is outside the scope of this thesis to do so. However, I do take issue with their characterization of the respective reception histories of *Sweeney Todd* and *Assassins*. To be sure, these works are mere footnotes in Johnson and Cloonan’s larger argument, but to attribute their eventual success entirely to changing audience tastes, particularly in the case of *Assassins*, ignores the complex nuances of their respective reception histories and the specificities of the American musical as a

²² Johnson and Cloonan, 65.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

genre. To do so minimizes the role that different versions/revivals played in the eventual success of *Assassins*, one of my primary interests here. Instead, by way of implication, Johnson and Cloonan posit these musicals as static, unchanging works, and fail to consider the influence of cultural and historical context.

Indeed, *Assassins* should not be understood as a musical that trades in violence for its own sake. To the contrary, the representation of violence in *Assassins* is never (intentionally) meant to glorify the violent acts of the titular characters, but rather to critique the system which gave rise to them. Per Sondheim: “Nobody at the end of the show should feel that we have been excusing or sentimentalizing these people. 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.”²⁵ Jim Lovensheimer echoes this sentiment, arguing that in the context of the show, the actions of the assassins are understood to be “expressions of their hopeless and powerless positions in a system that seems, to them, to have been designed for the well-being of someone else.”²⁶ In short, as summarized by Knapp, *Assassins* takes as its subject “the violent underside of the American dream.”²⁷

The myth of the American dream, integral to the ideas of American nationalism and exceptionalism, is one of the foremost “American Mythologies” (to borrow the term

²⁵ Dominic Cavendish, “Stephen Sondheim, Interview: ‘I’m Not Pretentious, I’m a Product of Broadway,’” *The Telegraph*, December 1st, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/11265220/Stephen-Sondheim-interview-Im-not-pretentious-Im-a-product-of-Broadway.html>

²⁶ Lovensheimer, 212.

²⁷ Knapp, 165.

from Knapp) to be played out on the musical stage.²⁸ Indeed, the American dream mythos posits an unattainable reality, an America in which equal opportunity for happiness and success is afforded to all. This vision of equality and the celebration of difference rests on the ideals of “inclusiveness and reconciliation” said to embody the spirit of American nationalism, what Knapp calls the “melting pot” model.²⁹ The “melting pot” model at once ostensibly reflects American society as it presently is, and also expresses a sort of utopian longing for what America might become, an America otherwise. However, as Knapp notes, “that America’s own historical realities sometimes get grossly misrepresented in the process is perhaps the inevitable by-product of mythologizing on the one hand, and an inevitable shortfall between ideals and reality on the other.”³⁰ It is precisely the “shortfall between ideals and reality”³¹ that *Assassins* addresses – and the immediacy of its politics and incisiveness of its critique make it a sort of anti-utopian musical par excellence. This attack on American mythology (Knapp characterizes *Assassins* as an example of “Counter-Mythology”), fundamentally an act of symbolic violence, is perhaps the most violent thing about the musical.³²

It is worthwhile here to explain my use of the terms “utopian,” and “anti-utopian,” when referencing *Assassins*. Regarding the definition “utopianism,” Richard Taruskin comments thusly: “Recalling Thomas More’s original coinage – the word utopia literally means “noplace” – it is obviously an orientation away from reality toward...what?”

²⁸ Ibid., 119.

²⁹ Ibid., 122.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 153.

Something different? Something better? What could be wrong with that?”³³ Taruskin is suspicious of Utopian thinking, and it is this same suspicion that underpins Sondheim and Weidman’s work in *Assassins*. The American dream, and American nationalist mythology more broadly, is the product of utopian thought; however, it is crucial to note, as Taruskin does, that “what utopians envision is not a better world. It is a perfect world.” This, Taruskin concludes, is what makes utopian thinking dangerous, because “if perfection is the aim, and compromise taboo, there will always be a shortfall to correct – a human shortfall.”³⁴ It is not much of a stretch to apply this line of reasoning to *Assassins*: deprived of the American utopia they were supposedly promised, their right to happiness and fulfillment denied, the assassins attack the nation’s figurehead to obtain visibility and some semblance of achievement. The life of a president is the human price to be paid for this “shortfall between ideals and reality.” It is for this reason that I refer to *Assassins* as an “anti-utopian” musical: it is, of course, in no way utopian, but neither is it dystopian. Rather than warning of some future crisis, *Assassins* addresses the crisis of the here and now, its critique grounded by historical and cultural specificity and immediacy.

“The Show Will Live On:” Assassins at the Playwrights Horizons Theatre, 1990-91

As far as Sondheim openings go, the premiere production of *Assassins* was not entirely out of the ordinary, given his widely noted penchant for strange, idiosyncratic musicals. The show opened on December 18th, 1990, off-Broadway at the Playwrights Horizons Theater in New York City, and closed on February 16th, 1991, after seventy-three

³³ Taruskin, xi.

³⁴ Ibid., xii.

performances.³⁵ Though the production was financially successful, it failed to make the transition to a larger theater on Broadway, and contemporary critical reviews, while somewhat varied, tended towards a negative or mixed reception. In general, critics were nonplussed by the musical's sardonic treatment of its subject matter and its frequent shifts in tone.

Already a controversial topic for a piece of American musical theater, the work's conceptual structure, based on the vaudeville-style revue, did little to make it more palatable. Writing in the *New York Post*, critic Clive Barnes was left unconvinced by the combination, writing that all in all, *Assassins* "adds up to an odd, uncertain evening."³⁶ David Patrick Stearns of *USA Today* mentioned the production's "gleeful bad taste" in his review, while *Variety* traded in puns, writing that of the many shots fired during the show, "few of them hit their mark."³⁷ In his review for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich referred to *Assassins* as "an anti-musical about anti-heroes,"³⁸ and though he was overall critical of the production, he was quick to add that "Mr. Sondheim has real guts," arguing that the "target of American complacency...is a valuable one."³⁹ Furthermore, in a moment of preemptive reception history, Rich discussed the potential effects of the

³⁵ "Assassins," in The Stephen Sondheim Reference Guide, accessed January 28th, 2016, <http://www.sondheimguide.com/assassins.html>.

³⁶ David J. Fox, "Critics Say 'Assassins' Will Have to Bite the Bullet," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29th, 1991, accessed January 28th, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-01-29/entertainment/ca-251_1_stephen-sondheim.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Raymond Knapp has convincingly countered this claim, arguing that *Assassins*, rather than being an anti-musical, "builds deftly and knowingly on existing traditions," and that the characters themselves are not anti-heroes, but rather "people who desperately want *in* to American society, and will kill to do it." See: Knapp, 164.

³⁹ Frank Rich, "Review/Theater; Sondheim and Those Who Would Kill," *New York Times*, January 28th, 1991, accessed January 29th, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/28/theater/review-theater-sondheim-and-those-who-would-kill.html?scp=1&sq=&pagewanted=1>.

contemporaneous Persian Gulf War on the public and critical reception of *Assassins*:

“This is not a message that audiences necessarily want to hear at any time, and during the relatively jingoistic time of war in which this production happens to find itself, some may regard such sentiments as incendiary.”⁴⁰ Perhaps the review of *Assassins* most typical of Sondheim reception, however, was written by critic Laura Winer for *Newsday*. Winer argued that while Sondheim’s “doubters” had been wrong regarding his ability to write unconventional musicals like *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, in the case of *Assassins*, “unfortunately, this time the doubters were right.”⁴¹

As exemplified by Frank Rich’s review, the increase in patriotism and the call for national unity which accompanied the Gulf War weighed heavily on those who saw and reviewed *Assassins* during its initial run. It seems that many thought the show was doomed from the start, though André Bishop, artistic director at the time of Playwright Horizons, maintained even in 1991 that the war had little to do with the critical reception of the musical and its failure to transition to Broadway:

In retrospect, I don’t feel that the war had much to do with the show’s critical reception (mostly negative) or with its relatively brief run, although I am sure in years to come people will blame the show’s supposed failure (i.e., brief run) on its unfortunate timing, just as history tends to blame the “failure” of other New York shows on newspaper strikes or blizzards. I know for those of us who worked on *Assassins* the show was a triumph.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fox, “Critics Say.”

