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'Another National Anthem': Public Memory, Burkean Identification, and the Musical *Assassins*

In this article Valerie Lynn Schrader examines the musical *Assassins* through the rhetorical lenses of public memory and Kenneth Burke's theory of identification. Offering a close textual analysis of the musical's script and cast recording, she argues that *Assassins*, along with its audiences, serves to co-create a public memory of the men and women who attempted to assassinate Presidents of the United States of America. Her article contends that *Assassins* creates a chilling consubstantiality between the characters in the musical and theatregoers through Burkean identification, which may cause cognitive dissonance for many audience members. Through identifying key themes in the musical, she argues that these both connect with the assassins' motives and are common human experiences, serving not only to create public memory of the stories, but also to humanize the assassins and create a bond between audience and characters – while the song 'Something Just Broke' undermines this connection and encourages audience members to identify with the mourning American public. Valerie Lynn Schrader is Associate Professor of Communications and Interim Director of Academic Affairs at the Schuylkill Campus of the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on rhetorical messages in theatre works, especially musical theatre productions. She is herself a classically trained lyric soprano/soubrette.

Key terms: Stephen Sondheim, American Dream, consubstantiality, cognitive dissonance, audience–performer relationship, Off-Broadway.

ON 18 DECEMBER 1990, Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's controversial musical *Assassins* debuted on the Playwrights Horizons Off-Broadway stage.[1] This dark musical, which focuses on the stories of nine individuals who either assassinated or attempted to assassinate Presidents of the United States of America, has been described as 'a deeply cynical account of the American Dream' and as Sondheim's 'most daring and audacious work'.[2] As Andre Bishop notes, *Assassins* seeks to show 'America through the stories of its villains, instead of its heroes'.[3]

Although the Off-Broadway production ran for only seventy-three performances, the musical was revived on Broadway in 2004. It lasted only slightly longer than the original show, closing after one hundred and one performances.[4] Some have attributed the musical's short runs to timing issues, noting that the original production opened during the Gulf War and the Broadway production shortly after the tragic events of 11 September 2001.[5] Despite these short runs in New York, the show has been staged in London many times, and is often performed in regional professional theatres throughout the United States. The Broadway production also won five of the seven Tony Awards for which it was nominated, including Best Revival of a Musical, suggesting the show was a critical success, if not a financial one.[6]

Assassins is presented through a non-linear 'web of intertextual references'.[7] Sondheim describes it as 'a book musical masquerading as a revue, featuring nine of the thirteen assassins who have attempted to kill the President of the United States'.[8] Because each assassin lived during a different period in history, the show asynchronously skips back and forth through time, often featuring conversations between characters who never met in real life. The messages presented to *Assassins*'s audiences are as unnerving as the musical's subject matter. Larry Stempel explains: '*Assassins* plays havoc with history

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by bringing together the killers and would-be killers of America's Presidents to examine the nightmare side of the American Dream.'[9] He continues: 'It not only humanizes the villains of American history . . . it takes them seriously.'[10]

In this article I examine *Assassins* through the rhetorical lenses of public memory and Kenneth Burke's theory of identification. Offering a close textual analysis of the script and cast recording, I argue that *Assassins*, along with its audiences, serves to co-create a public memory of the men and women who attempted to assassinate the President. Because these 'villains' are not often studied in basic North American history courses (with the exceptions perhaps of John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald), many theatregoers are likely to be unfamiliar with their stories. The musical thus co-creates public memory with its audiences, rather than reinforcing or changing public memory already in existence.

Furthermore, I contend that *Assassins* creates through the act of identification an unnerving consubstantiality between the characters in the musical and theatregoers. As Stempel observes, what is most frightening about *Assassins* is not the lives of the characters or even their shared values – it is the shared values between the assassins and audience members.[11] Furthermore, I argue that the addition of the song 'Something Just Broke' is essential to the musical in that it minimizes the consubstantiality between the audience and the assassins, and instead allows audience members to identify with the general American public, represented by the characters in mourning in the song.

