

# Assassins

## The plot in more detail...

Assassins opens in a fairground shooting gallery, evoking the feel of Coney Island - rather faded and battered but gaudy and colourful with flashing lights etc. The carnival **Proprietor** invites the assassins, a collection of misfits, to play his game, promising that their problems will be solved by killing a President. **Leon Czolgosz, John Hinckley, Charles Guiteau, Giuseppe Zangara, Samuel Byck, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme** and **Sara Jane Moore** are given their guns one by one. **John Wilkes Booth** enters last and is introduced as the "pioneer" (**Everybody's Got the Right**). The Proprietor announces President Abraham Lincoln. A shot rings out and we understand that Lincoln has been assassinated.

**The Ballad of Booth** is introduced by the **Balladeer**, a 20<sup>th</sup> century folk singer who, throughout the show, cheerfully comments on the historical settings of the assassination attempts and helps us to understand the various assassins' motivations. He begins by witnessing the fate of John Wilkes Booth in the hours following the shooting of Abraham Lincoln as Booth takes shelter in a tobacco barn with his confederate friend **David Herold**. Booth is trying to write an account justifying his actions but the balladeer interjects that his motives had much more to do with his personal problems. Booth is wounded and throws his diary to the balladeer so that his story can be told to the world. The Balladeer reads out Booth's self-justifications (voiced by Booth himself) and then when Booth shoots himself, concludes that he was a madman with only a legacy of butchery and treason, and that in trying to destroy Lincoln, he actually elevated him to legend status.

The next scene is in a bar. A number of assassins are gathered and play out a scene where they reveal their various personal issues, giving us the motivations for their later actions. Zangara complains of stomach pains and Booth suggests that shooting Franklin D. Roosevelt might cure him of his ailments.

The radio in the bar announces the attempted assassination via a live radio link to Miami's Bayfront Park and a number of bystanders are interviewed, each convinced that he or she was personally responsible for saving the President's life (**How I Saved Roosevelt**). From his electric chair, Zangara sings that he didn't care who he'd killed as long as it was one of the most powerful men in



the USA. He is angry that no photographers are at his execution, saying he is not afraid and to pull the switch. He is electrocuted on stage.

The next scene shows Leon Czolgosz listening, enraptured, to a lecture delivered by **Emma Goldman** - a Russian immigrant who joined the American anarchist movement. He introduces himself and declares his love. She advises him to embrace her ideals of social justice and fight for it.

There follows a hilarious scene between Sara Jane Moore and Lynette Fromme, both of whom attempted and failed to assassinate Gerald Ford. Fromme is smoking a joint and is joined by Moore who is trying to juggle her handbag, a takeaway drink and a tub of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Fromme talks about her lover, mass murderer Charles Manson, with whom she is obsessed. Moore claims she is an FBI informant, has been a CPA, and has had 5 husbands and 4 children. They connect over mutual loathing of their fathers, give Colonel Sanders on the KFC bucket the evil eye and then shoot him. They then realise that they both know Charles Manson as Moore says she dated him at school. Both scream with delight at the coincidence.

**The Gun Song** follows, introduced by Czolgosz, who reflects on how many men die in the mines, the steel mills and the factories to make just one gun. Booth, Guiteau and Moore join him one by one to sing first a duet, then a trio and then a barbershop quartet, in which they tell us of the power a gun has to change the world. Czolgosz is left alone, contemplating his decision to assassinate President William McKinley.

We then see him at the 1901 Pan American Exposition where the President is greeting visitors queueing at the Temple of Music. The balladeer sings **The Ballad of Czolgosz**. Czolgosz joins the queue and when he gets to the front, he shoots McKinley.

Sam Byck is introduced, sitting on a park bench in a grubby Santa suit. He delivers a monologue talking into a tape recorder, leaving a message to Leonard Bernstein advising him to write more love songs. Then he gets angry with Bernstein, accusing him of ignoring him - just like all the other celebrities he has tried to contact.

John Hinckley is found sitting alone and playing his guitar, when Squeaky Fromme enters. Hinckley, who tried to assassinate Ronald Reagan, has a picture of Jodie Foster on the wall and reveals his obsession with her as well as his impotence. Fromme mocks him for being in love with a woman he's never met and brags about her



depraved relationship with Manson. They then sing **Unworthy of Your Love**, a beautiful and simple Carpenters style ballad with a very disturbing subtext! Hinckley draws his gun and fires at an image of Reagan which keeps disappearing and reappearing. On each occasion it is glowing more brightly, indicating his failed assassination attempt.

In the next scene, Charles Guiteau flirts with Moore and gives her tips on how to shoot a gun correctly. He tries to kiss her but she resists and fires her gun so he leaves her to meet **President James Garfield** at the train station. There he tells Garfield that he wants to be Ambassador to France but when he is not taken seriously, he shoots and kills Garfield. He is immediately revealed at the foot of the gallows singing a poem he had written that morning, entitled **I Am Going to the Lordy**. The balladeer describes his trial and execution while Guiteau optimistically cakewalks up the stairs to the gallows, fully expecting to go to heaven, and is then hanged.

Moore and Fromme meet again, this time to prepare to shoot Gerald Ford. In the scene that follows, Moore shoots her dog and threatens to shoot her son, both of whom she has brought with her, before getting into an argument with Fromme and each pulling their guns on each other. Moore diffuses the argument, pointing out that they came to shoot the President, not each other. She waves the gun around and all the bullets fall out. **Gerald Ford** enters and helps them collect all the dropped bullets. Too late, they realise who he is, and Moore ends up throwing her bullets after him as he exits.

Sam Byck is on his way to the airport to hijack a plane to crash dive into the White House, in order to kill Richard Nixon. He delivers a second monologue about the state of American politics and announces that the only solution he can see is to kill the President.

All the assassins join together to reiterate their motives and demand their prizes, over the sound of a wordless lamentation for their victims. The balladeer tells them that there are prizes everywhere if only they had chosen to follow the American Dream and that their actions didn't actually solve anything. The assassins realise that they will never achieve glory and sing **Another National Anthem** which grows louder and louder until they force the Balladeer offstage. This is their national anthem, sung for all those dispossessed by the American dream. They are now singing with a common purpose.

**Lee Harvey Oswald** appears, about to kill himself in a storeroom in the Texas School Book Depository. Booth interrupts him and tries to persuade him to assassinate John F. Kennedy instead. He calls all



the other assassins from the shadows and invites Oswald to join them, claiming that the only way for any of them to achieve any meaning is through this one final terrible act. Oswald tries to leave but the assassins all implore him to act so that they can live again. "Without you we're a bunch of freaks. With you we're a force of history. We become immortal". Oswald is told that he has the potential power to close the New York Stock Exchange, cause worldwide grief and the death of hope and innocence. He will inspire deeply passionate hatred in a world which previously never cared for him at all. Finally, Oswald turns and crouches at the window, then aims and shoots. A huge projected image of Kennedy's assassination is seen, ideally the live footage.

A group of typical American citizens recall where they were and what they were doing when they heard about the assassinations of Presidents Kennedy, Garfield, McKinley and Lincoln in the song **Something Just Broke**.

In the final scene, all the assassins reappear, with Oswald in their ranks, to sing the reprise of **Everybody's Got the Right**. One by one, they raise their guns to the audience, and then together - they shoot.

## BLACKOUT