⁴² Bishop, vii.

While noting the negative reaction from critics, Bishop went on to assert that they (he and the cast, crew, and creators of *Assassins*) “were surprised and heartened by the enthusiasm of audiences and by the long lines of people waiting for ticket cancellations every night.”⁴³ This assertion contrasts with John Weidman’s later account: writing in 2004 on the heels of the successful Broadway revival, Weidman recalled that the premiere production of *Assassins* “received a uniformly chilly reception from the critics and, on most nights, and equally chilly reception from the 147 subscribers who crowded into the tiny theater at Playwrights Horizons where it was performed.”⁴⁴ For Weidman, in retrospect, audiences and critics alike were unprepared for the musical’s subversive tone and controversial subject matter.

It is intriguing that Weidman does not mention the impact of the Gulf War in this retrospective account. While Bishop downplayed the war’s influence on the show’s reception in his 1991 preface to the published edition of the libretto, and Weidman ignores it entirely in his liner notes for the 2004 Broadway cast recording, I argue that the war played a pivotal role not only in the reception of *Assassins* but also in its creation. If, as Knapp explains, the musical has “the specific capacity and implicit charge of projecting a mainstream sense of ‘America’ – of what America is, what it was not, and what it might become,” and this projected sense of “America” reflects the specific historical and political moment of the musical (i.e. *Hair* and the counterculture of the 1960s, *Candide* and McCarthyism), then it should come as no surprise that *Assassins* came about when it did, functioning as a sardonic antidote to jingoism and blind

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Weidman, Liner Notes.

patriotism during a time of war. *Assassins*, I would argue, is inescapably a product of its historical moment.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, video recordings of the initial run at Playwrights Horizons, as far as I can tell, do not exist or are not widely available. However, the published version of the libretto contains many professionally shot black and white photographs of the production, which are valuable visual records. The costume design by William Ivey Long, as represented in these photos, appears to have been historically informed and somewhat understated, modestly presenting the assassins as they were, or were imagined to be, in effect humanizing them. The actors' makeup reflects this humanization, making no attempt at garish othering, opting instead for standard stage contouring. Loren Sherman's set design, as stated in a note before the "Cast of Characters" list in the libretto, "relied heavily on the use of slides and projections. Some were projections of period engravings or photographs depicting presidents, assassins, or assassinations. Others simply set the scene: The Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo; a public park."⁴⁶

Though this approach was almost certainly a creative solution to budget constraints, it is notable for its lack of spectacle. The historical reality of these characters and their deeds is unflinchingly portrayed via discrete documentation from which the audience cannot be easily distracted, though the shooting gallery set is a notable exception – one which set designer Robert Brill would build upon for the 2004 revival. Also notable is the use of darkly ironic product placement, both in the set design and the

⁴⁵ Knapp, 8; 153.

⁴⁶ Sondheim and Weidman.

actual libretto (i.e. the bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken referenced by Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and Sara Jane Moore in scene six; the Burger King bag and wrapper scornfully discarded by Samuel Byck in scene fourteen). Sondheim’s score, according to Weidman, was performed “by a stripped down, three-piece band,” a less than ideal realization that failed to “deliver all the richness and texture in these rich and complex songs.”⁴⁷ The ensemble at the initial performance consisted of musical director Paul Gemignani on drums and percussion, Paul Ford on piano, and orchestrator Michael Starobin on synthesizers.⁴⁸ Starobin would expand this orchestration for the 1991 cast recording and eventually produce a version for full orchestra to accompany the 2004 production and the subsequent recording.⁴⁹

Some of the most vivid descriptions of the Playwrights Horizons production come from Bishop’s preface, introduced as his “favorite moments and images.”⁵⁰ These reports capture with an exquisite attention to detail the performances of the individual actors and their contributions to *Assassins*. Bishop recounts Jonathan Hadry’s performance as Charles Guiteau as powerfully unhinged, particularly during his execution scene: “An out-of-the-body shriek: Jonathan Hadry as Charles Guiteau reaching the top of the scaffold, a noose around his neck, and defiantly yelling into the void ‘I shall be remembered!’ , his eyes bulging, his body shaking.”⁵¹ Bishop also notes that scene five, in which Terry Mann’s Leon Czolgosz professes his love for Lyn Greene’s Emma

⁴⁷ Weidman, Liner Notes

⁴⁸ *Assassins*, Sondheim Reference Guide

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵⁰ Bishop, Preface.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Goldman, “always” received a round of applause from the audience “for the unaffected sincerity of the writing and the playing.”⁵² Bishop argues that this “unaffected sincerity” was due in part to the refusal of Sondheim and Weidman to include a “bittersweet ballad at the end of it,” a choice that would typify Broadway convention, opting instead for understatement and affective expression on the part of the actors. Bishop in particular was struck by “the look on Terry Mann’s face, and the moment when he helped Lyn Greene [Emma Goldman] carry her suitcase.”⁵³ In researching this production, I am left with the impression that this was a profoundly human version of *Assassins*, one in which the titular characters were made as relatable as possible to the audience. There was little attempt on the part of the production team, as far as I can tell, to hide their actions and ideologies behind artifice and spectacle. These moments of humanization, however, likely clashed spectacularly with the more darkly ironic or subversive moments in the musical (i.e. Guiteau’s hanging, the campiness of “How I Saved Roosevelt”), and perhaps it was due to these shifts in tone that *Assassins* was generally thought to be an “odd, uncertain” show. Bishop certainly thought the production was a success despite its reception, and enthusiastically declared at the end of his preface to the libretto “the show will live on.”⁵⁴ And indeed it did.

“That Was Then and This Is Now:” *Assassins* at Studio 54, 2004

I argued above that the historical and cultural context of the Persian Gulf War (or First Iraq War) played a pivotal role in the creation and initial reception of *Assassins*. It is

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., xi.

tempting to claim that it is no coincidence that the Broadway revival was being formulated amidst the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, and the beginnings of the Iraq War. However, in this instance, the coinciding of the musical and these events seems to have been a case of unfortunate timing. As Weidman recalls, director Joe Mantello was already in talks with the Roundabout Theatre company about the production, and lots of pre-production work had already been completed.⁵⁵ Rehearsals for the production were to begin during the third week of September 2001; then, as Weidman states, came “the morning of September 11th. By the morning of September 12th, Steve, Joe, Todd, and I had all conferred, and almost without having to put our feelings into words, discovered that we all felt the same way. The people were in mourning and could not, and should not, be asked to struggle with the issues which *Assassins* raises – particularly given the satiric tone which it often uses in raising them. There was no way the show could engage an audience so soon after the awful events which New Yorkers and witnessed.”⁵⁶

The political climate following the September 11th attacks was certainly inhospitable to dissent; as Reebee Garofolo puts it, “this new political context included decisive conservative control over all three branches of government, legislation and executive practices that privileged national security over civil liberties, and concentration and consolidation in the music industry itself that narrowed the diversity of voices in the musical marketplace.”⁵⁷ Indeed, there were instances of outright censorship during this period; however, *Assassins* was not censored in any official sense. Rather, the decision to

⁵⁵ Weidman, Liner Notes.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Garofolo, 4.

delay the revival is an example of what one might call “prudent forbearance,” or even internal censorship. As Martin Scherzinger notes, this act of voluntary withdrawal “registers the limits of American toleration at a particular historical moment and thus functions as an ideological gauge. These limits, in turn, mark the conditioning grounds for internalized censorship.”⁵⁸ From this perspective, the decision to delay this production of *Assassins* bears a resemblance to the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s decision to cancel a performance of the choruses from John Adams’ opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* shortly after 9/11.⁵⁹

In any event, once the revival finally opened on Broadway at Studio 54 in April 2004, it became apparent that delaying the production had been the right choice. The show opened almost immediately to critical and commercial acclaim, surpassing the expectations of those involved. *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley mentioned the lavish production values of this new version, and noted that the overall set design “emphasizes their [the assassins] shared belief in their potential magnificence” and thus “their environment matches their aspirations in ways smaller productions could not.”⁶⁰ Central to the magnificence and spectacle of the set was Robert Brill’s “sprawling tower of wooden scaffolding,” which produces a sort of Brechtian sense of alienation and disconnect – such a set piece flies in the face of any sense of realism.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Scherzinger, 95.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ben Brantley, “A Demon Gallery of Glory Hounds,” *New York Times*, April 23rd, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/23/movies/theater-review-a-demon-gallery-of-glory-hounds.html?_r=1

⁶¹ Ibid.