Public Memory and Burkean Identification

Carole Blair, Greg Dickenson, and Brian L. Ott define public memory as 'beliefs about the past [that] are shared among members of a group, whether a local community or the citizens of a nation state'.[12] As Sara C. Vander-Haagen notes, 'remembering . . . connects human beings to their contemporaries and "imagined communities" by establishing a common narrative and space for identification'.[13] Blair *et al*. describe six 'assumptions' about public memory: 1) it 'is activated by present concerns, issues or anxieties'; 2) it 'narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging'; 3) it 'is animated by affect'; 4) it 'is partial, partisan, and thus often contested'; 5) it relies on both material and symbolic supports; and 6) it 'has a history'.[14]

While public memory has often been associated with museums, memorials, and monuments, other art forms and technologies, including film, digital archives, and theatrical performance, can also create public memory.[15] As Susan Evans explains, 'as a self-reflective act of creation, theatre is that format through which audiences come to understand history as a series of acts and decisions'.[16] Because audience members experience a performance together, they are invited to co-create public memory through their participation.

I argue that *Assassins*, in addition to co-creating public memory with its audiences, uses the communication theory of Burkean identification to create consubstantiality between characters and audience. In his *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke explains that identification occurs when

> A is not identical with his colleague B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.[17]

Burke suggests that identification creates 'consubstantiality', or the state of being when a listener sees his/her own interests as being 'substantially one' with the speaker's interests.[18] Communication scholar George Cheney explains that consubstantiality 'may be thought of as a product or state of identification that leads an individual to see things from the "perspective" of a target'.[19] Although Stempel has noted *Assassins*'s creation of shared values, Burkean identification has yet to be used to examine how *Assassins* communicates its dark message to an audience.[20] This close textual analysis shows how the musical creates both public memory and Burkean consubstantiality between audience and characters. As shown below, this con-

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substantiality may lead audience members to experience cognitive dissonance, a term coined by Leon Festinger to describe the tension that people feel when confronted with information that is in conflict with their beliefs or actions.[21]

Close analysis of the musical reveals five recurring themes: fighting against political injustice and sacrificing for the greater good; getting attention and being noticed; idealism; pain, desperation, and disillusionment; and community. These themes connect with the assassins' motives, but are also common human experiences, serving not only to create public memory of the stories, but also to humanize the assassins and form consubstantiality between the audience and the characters.

Assassins creates public memory and consubstantiality for audience members by introducing and providing a background for each assassin. The musical begins at a shooting gallery at a fairground, where a proprietor propositions each assassin to 'c'mere and kill a President'.[22] Since most audience members are likely unfamiliar with most of the assassins, it is essential to establish the characters early in order for the audience to make sense of the musical.

Fighting against Political Injustice and Sacrificing for the Greater Good

Assassins presents political injustice and sacrifice for the greater good as a motive for six of the nine assassins in the show: John Wilkes Booth, Giuseppe Zangara, Leon Czolgosz, Charles Guiteau, Lynette 'Squeaky' Fromme, and Samuel Byck. While political injustice may not have been the sole reason for their assassination attempts, it is portrayed as the primary reason for at least two assassins: Booth and Czolgosz.

Since Booth's story is the most familiar to audiences and he is, chronologically speaking, the first assassin, he is also the first to fire his gun in the shooting gallery. Booth is presented as 'handsome and thoughtful, theatrically but elegantly dressed in black', representing both his career as an actor and his appearance as a mid-nineteenth-century Southern gentleman.[23] A Balladeer, described as a 'twentieth-century folk singer', begins the 'Ballad of Booth', in which he presents a number of possible reasons for Booth's decision to assassinate Lincoln, including his struggling career, alcoholism, and jealousy of his brother.[24] Booth angrily argues against these accusations, pleading with his accomplice David Herold to write down what he insists were his true motives, namely, that Lincoln 'did ruthlessly provoke a war between the States which cost some six hundred of [Booth's] countrymen their lives' and that Lincoln 'did silence [his] critics in the North by hurling them into prison without benefit of charge or trial'.[25]

Booth proclaims that he 'did it for [his] country', suggesting that his was an act of patriotism.[26] Indeed, this motive is supported historically: the Ford's Theatre Museum notes that Booth was part of a conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William Seward in order to put the Union in a state of disarray and anarchy.

