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Playing Sam Byck: Analysis Of Text And Performance In Sondheim's Assassins

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PLAYING SAM BYCK: ANALYSIS OF TEXT AND PERFORMANCE IN
SONDHEIM'S ASSASSINS

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Arizona State University, 2006

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
May
2012
This thesis, submitted by Hyrum Wright Patterson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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25 April 2012
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Department Theatre Arts

Degree Master of Arts

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To Heather and Albie
for always giving me a
hug when I need one.
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores an actor's process of creating a character for a musical production, specifically, the role of Sam Byck in Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. The production occurred in November of 2011 at the University of North Dakota. The first two chapters of the thesis contain historical research regarding the character, world events, and the musical, as well as a text analysis of the musical, and given circumstances for the character. The third chapter is a reflection about the production at the production's completion.
INTRODUCTION

The process of creating a character as an actor entails much more complexity than simply memorizing lines and repeating them onstage. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the process of creating a character for the University of North Dakota's 2011 production of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. The character in question is based on Sam Byck (1930-1974), a would-be assassin of President Richard M. Nixon. Since Sam Byck was a real person, researching the background of the historical figure is of great importance to understand the fictional representation of the person. The process of creating the character of Sam Byck will be explored in three chapters. Chapter one will include research on Richard M. Nixon, Byck's intended target, Sam Byck himself, and a brief background of the Stephen Sondheim and the production history of *Assassins*. Chapter two will be a breakdown of the text and the given circumstances of Sam Byck, including analysis of the structure of the musical. Chapter three is intended to be a reflection on the production at the end of the process. This chapter will attempt to answer questions such as what went well? What did not go well? And what was the response to the production?
CHAPTER I: HISTORICAL INQUIRY

The first task in creating a character based on an actual historical figure is to research that character's given circumstances. Due to the fact Sam Byck was an actual person, some of the important factors will be the historical and political climate in which he lived. The first chapter of this thesis will therefore be dedicated to exploring the history of the United States; in particular the Presidency of Richard M. Nixon. Following a brief overview of Nixon will be a brief sketch of Sam Byck's life. The final part of this chapter will focus on Stephen Sondheim, including a brief biography, and an exploration of what elements came together to create the musical, which is Assassins.

Richard Milhous Nixon

Stephen Sondheim's Assassins features presidential assassins from across time, and it would be nearly impossible in the breadth of one paper to cover all of the historical aspects of the production. Therefore, since Richard Nixon is the President targeted by would-be assassin, Samuel Byck, who is the focus of this thesis, one should examine the history surrounding the Nixon presidency. According to Nixon biographer, Melvin Small, it is no small feat to analyze the Presidency of Richard Nixon, Small writes, "Noted presidential chronicler Theodore H. White admitted in 1984 'that I have spent the greatest portion of my adult life writing about Richard Nixon and I still don't understand him'" (Small 1-2).
Although Nixon left office disgraced by the scandal of Watergate, in his later years he re-invented himself as "a wise elder statesman whose life's work drew praise from Republicans and Democrats alike" (Small xiii). Nixon began his public service when he ran for congress in California in 1945 (8). Using smear tactics that would become his trademark whenever running for office, Nixon painted his opponent in the race as a communist (9). In 1950, Nixon challenged Helen Douglas for one of the Senate positions for California, again leveling charges that his opponent was a Communist sympathizer who was, "pink right down to her underwear" (12).

Nixon became such a popular figure as Senator that he was asked to join Dwight D. Eisenhower as his running mate in 1951. When Eisenhower won the election in 1952, Richard Milhous Nixon became the second youngest vice president at the age of thirty-nine (Small 14). Despite exhibiting effective strategies as vice president, Nixon was unable to win the 1960 election to President when he ran against the charismatic John F. Kennedy. Although he had more experience debating, Nixon was sick, and tense during the first televised debate. Kennedy, therefore, looked much more calm and collected, more "presidential" (20-21). Nixon was, however, convinced that "ballot-box stuffing Democrats" were responsible for his narrow loss to Kennedy (21).