The lighting and makeup likewise reflected this shift towards a Brechtian design aesthetic – faces are often rendered cold and pale, while awash in bright colors, emphasizing the otherworldliness of the characters and their environment. Guiteau’s gallows are made to be ridiculously tall, allowing actor Denis O’Hare ample room to cakewalk up and down before his ultimate demise, realized in darkly humorous fashion with a dummy hanging from the rafters above the stage. There are numerous examples of overstatement and mimetic gesture, in reference to both the music and the text: Guiteau’s cakewalk is realized with an exaggerated physicality that amplifies the crassly vaudevillian music and lends the scene a sense of dramatic pace, while Zangara’s execution is accompanied by American citizens marching to Souza. Intriguingly, Zangara’s musical representation, an offensively stereotypical Italian tarantella, has no accompanying movement or gesture – strapped to the electric chair, Zangara is denied representation through dance, highlighting a severe disconnect between music and physicality.

The final dramatic gesture of *Assassins* is one that demands attention: in the premiere production, and subsequent versions, the show typically ends with the assassins pointing their guns at the audience and firing. Gunshots occur throughout the show, both as diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, but the metadramatic⁶² action of aiming at the public and thereby “breaking frame” is intended to be a particularly shocking semiotic ploy. Contrary to Weidman’s contention that gesture was repeated in the revival, a bootleg

⁶² Elam, 81.

recording of a May 29, 2004, performance reveals otherwise.⁶³ At least on this occasion, it seems, the assassins point their guns straight up in the air, thereby keeping the frame, to some degree, intact – and thus, the audience is not directly implicated or confronted. This minor gestural difference underscores what is perhaps the major difference between the premiere production of *Assassins* and the 2004 revival. Given the historical circumstances of these performances – after 9/11 and during the height of the Iraq War – as Weidman notes, “Americans, particularly New Yorkers, realized in an instant that, like the president, we had all become symbols, and that as a result, we had all become targets. In 1991, when the actors on stage pointed their guns at the audience, it may have seemed like a cheap trick. When they do it in 2004, it must seem like a reminder.”⁶⁴ Frank Rich, writing about the 2004 revival, argued that the change in political climate, more than perhaps any other factor, was responsible for the production’s success:

Assassins was first seen Off Broadway just as Gulf War I was getting under way in January 1991. It received lackluster reviews (one of them by me) and vanished less than a month after its opening. Why has it become Broadway's newest hit in 2004? Though the text has been slightly tweaked, a song added and the production overhauled, it's not the show that has changed so much as the world. The huge difference in response to *Assassins* from one war in Iraq to the next is about as empirical an indicator of the larger drift of our post-9/11 culture as can be found.⁶⁵

Crucially, both Rich and Weidman point out that show gained a new relevance and topicality after the 9/11 attacks and the advent of the second Iraq War, and that the assassins began to bear a striking resemblance to the hijackers behind the attacks:

⁶³ “Assassins Broadway May 29, 2004,” YouTube, Posted By Jehan Prouvaire on June 16th, 2013. 1:43:31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vItcB9zw5EU>

⁶⁴ Weidman, Liner Notes.

⁶⁵ Frank Rich, “At Last, 9/11 Has its Own Musical,” in *The New York Times*, May 2nd, 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/02/theater/at-last-9-11-has-its-own-musical.html?_r=0

As Mr. Weidman pointed out in an interview, the assassins in his script, typified by Guiteau and Byck, are often like the young Arab hijackers of 9/11 in their ability to twist their rancid feelings of impotence and humiliation into a 'pseudo-political cause' that they think justifies their heinous acts. Presidential assassins and al Qaeda often choose their targets similarly as well: occupants of the White House, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are attacked not so much because of who they are but because they embody American power, for which their assailants have a pathological hatred.⁶⁶

I generally sympathize with Rich's assessment, but he neglects to address a crucial point of difference. Part of what made the original production of *Assassins* unnerving was the sympathy it engendered from the audience. By exposing American idealism and exceptionalism as the root cause of the assassins' disenfranchisement, the audience begins to lose a sense of how they are different from these figures they are supposed to deplore. Surely, they too have become at least marginally disillusioned with American ideals and mythology at some point. Is it simply a matter of degree, then? These are the sorts of questions earlier productions raised. And doubtless they were raised to some degree over the course of the Broadway revival. But grafting the identity of foreign hijackers and terrorists onto the assassins changes things. It may be unsettling, it may remind the audience that they have become targets, that threat of political violence against them is real, but it does not implicate the ideology of the American nation-state, and by extension the audience, in the same manner. In short, the musical's act of symbolic violence is, to some degree, mitigated.

Regardless of whether the assassins point their guns at the audience, then, the division between audience and assassins is secured. In the 2004 version, the assassins are

⁶⁶ Ibid.

perhaps more conveniently othered, and thereby the work of forging a national identity through the musical can more easily happen – we are Americans, while the assassins clearly are not, at least in any ideological sense. Such a division, I would argue, is unique to the 2004 production, and perhaps accounts for its positive reception when compared to the initial version. But of course, the success of the production cannot be entirely attributed to political climate and historical circumstance. The addition of the song “Something Just Broke,” written and premiered nearly a decade earlier during the 1993 London production, provided the audience with an alternative perspective on the violence wrought by the assassins, something sorely missing from the original production (this song, and its importance to the dramatic structure of the show, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). Joe Mantello’s stylistic flair and public notoriety, given his contemporaneous work on the award winning and highly successful musical *Wicked*, gave the revival a boost in pre-release coverage and word-of-mouth anticipation.⁶⁷ Robert Brill’s set designs moved away from the stark realism of slides and projections and towards a less literal, more theatrical landscape, replete with eye-catching set pieces like Guiteau’s gallows and the monolithic wooden apparatus that functioned as the production’s visual centerpiece.⁶⁸ Projection designer Elaine J. McCarthy’s widely noted coup de theatre – projecting the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination onto the chest of actor Neil Patrick Harris (as Lee Harvey Oswald) during the close of the Dallas book depository scene (Scene 16) provided a moment of near sublime emotional catharsis, which transitioned beautifully into the stunned mourning of “Something Just

⁶⁷ Robert Brill, pers. comm.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Broke.” Aside from the political and historical context that accompanied it, then, the 2004 production likely succeeded precisely because it had changed, and overall, quite inarguably for the better – something that Rich failed to acknowledge in his analysis. Times change, and musicals change with them. *Assassins*, in this iteration, was not the same work as when it was premiered – it, like all musicals, was (and is) a palimpsest, an aggregate of old productions combined with the innovations of a new production team, performed under new historical circumstances.