Booth's story in *Assassins* confirms the public memory that many theatregoers may already share. Unlike many of the other stories in the show, his tale is both a reminder of historical events and an unusual opportunity to experience them through the villain's eyes. In the musical, Booth believes what he has done is for the greater good. By experiencing the story from this perspective, audience members may even identify with Booth's patriotism through what Cheney refers to as 'the common ground technique'.[27] Audience members may find that they actually have a 'shared value' with Booth; although they may abhor his actions, they may recognize the same love of country in themselves.[28]

Also portrayed as politically motivated is Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President William McKinley in 1901. The text describes Czolgosz as 'a scruffy sullen laborer', and, in an early scene he gets into an argument with John Hinckley and Charles Guiteau about the dangerous labour conditions at his factory job, insisting that there are no other opportunities for him.[29] This representation of his

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extreme radical anarchism is historically accurate, many anarchist groups having shunned him because of his extremist discourse.[30] In Scene 5, Czolgosz meets anarchist Emma Goldman and confesses his love for her, and while she politely explains that she has no time for love, she inspires him to stand up for his beliefs. During the quartet number in Scene 7, Czolgosz, Booth, Guiteau, and Sara Jane Moore sing about the effects of a gun, and Czolgosz's lyrics tend to focus on the working class who make the guns. He sings: 'A gun kills many men before it's done. Hundreds, long before you shoot the gun. Men in the mines, and in the steel mills, men at machines, who died for what?'[31]

Czolgosz's story comes to a climax in Scene 8, when he kills McKinley. A chorus of fairgoers serves to highlight class disparity through statements like 'Doesn't the President look marvellous? So round and prosperous!' and 'I'm told that in his spare time he enjoys collecting coins.'[32] The Balladeer, who always appears during the scenes when an assassin succeeds in murdering his victim, declares that Czolgosz heard McKinley say: 'Some men have everything, and some have none, and that's just fine. In the USA, you can work your way to the head of the line.'[33] These classist statements directly oppose Czolgosz's political beliefs, suggesting that his decision to assassinate McKinley was politically motivated.

Czolgosz's narrative, unlike Booth's, serves to create public memory rather than reinforce it. Most theatregoers are probably unfamiliar with this tale; some may be aware that McKinley was assassinated, but few are likely knowledgeable about Czolgosz's motivations. By experiencing the story together through performance, audience members are not only made aware of what happened, but they also experience it through Czolgosz's perspective. This creates a public memory that, while still recognizing the heinous act for the murder that it was, provides the assassin with a rationale. Many in the audience may even agree with anti-classism politics. This acknowledges 'shared values' and thus creates an unsettling consubstantiality between audience and assassin.[34]

Czolgosz's political views are the most developed of any of the assassins in the musical, which would create more identification between him and the audience, and thus make him the character that elicits the most cognitive dissonance. Yet this dissonance is limited by the presence of Goldman, even though she only appears in one scene. Although her rhetoric was quite militant in real life, *Assassins* creates a public memory of her as a more moderate alternative to Czolgosz. As Burke notes, identification cannot exist without division.[35] While an audience may agree with the fight against unsafe working conditions and dislike wealth disparity, they are likely to disassociate with Czolgosz because Goldman is presented as another, more ethical alternative. Identifying with her reduces the cognitive dissonance.

The Desire for Public Recognition

Despite not being portrayed as having a political motive, Lynette 'Squeaky' Fromme also represents this theme because her motive involves sacrifice for what she believes to be the greater good. Fromme, a follower of Charles Manson who attempted to assassinate President Ford in Sacramento in 1975, is described as 'a small, intense girl swathed in religious red robes'.[36]

In Scene 6, Fromme is sitting on a park bench with Moore, smoking marijuana and praising Manson, who she claims saved her when her father threw her out of his house. She explains to Moore that after the apocalypse, 'Charlie will emerge as king of a new order, with me beside him as his queen.'[37] In her duet with Hinckley, she declares her undying love for Manson. In Scene 15, when the assassins explain their motives, she states she 'did it to make them listen to Charlie' and 'so there'd be a trial, and Charlie would get to be a witness, and he'd be on TV, and he'd save the world!' [38] She firmly believes that good will come from her violent act.

Fromme, portrayed as a brainwashed cult member, is excessively idealistic, convinced that the man she loves is the Son of God who will save the world. Again, this representation of Fromme is supported by historical

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documentation, including her own recollections. In an article in the *New York Times*, titled 'Letters from Squeaky: A Would-Be Assassin Explains Herself to the Actress Who Plays Her', Jesse Green says that Fromme 'committed the crime so that Charles Manson, whose "family" she joined in 1967, would appear as a witness at her trial, and thus would have a worldwide platform from which to preach his apocalyptic vision'.[39]

However, in the letters included in Green's article, the real-life Fromme also explains to Mary Catherine Garrison, who played her in the 2004 Broadway revival, that the 'family' was disillusioned with the political and societal status quo, specifically mentioning the Vietnam War and racial discrimination. The image of Fromme co-created through *Assassins* makes little mention of this desire for political and social change; instead, it portrays her as a drug-influenced cult member who attempts assassination in order to bring attention to the man she believes will save the world.