When Nixon ran again for his party nomination in 1968 he campaigned on a platform of ending the Vietnam War and shrinking the inflated government created by the Democratic Party (Small 27). Winning with 43.4 percent of the popular vote Nixon claimed the goal of his administration would be "to bring the American people together. This will be an open administration open to new ideas…open to the critics" (30). Nixon was sworn in as the 37th President of The United States of America in 1969. This
summary of his time in office will not, by any means, be a complete summary, but rather, will point out some of the contentious issues that would cause someone to become enraged enough to try and kill Nixon.

Melvin Small points out, that Nixon prolonged the Vietnam War another four years at the cost of thousands of U.S. lives and millions of dollars (Small 95). Rather than broker a peace deal in 1969 when he had an opportunity, Nixon escalated bombings including bombing Cambodia (95). Nixon's plans to end the Vietnam War included the somewhat schizophrenic announcement of a withdrawal of 150,000 troops, while simultaneously planning an invasion of Cambodia (78). Outraged students across the country poured from their classrooms in protest of escalating the War. Demonstrations grew so raucous, the remaining portions of some schools semesters had to be cancelled (79). This also included two incidents involving the National Guard shooting protesters. May 4th 1970, "four young people were killed and fourteen wounded at Kent State University" and May 15th "two students were killed and eleven wounded" at Jackson State University (80).

These events caused a large rift within the already divided country. Scores of letters to the editor applauded the National Guardsmen for doing their duty. In his book Kent State: What Happened and Why, James A. Michener chronicles just a sampling of these letters to the newspaper in Kent. One writer stated:

Congratulations to the Guardsmen for their performance of duty on the Kent University Campus. I hope their actions can serve as an example for the entire nation. The governors of our states cannot
waste the taxpayers' money playing games. These men were alerted
as a last resort to control mob action (Michener 438).

Many students and young people saw the event in quite another way. In a letter to the
editor one student wrote:

I do not believe that arson and violence should go unpunished, but I
know of no state in which arson carries a death sentence, and there
are certainly none in which 'illegal' assembly is punishable by
execution (443-4).

According to Melvin Small by July 4th, 1970, fifty-eight percent of Americans blamed the
students for what happened at Kent State, thus easing some of the pressure on the Nixon
Administration (82).

The "incursions" into Cambodia and North Vietnam were joint exercises with
South Vietnamese troops, and the Nixon administration painted them as successful.
Nixon and his advisers were hoping to show that "the South Vietnamese by themselves
can hack it" (Small 84). However, contradictory film footage of these supposed
successful "incursions" broadcast on American Television stations embarrassed the
Nixon administration (84). Soon enough young Americans disillusioned with the Nixon
White House would be the least of Nixon's worries. Two events would soon set the
country reeling: the Watergate scandal; and an oil embargo. Each of these issues, on their
own, would have tested the mettle of any administration, but, combined, the events
caused outrage among the American people.

The Watergate scandal began quietly as a robbery at the office of the Democratic
National Committee at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. June 17, 1972 (Kutler
The men were attempting to wiretap phones in the Democratic National Committee offices while simultaneously trying to make the act look like a simple burglary. From the 8th of January to the 30th in 1973 "the seven men indicted for the Watergate burglary were on trial" (Small 273). By February 7th the Senate had set up a committee to investigate Watergate, according to Small, "Over the next eighteen months, the Nixon administration would be revealed to be the most scandal-ridden administration in American history" (273). Evidence was brought forward that money was paid to those who had broken in to the Watergate Hotel, and that the source of that money originated in donations to the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP) (Kutler 355). Through some good investigative reporting, and an informer from within the administration, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward started to unravel the extent of the corruption (Small 286).