III. Sondheim's Musical Voice in *Assassins*

I have thus far been primarily concerned with a broad analysis of *Assassins*, considering reception history, political climate, and the contributions of the many creative artists involved in its production. As mentioned previously, my goal in “de-centering” Sondheim in this historical narrative should not be understood as an attempt to diminish his creative agency or to contest the fundamental role of his music and lyrics in *Assassins*; rather, my hope is that such an approach fosters a more historically rich, contextually accurate understanding of the musical while highlighting the collaborative nature of creativity in American musical theater. However, it is now time to shift the focus back to Sondheim. After all, my scholarly background is in music, rather than drama, and like many others, I suspect, it was Sondheim’s consummate music and witty lyrics that made me fall in love with this seemingly unlovable musical.

My discussion here proceeds through three sections: first, I discuss previous scholarly and critical writing on Sondheim’s general musical style, paying attention to the oft-cited dichotomy between what musicologist Steve Swayne terms his “composerly” voice and his “imitative” voice.⁶⁹ Then, I discuss *Assassins*’ eclectic score, a veritable hodgepodge of vernacular Americana and stylistic pastiche, paying attention to the way music functions as part of the show’s dramatic structure, and its connections with other Sondheim musicals, particularly *Follies* (1971). Finally, I turn to a specific song in the score, “Something Just Broke,” a song which was not included in the original 1991 production and differs drastically in style and tone from the rest of

⁶⁹ Swayne, “Hearing Sondheim’s Voices,” 11, 23.

the show. In my analysis, I address the ongoing debate about whether “Something Just Broke” belongs in *Assassins* from a dramaturgical perspective, its reception by scholars, critics, and audiences, and the way in which it was staged for the 2004 Broadway production. I argue that Sondheim’s musical voice, as exemplified by the song “Something Just Broke,” is itself a product of collaboration with various authors.

On January 31st, 2015, Lincoln Center, as part of its ongoing American Songbook series, hosted a conversation between Sondheim and American minimalist composer Steve Reich. The event, moderated by John Schaefer, was described by *New York Times* columnist Stephen Holden as a “genial two-hour-plus seminar,” in which the two composers expressed mutual admiration for each other’s style and innovations.⁷⁰ Performances of Sondheim and Reich’s music also featured prominently in the night’s proceedings, emphasizing a shared interest in, per Holden, “oscillating tones, shimmering and percussive [sounds]...for lack of a better term, [what] might be called musical pointillism.”⁷¹ Or, to put it another way, musical minimalism.

Sondheim has freely expressed his past debt to Reich, a debt particularly evident in the score for *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), a thoroughly modern musical that nabbed Sondheim and librettist (and frequent collaborator) James Lapine the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He acknowledged this debt again during the Lincoln Center gathering, immediately following a performance by Alexander Gemignani and Kate Baldwin of “Move On” from *Sunday in the Park with George*:

⁷⁰ Stephen Holden, “Melodist and Minimalist in Harmony: Sondheim and Reich at Lincoln Center,” *New York Times*, February 1st, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/arts/music/sondheim-and-reich-atlincoln-center.html?_r=0

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

JOHN SCHAEFER: In 2012, Steve [Reich], you got the gold medal for music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

STEVE REICH: Yeah, he [Sondheim] was the one that preceded me.

SCHAEFER: And you, Stephen [Sondheim], wrote a kind of induction speech for the occasion, in which you said – I’m paraphrasing here, but not by that much – “I’ve been ripping off Steve Reich for decades.”

[laughter]

SCHAEFER: What form does this musical theft take?

SONDHEIM: What the form is – and what we’re both interested in – is vamps. That’s what we spend our lives writing. And his vamps are the super-sophisticated, most imaginative and inventive ones I’ve ever heard. And you gotta get infected by that... it’s the rhythmic verve, and it’s also his chords... we share a fondness for the same harmonic structures. And for me, harmony is what makes music. I’m just exhilarated by everything he does, that’s all.⁷²

This rather breathless tribute and open admission of stylistic influence is reciprocated by Reich, and it may at first strike one as surprising to see these two ostensibly disparate artists grouped together under the common rubric of American modernism. However, as Carol J. Oja argued in her influential monograph *Making Music Modern*, American modernism has always been dynamic and multifaceted. Writing about the modernist movement in New York City during the 1920s, Oja notes that during this time, “seemingly distant points of the new-music spectrum emerged almost simultaneously – American and European, mainline and offbeat, esoteric and accessible – only to reveal that they weren’t so different after all, that difference and diversity were at modernism’s core.”⁷³ The core value of the modernist movement, a

⁷² “Reich and Sondheim: In Conversation and Performance”

⁷³ Oja, 4.

reverence for “iconoclastic, irreverent innovation,” was vague enough with regards to style and artistic medium to facilitate a spirit of unity amongst its practitioners and ideologues: per Oja, “theirs was a collective effort – a movement forged of group grit.”⁷⁴ This decade of artistic flourishing, argues Oja, set the stage for “many of the century’s major musical movements...from the political activism of the 1930s to the postmodern pluralism and focus on spirituality so prevalent late in the century.”⁷⁵ It is this mid-to-late 20th-century turn towards pluralism (less so spirituality, in the case of Sondheim) that gives rise to both Sondheim and Reich, inheritors of a rich, varied tradition of American modernism working in different musical contexts (theater and concert music). Holden closes his article about the Lincoln Center event by stating that “as much as the concert emphasized their similarities, you would never confuse Mr. Reich and Mr. Sondheim. They rule adjacent territories whose borders are sharply defined.”⁷⁶ Different, yes, but, to echo Oja, perhaps not so disparate after all.

Sondheim’s own musical voice is, however, multifaceted and dynamic – there has never been an easily identifiable “Sondheim sound.” Knapp notes Sondheim’s reputation as “both a musical modernist and a master of Broadway pastiche – the latter manifest in his particularly sure touch for re-creating song genres and subgenres,” and this strange dichotomy between Sondheim the innovator and Sondheim the imitator cuts to the heart of the present issue.⁷⁷ The challenge for critics and scholars, then, has

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁶ Holden, “Melodist and Minimalist in Harmony.”

⁷⁷ Knapp, 165.

been to parse out Sondheim's authorial voice from amidst the clamor of competing voices, many of them referential or explicitly derivative. This brings me back to the work of musicologist Steve Swayne, whose dissertation "Hearing Sondheim's Voices" (1999) and later monograph *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (2004) (along with Stephen Banfield's 1991 *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*) have proven to be the definitive works on this subject. Swayne's distinction between Sondheim's "composerly" voice and his "imitative" voice proves a useful analytic tool; indeed, as Swayne argues, Sondheim's voice "speaks in a variety of accents, some that at times sound foreign even to the speaker himself."⁷⁸ Thus follows Swayne's suggestion that it is more appropriate to speak of Sondheim's "voices," rather than any single authorial "voice."⁷⁹

So then, how do these voices sound? How can the listener effectively differentiate one from the other? Swayne presents us with two straightforward examples, both taken from the same source: the 1990 film *Dick Tracy*, directed by Warren Beatty, which featured an orchestral score by Danny Elfman and five original songs by Sondheim. Swayne argues that the song "What Can You Lose?" is a representative example of Sondheim's "composerly" voice: in its "intricacies" and its "vocabulary," this voice is a "product of the late twentieth century, a voice whose training and sophistication" sets it apart from the rest of the songs in the film.⁸⁰ In contrast, the song "More," argues Swayne, in its evocation of the style of George

⁷⁸ Swayne, 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

Gershwin, highlights Sondheim's "imitative" voice: in contrast to the "involved contrapuntal and motivic development" of "What Can You Lose?," the music of "More" "immediately invites comparison to other composers and performers, other eras, and other genres of music."⁸¹ However, as Swayne notes, "It is not as if the composerly voice is altogether silenced when he invokes these earlier convention...the music brings Gershwin to mind, while at the same time, by incorporating elements of Sondheim's natural voice, it makes Gershwin sound a bit more brittle than in one's memory of the original. Sondheim's pastiche brings to mind quirky, distorted Gershwin at best."⁸²

Returning then to the Lincoln Center American Songbook event with Sondheim and Reich, it should not be at all surprising that the musicals represented – *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Company*, and *Pacific Overtures* – generally demonstrate Sondheim's more "composerly," or modernist voice. This is the "Sondheim sound" that tends to be more critically valorized and is closer in style to the music of Reich.⁸³ The music of *Assassins*, with all its blatant borrowing, would have been spectacularly out of place at this event. How then can we account for this extreme stylistic heterogeneity? Swayne argues that it all comes back to dramatic context: "Sondheim uses a range of musical voices in pursuit of his singular voice: the voice of character delineation."⁸⁴ Swayne's formulation allows us to (mostly) do away with a hierarchical positioning of Sondheim's different voices on

⁸¹ Ibid., 23.