Other assassins represent this theme to a lesser extent. For example, Zangara, who tried to kill Franklin Roosevelt, is enraged that there are no photographers at his execution. Implying that he may have been partially motivated by the oppression he experienced through classism, he screams: 'Only capitalists get photographers!'[40] Similarly, in his taped letters Byck rants about wealth disparity to Leonard Bernstein and about political corruption to Richard Nixon.

Overall, this underlying theme creates a public memory of the assassins as fanatically and disturbingly patriotic or selfless – so much so that they commit atrocious acts in the name of their political or social views. The values of patriotism, the desire to fight against political injustice, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the greater good may create consubstantiality – and consequently, cognitive dissonance – for theatregoers who share these values.

Getting Attention and Being Noticed

Of all the assassins, John Hinckley perhaps best represents this second emergent theme, because attention is his only goal. Hinckley is desperately trying to get the attention of actress Jodie Foster, whom he is stalking. In Scene 10, Hinckley sits with a photo of Foster as he plays his guitar, while Fromme teases him about the inscription on the back of the photo, which Hinckley clearly wrote himself: 'Dear John, I will love you forever. One day, you will come for me and we will occupy the White House and the peasants will drool with envy.'[41]

After Fromme leaves, Hinckley says to the photograph: 'My dearest Jodie, I am humiliated by my weakness and my impotence. But, Jodie, I can change. I'll prove to you that I can change. With one, brave, historic act, I will win your love, now and for all eternity. Love, John.'[42] He proceeds to sing an unconventional duet with Fromme – the two being in different places at different times – where he declares his devotion to Foster as Fromme simultaneously declares her devotion to Charles Manson.

While Fromme does not embody the theme of getting attention here because she already has Manson's attention (she is, after all, part of his 'family'), Hinckley is still seeking the attention he obsessively craves. Depending on how familiar audience members are with his story, public memory may be either reinforced or created. Consubstantiality may also be created to some extent. While most people would not be able to relate to the obsessiveness of Hinckley's statements, some may relate to him on the issue of wanting the attention of an unrequited love.

Although he is not represented as seeking the attention of one specific person, Charles Guiteau also falls into this category. During Scene 7's quartet number, he declares that 'when you've got a gun, everybody pays attention'.[43] He later makes a pass at Moore, who, in rejecting his attentions, accidentally shoots her gun. This sets Guiteau on a mission; he declares, 'I am the next Ambassador to France!'[44] When he cannot get noticed in one way, he immediately finds another, finally succeeding to get the attention he seeks when he assassinates President Garfield and is sentenced to hang for his crime.

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The line-up of assassins and would-be assassins in the 2016 production at the Quill Theatre, Richmond, Virginia, directed by Andrew Hamm.

In Scene 11, he cheerfully cakewalks up the platform to the gallows, singing a prayer, 'I am going to the Lordy. I am so glad.'[45] These words, Sondheim notes, belong to the real-life Charles Guiteau, and, by putting them to music, Sondheim essentially *creates* a public memory.[46] Guiteau, portrayed as the disturbingly idealistic assassin, as discussed below, is enthusiastic until the very end, dancing back and forth on the platform and singing in an upbeat, major key: 'This is your golden opportunity: You are the lightning and you're news! Wait till you see tomorrow! Tomorrow you won't be ignored!'[47] Guiteau seeks to be noticed, to be remembered.

Just as with the first theme, other assassins share this desire to a lesser extent. Zangara's outrage at the absence of photographers at his execution shows a strong desire for the attention of publicity. Moore proclaims that one of her motives was 'so that her friends would know where [she] was coming from', demonstrating her desire to be noticed.[48] Oswald admits that he wants 'to be appreciated. To be valued. To be in other's people's thoughts.'[49] This desire for attention is not a foreign concept for most people. To love and be loved, either by the public or by specific individuals, is something that humans share, and audience members may find it alarming that they share this same desire with people who attempted to assassinate a president.

Idealism

A third theme to emerge from this analysis is idealism, which is primarily illustrated in the character of Guiteau, who incessantly and disturbingly 'look[s] on the bright side', to the point where he is almost childlike.[50] In the opening scene, he happily plays with his gun after the Proprietor hands it to him, while in Scene 3 he gives an uplifting toast to the President of the United States and provides Czolgosz with his impressive laundry list of former careers. In the quartet, Guiteau 'waltzes in cheerfully, holding a gun up admiringly', and declares: 'What a wonder is

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a gun! What a versatile invention!'[51] He is excessively optimistic and easily amused, like a happy infant.