The Senate investigating committee continued to ferret more and more details from witnesses and, finally, a shocking revelation was made when a Presidential Aide, Alexander P. Butterfield was forced to testify before the United States Senate committee. According to Woodward and Bernstein, "on national television, Butterfield reluctantly laid out the whole story of the tapes before the Senate committee, and the country (Bernstein 332). Ultimately the taping system Nixon had installed in his offices was his downfall, since the tapes indicted him in the cover-up of Watergate (Small 275-76). What initially just seemed like a breaking and entering was revealed to be a massive scandal of corruption and intimidation by the Nixon administration implicating Nixon himself. The most incriminating of these was a conversation from June 1972 with H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff "clearly demonstrating that the two had conspired to use the CIA to blunt the FBI's Watergate investigation (294).
While Nixon was dealing with the massive problems created by Watergate, tensions were mounting in the Middle East between Egypt and Israel. Israeli refusal to leave contested portions of the east bank caused Anwar Sadat the Egyptian leader to begin making threats toward Israel (Small 131). When Sadat did not receive the support he had hoped for from the United States in convincing Israel to vacate the contested areas Egypt declared war on Israel (132). On October 6, 1973 Egypt, with help from Syria, attacked Israel, and Nixon, who was distracted by the issues surrounding Watergate, neglected to attend even one meeting regarding the war (132). Outnumbered and surrounded, a besieged Israel quickly ran low on supplies and turned to the United States to help resupply them. However, threats from oil-rich Arab countries stated they would cease selling oil to any country that assisted Israel; therefore, the United States was hesitant to get involved and not a single European nation came forward to offer assistance (Small 133). The Nixon administration reversed course and offered to help. Small relates, "Beginning on 13 October Washington sent almost 1,000 tons of supplies to Israel every hour; the Americans sent more in one day than the Soviets sent in four days" (134). While this assistance turned the tide of the war in Israel's favor, it did not please the leaders of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). October 19, 1973, "King Faisal of Saudia Arabia announced that the Arab nations would embargo oil to the United States" (134). To a nation already struggling with corruption in the highest ranks of government, an oil embargo spawned gas shortages and outrageously higher prices (203).

Any modern American President would be adversely affected by high gas prices; Nixon, however, was crippled not only by gas rationing and high prices, but with the
revelation that he and his administration were willing to use any dirty tactics they could think of to maintain power. When the House Judiciary Committee began to draw up articles of impeachment, Nixon wavered on whether or not he would fight impeachment or resign (Small 294-5). Finally, knowing the fight was insurmountable, Nixon resigned as President of the United States of America on August 9, 1974 (295).

Samuel Joseph Byck

Unlike two infamous Presidential assassins John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald, the would-be Presidential assassin Samuel Byck is relatively unknown in popular American culture. Perhaps this is because he failed in his attempt to kill Richard Nixon. Byck was convinced the plan he had created would be a success and very carefully outlined the plan in a tape he sent to Washington Post reporter Jack Anderson just before his failed assassination attempt (Hoerl 21). The plan he concocted seems rather outrageous in a post September 11th world, as it involved high-jacking an airplane. The assassination attempt itself, however, did not unfold the way Byck had envisioned. In order to understand the character Sam Byck in Assassins one must first explore who Sam Byck was and what events shaped him.

Samuel Joseph Byck, born January 30, 1930, was the eldest son to Jewish parents, with two younger brothers. Very little has been written about Byck's life, so it is difficult to make many assertions regarding formative events from his childhood. James W. Clarke is the main source for any information regarding Sam Byck. In Clarke's book American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics, Clarke mentions briefly, Byck's father was "a kindly, well meaning man who Sam recalled fondly, played pinochle in the
evenings with his sons" (129). Byck's father may have had a friendly disposition; however, he repeatedly failed as a breadwinner for the family causing his family to suffer. Despite his best efforts, Byck's father was unable to have any amount of success in providing materially and financially for his family. Clarke concludes that financial struggles the family had to endure led Sam to become disenchanted with his father to the point of being completely ambivalent (129).