⁸² Ibid., 23-24.

⁸³ Swayne notes that critic Scott Ross, reviewing the songs from the film *Dick Tracy* in an issue of *The Sondheim Review*, argued that song "What Can You Lose?" is the film's best, precisely because it is not written in any immediately recognizable style. See: Swayne, 11.

⁸⁴ Swayne, 27.

an axis of high and low, and instead, investigate how these different voices meet the demands of various dramatic contexts. With this in mind, I argue that the purpose Sondheim's "imitative" voice often serves is that of conveying irony and subversion. To better illustrate this point, I proceed by summarizing the ways in which musical pastiche is utilized dramatically in *Follies*, and then show how it is used in much the same way in *Assassins*.

Sondheim's use of musical pastiche is often utilized in the service of irony and critique, and one of his more frequent subjects of critique, as Sandor Goodheart points out, is "the myth of the happy ending," a myth "that has dominated the musical stage in America and our lives as we live them in accord with that myth."⁸⁵ Goodheart turns to *Company*, and in particular, *Follies*, to illustrate this claim, and it is easy to see why: *Follies*, with its psychological drama, fragmented narrative structure, and pastiche score, has proven popular with scholars concerned with close readings of Sondheim. Goodheart's reading of *Follies* is undertaken with the aim of codifying Sondheim's aesthetics, arguing that a critique of the American Dream mythos, and more broadly of the happy ending, is central to understanding Sondheim's musicals as "a coherent body of work, which is to say, as the product of systematic choice, effort, selection."⁸⁶ Goodheart's statement is informed by a presuppositional valuing of unity – or, to put it another way, the theory of auteurism. Though I am wary of the totalizing narrative this statement gestures towards, an understanding of the subversive aesthetic prevalent in

⁸⁵ Goodheart, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Follies does provide something of a precedent for a later work like *Assassins*. My discussion of *Follies*, however, is less concerned with drawing a straight line from *Follies* to *Assassins* than it is with establishing a sense of what constitutes subversion in Sondheim, and how Sondheim's "imitative" voice is employed to this end.

That said, if one were looking for parallels between the two, a convenient starting point would be the initial critical reception. Reviews of the 1971 production of *Follies* were far from glowing. Many critics panned the work in large part because of its use of a plotless conceptual structure.⁸⁷ Frank Rich, writing as an undergraduate for *The Harvard Crimson*, proved to be the most sympathetic ear, titling his review of *Follies* "The Last Musical," in which he praised the show's subversive deconstruction of American musical theater.⁸⁸ Though Rich's review was more positive here, it seems that in the case of *Assassins*, history did repeat itself.

Of course, the central premise of *Follies* is far less blatantly provocative than that of *Assassins*. As summarized by Ann Marie McEntee, "*Follies* presented a seemingly cinematic collage of two middle-aged couples whose thirty-year reunion with one another and their younger selves proved to be their undoing."⁸⁹ It is during this confrontation between the older characters and their younger selves – in what is often referred to as the "Loveland" scene, or as Goodheart calls it, a "mini-follies" – that the musical is most structurally abstract.⁹⁰ The scene, which takes place entirely

⁸⁷ McEntee, 89.

⁸⁸ Frank Rich, "The Last Musical," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 26th, 1971, accessed January 30th,

⁸⁹ McEntee, 89.

⁹⁰ Goodheart, 26.

within the minds of the central characters, acts as a “mad theatricalization of the innermost desires and incapacities of each of the principal characters,” as portrayed by a parodic take on the *Ziegfeld Follies* – extravagant Broadway revues popular during the 1920s and 30s.⁹¹ The characters, past performers in what Sondheim and librettist James Goldman unsubtly term the *Weismann’s Follies*, appropriate the vaudeville performance style of the follies as a means of dramatizing their inner turmoil and profound dissatisfaction.⁹² In the course of this retreat into the characters’ subconscious, it becomes increasingly difficult for the audience to discern what exactly is being staged: it simultaneously is the follies – vaudevillian Broadway spectacle – and, as Goodheart states, the “madnesses of the characters...the culmination of their emotional lives as we have seen them develop.”⁹³ *Follies*, then, is a sort of postmodern spectacle - and according to McEntee, the “Loveland” sequence in particular functions as a critique, albeit a loving one, of “the formulaic, happy ending musical which had supported the theater’s star system for over fifty years.”⁹⁴ Musically, Sondheim borrowed heavily from American songwriters like Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin in his score for *Follies*, providing an soundtrack saturated with referential irony – pitch perfect for a show that is by turns both reverential and scathingly critical.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ibid., 24.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁴ McEntee, 95.

⁹⁵ Lawson-Peebles, 387.

Both McEntee and Goodheart see in *Follies* a critique of the American Dream mythos, of the happy ending, and of the “collective memory of nostalgia, which recalls only the good, but never the real.”⁹⁶ Robert L. McLaughlin, in his discussion of Sondheim and postmodernist aesthetics, adds to this list a critique of linear narrative as conducive to meaning.⁹⁷ McLaughlin calls attention to the fragmentary structure of *Follies* – the conceptual, non-linear form to which Goodheart and McEntee also refer – but argues that the work’s rejection of linear narrative structure can be understood in philosophical terms, outside of purely formal intentions. The audience, argues McLaughlin, in being confronted with the task of trying to assemble fragmentary incidents into a meaningful, coherent structure, is faced with the “limitations...of narrative making,” the epistemological insufficiencies of linearity.⁹⁸ For McLaughlin, this proves to be a unifying aesthetic in Sondheim’s work – and he proceeds by tracing this aesthetic chronologically through Sondheim’s output, all the way to *Road Show* (2008), the most recent work. *Road Show*, which premiered off-Broadway, and is another collaboration between Sondheim and Weidman, chronicles the fortune-seeking entrepreneurship of Wilson and Addison Mizner, brothers whose pursuit of happiness leads them to Florida during the land boom of the 1920s.⁹⁹ In typical Sondheim/Weidman fashion, not “all’s well that ends well” here – as McLaughlin puts it, “when the bubble burst, so did their fortunes.”¹⁰⁰ For McLaughlin, *Road Show* acts

⁹⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁹⁷ McLaughlin, 30-31.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

as a recapitulation of nearly all of Sondheim's major themes: a critique of the American dream, of the happy ending, and of linear narrative as a "means of finding meaning," a notion that here has been extended "from the area of personal identity to national identity."¹⁰¹

Returning to *Assassins* with these concepts in mind, it is quite easy to read the work through the lens of *Follies* – to tease out aesthetic commonalities. Certainly, a critique of the American Dream mythos is at the thematic forefront of the work: as McLaughlin puts it, the trite, complacent narratives of American mythmaking are rendered sinister in the mouths of well-known killers and would-be assassins.¹⁰² From a musical standpoint, *Follies* relied upon a stylistic pastiche of Americana, what Robert Lawson-Peebles refers to as a sort of cultural archaeology, as a means of conveying irony.¹⁰³ The same can be said of *Assassins* – although, as Lovensheimer points out, the stylistic gamut is much wider: the vaudevillian revue structure extends the "sources for his pastiche" into such disparate genres as "popular song styles from nineteenth-century parlour songs to 1980s pop love songs, as well as popular dance styles such as cakewalks, Sousa marches, and hoe-downs."¹⁰⁴ The genres appropriated by Sondheim change from song to song, sometimes even within the same song, and are based on which character is singing; Stephen Banfield has used the term "suites" to describe

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Lawson-Peebles, "*Follies*: Musical Pastiche and Cultural Archaeology."