However, just as young children become angry when they do not get their way, Guiteau becomes enraged when he does not get what he wants. When Moore turns down his advances, he grabs and attempts to kiss her, struggling with her until her gun fires accidentally. As noted, this seems to reinvigorate him; he declares to her his desire to become an ambassador, and encountering President Garfield announces 'I want to be Ambassador to France!'[52] When Garfield appears confused, Guiteau, like a spoiled child, repeats the phrase furiously. As Garfield turns to walk away, Guiteau shoots him in the back. This creates public memory for the audience, who learn history through the performance.

Guiteau's delusions of grandeur and idealism are well illustrated in his execution scene and encouragement to the audience to 'look on the bright side'.[53] As Lovensheimer notes, 'The Ballad of Guiteau' uses an 'upbeat dance form to indicate Guiteau's madness alongside his unrelenting optimism'.[54] His incessant idealism and childlike quality make him both an endearing and terrifying character.

While it is unlikely that many audience members would find consubstantiality with his intense optimism, they may feel more sympathy for Guiteau than for some of the other assassins. Stephen Banfield concludes that it is 'difficult to keep sympathy for the assassins at bay when they are projected with Sondheim's persuasive powers'.[55] Guiteau's childlike quality in particular elicits emotion from the audience, who may feel pity towards this deeply disturbed man.

Pain, Desperation, and Disillusionment

This fourth theme is represented through the characters of Zangara, Moore, Oswald, and Byck. Guiseppe Zangara is described as a 'bricklayer from Calabria, Italy', who was unable to carry out his plan to kill Franklin D. Roosevelt, then President-Elect, in Miami in 1933; instead, he accidentally fatally shot Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak.[56]

Zangara is described as a 'tiny, angry man' who appears to have 'nothing'.[57] Audience members learn Zangara's story through a conversation with Booth in Scene 3. He is a poor immigrant who suffers from stomach pains, gave up smoking, drinking, and his job to move to Miami to have his appendix removed, but still finds no relief. When Booth suggests killing Roosevelt, Zangara leaves the bar. The next scene is his assassination attempt.

While bystanders sing about how they succeeded in saving Roosevelt's life, Zangara sings his solo angrily from the electric chair where he will be executed. He declares his fearlessness, and explains that he initially wanted to kill Hoover, but that it was too cold in Washington – he simply wanted to kill 'a king'.[58] This constructed public memory aligns with recorded history: Zangara hated leaders of all countries, and, in his last words, he said goodbye to the 'poor people of the world'.[59] While he was not acting with one particular political purpose in mind, he was in pain and had struggled as an unemployed poor immigrant.

Although most of us will have felt pain or desperation at some point in their lives, any consubstantiality between them and Zangara is limited, for he does not elicit laughter or pity in the same way as many of the other characters; he is an angry, frightening, unlikeable character. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he is the first assassin to be executed. His story is shorter than some of the others, and audience members do not have time to develop a connection to the character in the way that they do with others.

Another assassin to represent this theme, albeit in an unusual way, is Sara Jane Moore. Moore is portrayed as clumsy, confused, and forgetful, and is frequently seen dropping the contents of her purse or accidentally firing her gun. Through a conversation Moore has with Fromme, audiences learn that Moore worked for the FBI and the Women's Army Corps, had been married five times, had three kids, and was a Certified Public Accountant. Through a scene with her son, Moore is portrayed as a desperate, frustrated mother with a stubborn child; she ends up pointing

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her gun at her own child, until the situation is diffused by Fromme.

Moore's motives for attempting to assassinate President Ford are relatively unclear until Scene 15, when she states, 'I did it so my friends would know where I was coming from' and 'I did it so I would know where I was coming from'.[60] Moore appears to be frustrated and in a state of desperation – she does not know how to understand or express herself, and takes drastic action in an attempt to do so. Moore's motive is the most ambiguous of all the assassins, and is the most difficult to classify.

The real-life Moore attempted to assassinate Ford for political reasons; she belonged to a number of radical political groups in San Francisco.[61] However, she is not portrayed as a militant political activist, perhaps because several other characters already fulfil that role. Instead, she appears as a desperate, confused woman, who is at the end of her tether with her children, failed marriages, and career changes.