¹⁰⁴ Lovensheimer, 213.

these changes in genre and tone,¹⁰⁵ which occur throughout the course of the show.¹⁰⁶ These styles, a familiar musical vocabulary for American audiences, are stripped of their comforting associations, and subverted into something strange – a musical “other.” Take, for example, the opening number, “Everybody’s Got the Right to Be Happy:” musically, the song is a quintessentially cheerful piece of twentieth-century musical theater. Lyrically, however, the song appropriates the American Dream and subverts it in such a way that assassinating a president is made to sound like a legitimate realization of the pursuit of happiness. “Unworthy of Your Love,” a duet sung by John Hinckley and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, takes as its musical source the cloying 1970s pop song, and pushes against its kitschy affect as the two characters profess their love to people who are not there – Jodie Foster and Charles Manson, respectively. As these examples illustrate, this pastiche compositional approach allows Sondheim to borrow from various vernacular and popular genres – replete with their histories and associations – which often implicitly or explicitly support or represent American idealism and the American Dream, and subvert them using the content of the lyrics and the context in which they are sung.

Thematically, *Assassins* fits comfortably with the works by Sondheim discussed previously. Like *Follies*, it renders the rhetoric of complacent American idealism bankrupt in the wake of disillusionment and failure. Likewise, *Assassins* also implicates the genre of musical theater as complicit in the propagation of the American

¹⁰⁵ Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Though even while the same character is singing, the style or genre of the music can change. For example, the shifting in the “Ballad of Guiteau” between solemn hymnody and ostentatious cakewalk.

dream mythos – in this way, both works take aim at the vapid spectacle of theater as a means of cultural critique. Finally, *Assassins*, like *Follies*, investigates the limits of a narrative-based epistemology, most evidently in the exchanges between the character of the Balladeer and the various assassins. The Balladeer presents one account of American history – a simplified, everyman’s account – that is gradually negated by the more cynical version put forward by the assassins, recalling McEntee’s comments about the “collective memory of nostalgia,” where what is recalled is the good, not necessarily the real.¹⁰⁷

Sondheim’s pastiche or “imitative” voice pervades these musicals, providing an ideal soundtrack for the critique of American culture and politics. In *Assassins*, Sondheim’s imitative voice utterly dominates, a fact that has been touted alternately as both a strength and a weakness of the show. Banfield argues that even though *Assassins* can be considered an inferior Sondheim musical due to the “derogation” of Sondheim’s authorial musical voice and its overly taut runtime, these ostensible weaknesses “can be considered part of its truthfulness: if it feels foreshortened, the fact stands as a warning and a reminder that history will probably afford new opportunities for its scope to be broadened, its episodes to be increased, its cast of characters to be extended.”¹⁰⁸ Banfield’s rather poetic justification of the original production defends its deficiencies, even as it acknowledges them as flaws. Writing in 1990-1991, he had little reason to anticipate the musical’s future productions or its eventual success. Nor did he likely expect the addition of a new song, which would in many ways contradict

¹⁰⁷ McEntee, 98.

¹⁰⁸ Banfield, 58-59.

his assessment of the original. But this is precisely what occurred with the addition of “Something Just Broke” for the 1992 London production.

The 1992 London production of *Assassins* opened on October 29th, 1992 at the Donmar Warehouse, and ran for 76 performances, closing on January 9th, 1993.¹⁰⁹ The production was directed by Sam Mendes,¹¹⁰ who at the time was just beginning a lauded career as both a stage and film director (mentioning this production in the liner notes for the 2004 Broadway production, Weidman refers to him as the “not-yet-legendary Sam Mendes”).¹¹¹ The 1992 production, as Weidman recalls, was a hit with critics and audiences alike, standing in stark contrast to the original off-Broadway run at Playwright Horizons – and, Weidman continues, “one of the things that made the production terrific was the addition of a new number:”

Sam felt the show was short one song, a song for one of the assassins. Steve and I considered this and decided that in fact there *was* a song missing, but not for one of the assassins, rather a song for the ordinary Americans who had been treated comically in “How I Saved Roosevelt,” a song in which they would be given an opportunity to express the simple, uncomplicated grief which we all experience in response to these vicious, horrific acts. Indeed, at the age of 17 I had gotten on a train, gone to Washington D.C., stood on the sidewalk, and watched, grief-stricken and in anguish, as John Kennedy’s funeral cortege rolled past. This song would capture those emotions – still, for me, raw and unresolved. “Something Just Broke” completed an extraordinary Sondheim score.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “*Assassins*” in The Stephen Sondheim Reference Guide, <http://www.sondheimguide.com/assassins.html>

¹¹⁰ Mendes later became known for his dark productions of musicals, such as *Cabaret* (1994), *Oliver!* (1994), and Sondheim’s *Company* (1995). His filmography includes *American Beauty* (1999), *Road to Perdition* (2002), and the recent James Bond films *Skyfall* (2012) and *Spectre* (2015).

¹¹¹ Weidman, Liner Notes.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

In conversation with musicologist and Library of Congress archivist Mark Eden Horowitz, Sondheim stated that he had always intended to write a song about “what happens to the country when a president gets assassinated,” but because the original production did not transfer to a theater on Broadway, he composed it for the London production instead.¹¹³ Horowitz noted that “one of the through lines of your work has been history through the eyes of the bystander,” and Sondheim responded by crediting Weidman for the notion of “history as prisms through different time zones,” and pointing out that all of the “socio-political” shows he has written – *Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins*, and *Wise Guys* (which would become *Road Show*) – were in collaboration with Weidman.¹¹⁴ This is an important point of consideration for Sondheim scholars: these shows, in their choice of subject matter, are more reflective of Weidman than Sondheim. From this perspective, Sondheim appears more a collaborator than an auteur, an important distinction that is one of my primary concerns here. Furthermore, it calls into question the claim that “Something Just Broke” is representative of Sondheim’s “natural” voice, as Swayne claims.¹¹⁵ Clearly, Weidman had a great deal of input and influence on the song, and Sondheim’s recollections aside, it seems the number was written at the behest of Mendes.¹¹⁶

In the dramatic context of the musical, “Something Just Broke” is interpolated between Scene 16, the infamous book depository scene, during which Booth and the other assassins convince Lee Harvey Oswald to assassinate John F. Kennedy, and the

¹¹³ Horowitz/Sondheim, 66.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Swayne, 156.

¹¹⁶ See, for example: Mordden, 130-131.

final scene, which is a reprise/variation of the opening number, “Everybody’s Got the Right.” The song gives voice to average American citizens across different points in time, allowing them to express their grief and shock in response to the actions of the assassins. It is the first real moment of reprieve the audience has from the perspective of the assassins, and the only moment where the actions of the assassins are explicitly condemned, and as such lends a sense of dramatic conclusion to the musical, in addition to filling out the runtime.

But what about the music itself, the actual sound? Swayne’s comprehensive formal analysis of *Assassins* is concerned with musical sound and its immediate relation to dramatic structure, generally eschewing details of production history and the artistic input, however tangential, of Weidman and others. However, I argue that even the music itself cannot so easily be labeled “authentic” or “pure” Sondheim. Indeed, the musical influence of Steve Reich and the contributions of orchestrator Michael Starobin complicate any clear distinction between Sondheim’s “authorial” and “imitative” voices. My formal analysis of “Something Just Broke” is undertaken with the goal of highlighting these musical subtleties and addressing how they might alter our understanding of the song’s dramatic function.

In a review of the 2014 London production of *Assassins*, directed by Jamie Lloyd, Quentin Letts argued that the show’s music – the “Sondheim half-melodies” and the overall lack of “big, sweeping, romantic numbers” – contributes to its being what he calls a “cerebral effort.”¹¹⁷ Letts’ review is striking for its lack of musical

¹¹⁷ Quentin Letts, “One to admire, but hard to love: Quentin Letts reviews Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Assassins*,” *The Daily Mail*, December 1st, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article->

depth. What is “Unworthy of Your Love,” for example, if not a sweeping romantic number, darkly ironic implications aside? And where exactly are these “half-melodies” in the score? Indeed, *Assassins* is regarded as one of Sondheim’s more tuneful scores: as Knapp puts it, “one cannot sing the songs of *Assassins*, off stage, without a tinge of queasiness, even though many of its songs are musically quite seductive in this regard, and eminently singable.”¹¹⁸ Though, to his credit, Letts’ assessment does fit the description of one song in the show: “Something Just Broke.”

Musically, “Something Just Broke” differs drastically from that which precedes it. A somber, plaintive number, the song utilizes an antiphonal structure, repetitive accompaniment, and fragmented melodies (with, per Swayne, “pentatonic coloration,” reminiscent of the song “Someone in a Tree” from *Pacific Overtures*) to underscore its earnest portrayal of shock and grief.¹¹⁹ Compositionally, the song borrows a great deal from American minimalists like Reich,¹²⁰ in particular, the use of ostinato, additive and subtractive processes, “registral expansion,” diatonic harmonic extensions (i.e. 9ths, 11ths, 13ths) and tone clusters.¹²¹ Take, for example, the opening ostinato (what

¹¹⁸ Knapp, 175.

¹¹⁹ Swayne, 156.

¹²⁰ Interestingly, Holden argues in his article that “Someone in a Tree,” as well as the song “Poems” (also from *Pacific Overtures*) are “as close to outright Minimalism as Mr. Sondheim has gotten.” See: Holden, “Melodist and Minimalist in Harmony.”

¹²¹ See: Fink, 48-50.

Swayne refers to as the “sigh motif”),¹²² which is arguably the song’s central musical gesture (Ex.1):

Example 1

(3 times)
TAPE:
♩ = 80

A simple repeating pattern with ambiguous harmony (we might analyze the first chord as a C Maj.7sus2, and the second as a C6sus2#4, for example), this gesture gets expanded and contracted rhythmically, harmonically, and registrally over the course of the song. By the time the orchestra replaces the tape (as notated in the score), the register of the opening ostinato has been widened, going as low as A2, with the moving 6ths now doubled in octaves (Ex. 2):

¹²² Swayne, 156.

Example 2

(Orch. only)

The key signature modulates to A major at m. 26, the first real change of harmony in the song, and the ostinato figure is transposed up a whole step, as are the melodic patterns of the singers (Ex. 3):

Example 3

(3 times) (+Orch.)

There are two significant moments of rhythmic alteration in the score: the first occurs at m.44, where a half note on beat 3 replaces the previous quarter note, filling in the rest on beat 4 (Ex. 4):

Example 4

The musical score for Example 4 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#).
 The first system shows three measures. The right hand (treble clef) features a melodic line with a slur over the first two measures and a fermata over the third. The notes are: Measure 1: G#4, A5, B5; Measure 2: G#4, A5, B5; Measure 3: G#4, A5, B5. The left hand (bass clef) has a steady bass line: Measure 1: G#2, C#3; Measure 2: G#2, C#3; Measure 3: G#2, C#3.
 The second system also shows three measures. The right hand continues the melodic pattern: Measure 1: G#4, A5, B5; Measure 2: G#4, A5, B5; Measure 3: G#4, A5, B5. The left hand continues the bass line: Measure 1: G#2, C#3; Measure 2: G#2, C#3; Measure 3: G#2, C#3.

The second occurs twice on the word “broke,” with the pattern itself rhythmically “breaking” with the addition of a rest on beat 2, and the return of the rest of beat 4. This moment, occurring first at m. 50 and again at m. 60 (Ex. 5), is augmented by Starobin’s added percussion, which provides mimetic emphasis to the word “break,” while at the same time highlighting the formal structural breaking of the ostinato pattern.

Example 5

The musical score is set in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It features three staves: Voice 1, Voice 2, and a piano accompaniment.

- Voice 1 (HOUSEWIFE):** The melody begins with a rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. This is followed by a half rest, then another quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4.
- Voice 2 (STOCKBROKER):** The melody begins with a half rest, followed by a quarter note G3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4. This is followed by a half rest, then another quarter note G3, a quarter note A3, and a quarter note B3.
- Piano Accompaniment:** The right hand starts with a chord of G4, B4, and C5, marked with a hairpin crescendo. It then moves to a chord of G4, B4, and C5, marked with a hairpin decrescendo. The left hand has a bass line with notes G2, B2, and C3. Percussion includes a snare drum (B.D.) and a cymbal (Cym.) in the first measure, and a maraca (mp (perc.) etc.) in the second measure.

Lyrics for Voice 1: "Some thing just broke. Some-thing just"

Lyrics for Voice 2: "I was down at the ex - change"

The language of American minimalism serves a particular dramatic purpose here: musically, it clearly distinguishes the assassins from the “ordinary” citizens, marking a deviation from blatant pastiche, and recognizable melodies and genres. This is important, as the song’s purpose is to provide the audience with a reprieve from the perspective of the assassins, and in the process, allow the audience members to identify themselves onstage, thereby maintaining a safe distance from the assassins. This much can be argued by calling the song an example of Sondheim’s “natural” voice, as Swayne does. But to end the analysis there is unnecessarily reductive. The musical language of American minimalism works well in the context of “Something Just Broke” precisely because of its perceived anti-teleology: it stops the show in its tracks, allowing a moment of reflection before the finale. Furthermore, as a musical

topos, it functions with more representational specificity than Swayne's binary can account for. Indeed, musical minimalism, in contrast to the vernacular Americana used to represent the assassins, sounds more sophisticated, more "pure," perhaps more middle-class¹²³ – yet is still recognizably American. A small point maybe, but, I hope, an illuminating one nonetheless.

All of this is to say that "Something Just Broke," like the whole of *Assassins* itself, is an object with complex and entangled authorship. Musically, it reflects the input of Sondheim and Starobin and the stylistic influence of Steve Reich. It is also a product of Sondheim's collaboration with Weidman, and the remnant of a particular historical moment: the 1992 London production, and the attendant discussions with director Sam Mendes. There is still some disagreement, however, about whether the song belongs in the musical proper. Scott Miller, a well-known director of musical theater, writing in 1997, was ambivalent about the song's place in *Assassins*: "Without this song, the assassins take over the show and discover their power as a group, act on this knowledge by going together to the book depository, and then declare their triumph with the reprise of 'Everybody's Got the Right' as the show's finale. With 'Something Just Broke' between the last two scenes, the assassins hand control back over to the public briefly before going on to the show's finale."¹²⁴ Miller's analysis highlights the significant impact the song has on the show's dramatic structure. Still, others have downplayed the importance of the song. According to Swayne:

¹²³ For more on the link between minimalism and the changing American middle-class of the 1960s, see: Fink. 70-71.

¹²⁴ Miller, 194-195.