This representation of Moore creates a completely different public memory for an audience than if Sondheim and Weidman had chosen to emphasize her radical political views. As Lisa M. Burns notes in her discussion of collective memory and former First Ladies, one of the shortcomings of collective memory is that it often emphasizes a 'single ideology or role'.[62] By only focusing on Moore's confusion and desperation, the collective memory of the audience members unfamiliar with Moore's story will likely leave the show believing that she was a frustrated housewife and mother who simply could not cope with failure.

While this representation of Moore evokes a different public memory from what 'real-life' history might depict, it also creates a different element of identification. Moore is one of only two assassins presented as having a 'traditional' family (Oswald is the other), and their stories focus on the desperation one feels when everything in life appears to be going wrong. It is easy to see how audience members could identify with Moore's confusion, frustration, desperation, and clumsiness, creating consubstantiality.

The Pain of Oswald and the Rants of Byck

The character who perhaps best represents this theme of pain is Lee Harvey Oswald, who does not appear at all until the penultimate scene. He is portrayed as a desperate man attempting to commit suicide and as the only assassin who had no intention of killing a President. Booth needles him, using a myriad of tactics in an attempt to persuade him to kill Kennedy instead of himself. Unable to convince him, he relies on the other assassins, who assure Oswald that by killing Kennedy he is becoming part of their community. Hinckley asks for his autograph, Zangara delivers a stirring speech in Italian, and Moore tells him that they are his family. Ultimately, a desperate Oswald gives in and pulls the trigger.

Oswald's unwillingness to assassinate Kennedy makes him one of the most relatable characters in *Assassins*. He elicits pity from the audience and perhaps, to some extent, identification, in that some audience members who have encountered depression may find a level of consubstantiality with Oswald, at least until he is convinced to commit murder. Perhaps more interesting, though, is how *Assassins* uses Oswald to recreate public memory. Oswald and Booth are, of course, the two assassins with whom audiences are most familiar. However, while Booth's story is well accepted in US history, Kennedy's assassination is still shrouded in conspiracy, with many people questioning whether Oswald was, in fact, Kennedy's assassin. By portraying Oswald as a somewhat unwilling assassin, the musical propounds a public memory founded on the belief that he was the sole murderer but that it was not a premeditated decision.

The final assassin to represent this theme, and the only one without a major singing role, is Samuel Byck. Byck is always seen sweating, wearing a Santa Claus suit, and carrying a picket sign. He has two major monologues sitting in his car, drinking and eating brand-name food, talking into a tape recorder, and addressing Leonard Bernstein and Richard Nixon. Both of these rants suggest disillusionment and desperation; thus,

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he blames Bernstein, among others, for not reaching out to him, and he blames Nixon for such concerns as poverty and destroying the environment.

Throughout these rants, Byck references commercial slogans: 'This Bud's for you', 'It's Miller time', and 'Have it your way'. [63] His consistent use of brand-name products implies a disillusionment with consumer culture: he eats Burger King burgers and drinks Yoo-Hoo, but he does not find fulfilment in them.

Byck, however, is more distressed by the political system and by the widening wealth disparity than by consumerism. In his tape-recorded letter to Bernstein, he threatens to 'drop a 747 on the White House and incinerate Dick Nixon' and says that Bernstein will later ask himself: 'What kind of world is this where a decent stand-up guy like Sam Byck has to crash a plane into the President to make a point?'[64] In his tape-recorded letter to Nixon, he explains his disgust with the party system, comparing himself to a child who is told by both parents that one loves him, but the other does not. He screams that both parties lie, and that the public becomes frightened when they do not know who to trust. In both scenes, he is portrayed as an angry man who has become disillusioned with politics, consumerism, and the world.

This disillusionment may create consubstantiality between audience members and Byck; while they do not approve of his actions, they may to some extent agree with parts of his ranting monologues. Furthermore, the child metaphor, like Guiteau's childlike quality, evokes sympathy for Byck. His monologues also create public memory for audience members, particularly those who are unfamiliar with his story. Kanfer explains that, in real life,

> Samuel Byck, an unemployed car salesman, sent lunatic taped monologues to several public figures. . . . He hijacked a commercial airliner that he intended to crash into Richard M. Nixon's White House, and killed two nonpolitical passengers before he himself was slain.[65]

While many people may not even be aware that there was an assassination attempt on Nixon's life, by showing Byck in the process of taping these monologues, *Assassins* shares this story through the eyes of its villain to create collective memory with the audience.

Community

The final theme to be identified is that of community. Mark Fulk and Angela Howard suggest that 'family' is *Assassins*' central metaphor, particularly noting that family is 'the central concept that binds the group of American assassins and would-be assassins'.[66] I have extended this 'family' theme to 'community' in order to encompass not only the community (or family) of assassins, but also a second community of bystanders. The community theme is illustrated primarily in two scenes, only the first of which appeared in the original version of the musical. This is Scene 16, where the assassins join together to convince Oswald to assassinate Kennedy, assuring him that they are 'his family' and that he 'belongs'.[67] By doing so, they create a clear community amongst the assassins.

The second scene, which Sondheim added towards the end of the musical for the 1992 London production, includes the song 'Something Just Broke', which 'deals with the deaths of all four presidents'. [68] This features five bystanders who reflect on their reactions to the news that the President has just been shot. This 'bystander community' stands in opposition to the assassins. They switch hats and costume pieces in order to represent different eras and individuals, including an office clerk, a farmer, a waitress, a policeman, a schoolboy, a minister, and a housewife – the latter the only bystander who does not change outfits, and takes a leading part with some of the most poignant lines in the song.

The bystanders sing about where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news, and some sing about the aftermath of the assassination, recognizing that the tragedy has brought them together. Ultimately, the characters sing: 'Something just spoke. Something I wish I hadn't heard. Something bewildering occurred. Fix it up fast, please, till it's just smoke, till it's only something just passed.'[69] At the end of the

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song, the housewife, the last performer onstage, breaks down and cries.

The song was intended to create public memory; Sondheim wrote it after viewing a video that 'focused on the reactions of people after Kennedy was shot'.[70] Public memory is often connected with tragedy, as people attempt to cope with and understand tragic events by reflecting on them,[71] and are here reminded of their own experience of living through a national tragedy as they watch this scene, possibly identifying with some of the characters.

In a series of interviews with Mark Eden Horowitz, Sondheim explains that he asked himself: 'How do I get the whole country on stage?'[72] The bystanders in the song serve to represent the people of the United States – everyday citizens, bystanders who exist in juxtaposition to the community of assassins, as a body to which the audience can relate.

Burke states that identification requires division.[73] In 'Something Just Broke,' audience members are reminded of which side they support by identifying a 'common enemy'.[74] Sondheim thus creates 'identification through antithesis'.[75] While throughout the rest of the musical audience members are encouraged to relate to certain qualities exhibited by the assassins, 'Something Just Broke' reminds them that they are *not* like the assassins. Instead, they share such traits as compassion, fear, and sadness with the community of bystanders who mourn the loss of a President.

This community and thus the identification that exists because of it would not exist had the song not been added to the musical. Bystanders only appear in two other scenes: Scene 4, when Zangara attempts to assassinate Roosevelt; and Scene 8, when Czolgosz succeeds in assassinating McKinley. In both these scenes, the American public is portrayed as self-aggrandizing, self-absorbed, and apathetic towards the struggles of other people. When 'Something Just Broke' is eliminated from the musical, consubstantiality between theatregoers and the American public is minimized or eliminated entirely. This encourages the identification between theatregoers and the assassins through a shared understanding of the assassins' frustration with a world full of political corruption, narcissism, and apathy. In order to redeem *Assassins*' version of the American public, it is essential to include 'Something Just Broke', which creates consubstantiality between theatregoers and the American public by portraying them as thoughtful, reflective, and saddened people.

Conclusion

I have suggested how each of the five themes identified and examined in *Assassins* is connected to the motives of the perpetrators, but also with real-life human experiences, thus creating identification between the characters in the musical and the theatregoers who are co-creating meanings and public memory by experiencing the performance.

It is useful to return now to Blair, Dickinson, and Ott's six 'assumptions' about public memory to make concluding comments about the production. First is their observation that public memory is 'activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties'.[76] The fear of another national tragedy is ever present in the United States as in many countries around the world. Fulk and Howard note that in early productions of the show, audience members who were 'old enough to remember the assassination of President Kennedy were offended by its portrayal onstage', likely because it created anxiety for them.[77] Besides presidential assassination attempts, many people have experienced anxiety associated with other national tragedies. *Assassins* responds to this ongoing anxiety through performance.

Second, public memory 'narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging'.[78] *Assassins* achieves this through identification in a way that many theatregoers may find unnerving. By humanizing the assassins, the musical allows us to experience history through the eyes of the villains. Later, with the addition of 'Something Just Broke', the show invites theatregoers to experience communal belonging with a separate group of bystanders who reflect on the national tragedy, and by doing

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so allows theatregoers to disassociate from the assassins. This reduces the cognitive dissonance audience members may have experienced earlier from identifying with them.