As I have argued, whatever ‘control’ the assassins have is false....when they return for the finale – with or without ‘Something Just Broke’ – they themselves have been broken. The finale’s fleeting modulatory scheme of ever-higher keys parallels the attempt to re-capture the breeziness of their opening and the power they held so fleetingly, a power that has been drained away when the ‘public’ of ‘Something Just Broke’ determines that somehow the country will survive the madness inflicted upon her by her own citizens.¹²⁵

There seems to be a contradiction in Swayne’s assessment: the “breaking” of the assassins occurs because of “Something Just Broke,” not despite it – something he acknowledges in this excerpt. His alternative evidence, the modulatory scheme of the finale, seems overread and incomplete without “Something Just Broke” to complement it. Swayne appears to be reading the original production through the lens of later productions to claim the original version as something of an urtext, fully formed and dramatically coherent in and of itself. Knapp does something similar, but argues the opposite position:

But ‘Something Just Broke’ may not completely solve the problem Assassins presents for American audiences. After all, that the locus of sympathy for Assassins lies within its audience, rather than on stage, is a point made explicitly in the parallel moments ending ‘Everybody’s Got the Right’ and its final reprise at the end of the show. Thus, in the first instance, the assassins’ guns point at presidential targets, but in the end, they point at us in the audience, the real target of their rage.¹²⁶

For Swayne, then, “Something Just Broke” is redundant, while for Knapp, it ultimately fails to thwart the assassins. Both scholars seem compelled to establish an authoritative reading of the work based on the original production, rather than accept the cognitive dissonance of multiple versions with various interpretations. Perhaps a more

¹²⁵ Swayne, 155-156.

¹²⁶ Knapp, 175.

interesting question to ask is how “Something Just Broke” *does* change the dramatic structure of the show – what are the various interpretations it gestures toward?

One intriguing interpretation is Ben Brantley’s take on “Something Just Broke” in his review of the 2004 revival:

"Something Just Broke" is a chilling acknowledgment that assassins do have an impact, that by pulling a trigger an individual can upset the course of history. The grief-numbed singers are, of course, the people with whom you instinctively identify. But in their light-colored, ethereal costumes by Susan Hilferty, they seem curiously unsubstantial. They inhabit an orderly dream of a world to which the show's main characters can never gain entry. It's the assassins who are the dominating, vivid presence. For two haunted, exquisitely wrought hours, they are allowed to present their own version of reality. It is by no means a comfortable place. But when your guides are as skilled as the creators of this revival, there is catharsis and even exhilaration in working your way through this tarnished looking-glass land.¹²⁷

Brantley’s analysis/interpretation is incisive and enlightening. For him, the costumes worn by the singers in the revival fundamentally change the song’s dramatic implications, making the “ordinary citizens” into imagined projections of the assassins, no more real than the purgatory they mingle in. Brantley reminds us of the mutability of musical theater, of the way in which each production, each performance even, must be understood as separate and distinct, ontologically speaking. He brings our attention to the other authors at work, referring to them as the “creators” of the revival. It is worthwhile to note that he avoids saying something to the effect of “these artists have realized Sondheim and Weidman’s vision.” Rather, he grants them their own creative agency. Furthermore, Brantley’s interpretation highlights how difficult it is to defend any

¹²⁷ Brantley, “A Demon Gallery of Glory Hounds.”

definitive interpretation of the musical or even the songs. Ultimately, interpretations will vary with productions, with historical circumstance, and according to audience tastes.

In conclusion, I argue that “Something Just Broke,” as well as Sondheim’s musical voice generally, is best understood as fundamentally collaborative. Though to be sure, Sondheim is the composer and lyricist of *Assassins*, his scores and lyrics also bear the traces of various authors, production and reception histories, and historical circumstances. They also exist dialogically with the other components of the piece and are thus subject to different interpretations as components such as orchestration, make-up, lighting, and costume design change from production to production. Furthermore, I hope to have demonstrated how fundamental notions of intertextuality and referentiality are to understanding Sondheim’s music from a dramatic perspective. Though this argument is largely indebted to Swayne, I hope to have shown that even Sondheim’s “authorial” voice is itself often referential, albeit in subtle ways, and thus serves a dramatic purpose that the label of “authorial,” or original, voice unnecessarily obscures.

IV. Conclusion

Assassins has gone on to great, if not entirely universal, acclaim since the success of the 2004 production, and continues to be relevant and influential. Actor, writer, and singer Rachel Bloom, the driving creative force behind satirical musical-comedy television series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, has been vocal in various interviews about the impact *Assassins* has had on her creative approach to the show: “It’s [Assassins] just so much my sensibility. It really in so many ways defined me and what I want musical theater to do and be, and my love of pastiche, and my love of dark pastiche.”¹²⁸ In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Bloom and her fellow writers utilize a variety of popular music genres in a pastiche approach reminiscent of *Assassins*, appropriating these styles and rendering them darkly ironic and humorous via the subversive content of the lyrics, or context, for the purpose of cultural critique – often from a feminist perspective.

Assassins continues to be a fairly popular choice for high school and college productions, despite the riskiness of its subject matter.¹²⁹ On the website of the musical’s publisher, Music Theater International (MTI), the show is advertised as a “multiple Tony Award-winning musical tour-de-force.... bold, original, disturbing, and alarmingly funny, *Assassins* is perhaps the most controversial musical ever written.”¹³⁰ *Assassins* past controversy, and its potential to alarm audiences, is here used as a selling point, which might indicate that show’s actual shock value has diminished as it has garnered

¹²⁸ Remy Holzer, “BWW Interview: Rachel Bloom talks Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, Sondheim, and Community Theater,” *Broadway World*, March 8th, 2017. <http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwtv/article/BWW-Interview-Rachel-Bloom-Talks-CRAZY-EX-GIRLFRIEND-Sondheim-and-Community-Theater-20170308#>

¹²⁹ Weidman, Liner Notes.

¹³⁰ Music Theatre International, “*Assassins*.” <http://www.mtishows.com/assassins>

more prestige and recognition. However, a production of *Assassins* is never guaranteed to be a commercially successful endeavor or a critical hit – much depends on the creative choices of the artists involved. To offer one final example in support of this point: in his review of the 2014 London production at the Menier Chocolate Factory, Quentin Letts was particularly unamused by a certain design choice: “Mind you, most of the assassination attempts are presented in a black-comedy light. Take the Reagan shooting. Several actors wearing Reagan masks pass through the target zone like pot-shots at a fairground arcade. What a laff. Or not. All I could think about was Reagan’s press chief, the late Jim Brady, who was crippled by one of Hinckley’s shots and spent the next 33 years in a wheelchair. The murder of the Democrat Kennedy, surprise surprise, is treated with greater respect.”¹³¹ Here, a choice in costume design and choreography politicized the musical in a new way, as American political party affiliation was not a topic generally discussed by reviewers prior to this production – this is all the more interesting, given that this production was staged outside of the United States.

One of my initial goals in researching this thesis was to ascertain a sense of why *Assassins* has continued to endure and remain relevant. Why was the 2004 production so successful, when compared to the original production? How did it change, and how did political climate affect these disparate reception histories? These questions ultimately led me to larger theoretical queries about authorship, text, and collaboration that became the focus of the thesis. Certainly, as I hope I have demonstrated, the role that various productions have played in the success of *Assassins*, the changes made along the way,

¹³¹ Letts, “One to Admire, but Hard to Love.”

and the contributions of the many creative artists involved, cannot be overstated, nor can the influence of political climate and historical circumstance on the show's reception history be denied. *Assassins'* contentious subject matter is often thought of as its curse, but perhaps it is ultimately a blessing. A musical about political discontent renews its relevance in times of political unrest, offering a myriad of new meanings for artists and audiences alike. As of the writing of this thesis, the United States is in a rather unprecedented time of unrest, and tensions run high. Contemporary productions of *Assassins* will take on a whole new light in this fraught political climate, and the musical's relevance will be reasserted once more, as it continues to change with the times.

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