Third, public memory is 'animated by affect' and 'relies on both material and/or symbolic supports'.[79] *Assassins* uses affect to create public memory by eliciting emotion from the audience through both the assassins and the bystanders. It also uses both symbolic and material supports to create public memory. While much of the musical relies of rhetorical constructs such as the characterization of the assassins through performances and the symbolism of the shooting gallery, it also incorporates photographs and engravings of three of the four successful assassination attempts referenced,[80] which serve to remind audience members that what they are experiencing is a representation of history, and not a fictional story.

Finally, Blair, Dickinson, and Ott note that public memory is 'partial, partisan, and thus often contested' and 'has a history'.[81] This show is nothing if not contested: it presents little-known stories in American history through the controversial lens of its villains, making these individuals not only understandable, but, on occasion, relatable. While 'Something Just Broke' reminds an audience whose side they are really on, many people would find it highly controversial to think, even for the duration of the show, that they might have something in common with presidential assassins.

Blair, Dickinson, and Ott also suggest that public memory is 'historically situated', which is the case for the entire musical.[82] Although it may follow a non-linear structure, each scene is situated, at least to some extent, in documented history.

In addition to creating public memory, *Assassins* also utilizes identification in order to create cognitive dissonance for audience members. Sondheim and Weidman have structured the musical so that the assassination attempts occur in roughly the order that audience members will identify with the assassins. With the exception of Booth, who must be placed first in order to serve as the 'pioneer' and leader of the other assassins, characters who are less likely to create consubstantiality – Zangara and Czolgosz, for example – have their stories told first, while Fromme, Moore, and especially Oswald have their stories later.[83]

This is especially noticeable in the character of Guiteau, whose disturbingly childlike idealism elicits emotion from the audience. His story is told near the middle of the musical; if Sondheim and Weidman had organized the show chronologically, the assassination of McKinley would occur right after Booth's murder of Lincoln. As it stands, Czolgosz and Zangara's stories, which occurred after Guiteau's in real life, are told first, giving the audience time to connect with the more likeable Guiteau.

Assassins offers theatregoers a frightening message that freedom is double-edged. As Andre Bishop observes, the musical creates a public memory where

> one has a sense of an America whose extraordinary freedom has created a land where accidents of all kinds happen. Any kid can grow up to be President; any kid can grow up to be his killer.[84]

In the opening number, which is reprised at the end, the assassins sing, 'Rich man, poor man, black or white – pick your apple, take a bite. Everybody just hold tight to your dreams. Everybody's got the right to their dreams.'[85] If one were to hear these lyrics sung without knowledge of the show and who was singing them, he/she would likely identify with the lyrics, due to the focus on equality and the 'American Dream.' However, when taken in the context that *Assassins* conveys, audience members are invited to question the deeper implications of these statements: does someone have the right to happiness if that 'right' hurts someone else?

As Adler suggests, *Assassins* invites audiences to ask 'whether democracy's championing of untrammeled individualism does not, at the same time, nourish the seeds of a narcissistic egoism that threatens any notion of responsibility to the larger community'.[86] *Assassins* encourages its audiences not to fall prey to the glittering generality of the American Dream', but to think about the consequences that this double-edged sword creates.

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Throughout the musical, the assassins sing that they deserve 'a prize' for what they did, a metaphor that is amplified through the shooting gallery scene at the opening. This 'prize' appears to be a place in history – the prize of being remembered for the atrocities they committed. They believe they can halt the country's history for a day 'and effect the narrative, and in so doing ensure that their personal history is not robbed of meaning'.[87]

Although the assassins may have sought attention, fame, and remembrance, few of their stories find much of a place in American history. As Elie Wiesel notes, 'indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction', and so it is more hurtful to be indifferent than to hate.[88] History has consistently treated most of the assassins in Sondheim's musical in this manner and very little is mentioned about any of these killers. In short, they did not get their 'prize'. As the Balladeer sings to the assassins in Scene 15: 'You forgot about the country, and now it's forgotten you.'[89]

Assassins, however, brings to light these forgotten stories through performance, co-creating public memory with its audiences. While it might be more heartening to study the successes of the heroes in American history, and while indifference may be a method of punishing the villains, there is a risk involved in doing so. As the old adage states, 'Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it'. If we forget these stories and leave out the voices of the villains, are we destined to have tragedy repeat itself? *Assassins* helps to ensure that we do not forget – through public memory, we remember painful events that have become part of our collective history.

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