Byck attended High School in Philadelphia but never graduated. He then worked different jobs never staying long with any particular one until he enlisted in the Army in 1954. Byck's training in the Army was in "firearms and explosives," which also happened to be the two things he would eventually use in his attempt to kill the President (Clarke American Assassins 129). Byck was honorably discharged in 1956 and his ill feelings toward his father became very apparent to his family when he ignored the Jewish custom of formal mourning when his father died. Instead of respecting the proper mourning period he got married one month after his father's death in 1957 (129-30). Quite soon after the wedding he and his wife started a family, and in a brief period of time his family grew until he was the father of three daughters and a son (130).

While one of Byck's younger brothers became successful as a business owner and the other as a dentist, Byck returned to his old habits after High School and followed in his father's footsteps maintaining jobs (Clarke American Assassins 130). His inability to provide for his family not only strained his relationships with his more successful brothers, but also, and perhaps more importantly, caused strife at home with his wife. His failure as a breadwinner weighed heavily on his psyche causing Byck to feel like an utter failure, which created depressive episodes for Byck (130). Battling his mental problems,
Byck admitted himself into the "Friends Psychiatric Hospital on November 12, 1969 for in-patient treatment for anxiety and depression" (130). Byck was "diagnosed as having a 'manic-depressive illness' and continued to seek out-patient care for the next two years" (130). Byck was unconvinced that his mental illness had anything to do with his problematic relationships. "He had real problems: no job and a failing marriage" Clarke writes (130).

In an attempt to become a success in business, Clarke reports Byck had one, "desperate final bid to save himself and perhaps his marriage, he applied in 1969 for a loan from the Small Business Administration. His plan was to restructure his life on the basis of a rather novel scheme for retailing automobile tyres [sic] from a brightly painted bus which he intended to park at varous [sic] shopping centres (Clarke "American Assassins: An Alternative Typology" 97). Byck received the rejection letter for the twenty-thousand-dollar loan during his initial stay at the Psychiatric Hospital. This rejection was a crushing blow to the hopes for a successful business and convinced Byck the system was stacked against him. As a result, he began to identify with oppressed groups, so much so that he contacted "the Black Liberation Army and later contributed some five hundred dollars and a couple of truck tires to the organization" (Clarke American Assassins 130).

Failure as a businessman and failure as a father were looked at by Byck as someone else's problems. He believed that the only way for people to become successful was to sell out. "Only people who sold out to the system—like his brothers—could make it. But Sam Byck was no sellout. He had principles" (Clarke American Assassins 131). Byck became convinced that his inability to find economic success was a direct result "of
a corrupt, constitution-subverting political regime in Washington" (131). His mental illness however, is most likely what caused him to assume that he was the victim of a corrupt political system that was bent on oppressing him and others like him (130). By 1972 Sam Byck's marriage was unsalvageable. His wife asked him to move out of the house and his alienation from people important in his life only helped to worsen his mental state. Unable to spend any lasting time with his children Byck also felt like a failure as a father. Byck "claimed that he was permitted to see his children for only an hour on Sundays" (131). The alienation from his family, combined with his ongoing unemployment, may have caused the symptoms of his mental illness to worsen.

In his article "A Study of Presidential Assassins", Marshall N. Heyman, PhD summed up Byck's mental state, writing:

Byck invested a great deal of psychological energy in trying to acquire intellectual discipline and social maturity and responsibility. However, through some perverse element in his makeup and in his relations with all the important people in his world, he was utterly incapable of bringing his resources to bear in any single, productive socially redeeming activity.

(137)

Heyman cites Bycks scores of letters, and cassette recordings as futile efforts By Byck to be productive. By September 1973 Byck's divorce was final. Alone in his small apartment he was able to ruminate over the ever-growing corruption scandal that was being unearthed in the Nixon administration. New information was being reported daily in the scandal and the unemployed Byck had nothing but time on his hands. Clarke writes that Byck felt that, "rejection of his SBA (Small Business Administration) application
was simply another example - indeed, further evidence - of the injustice and dishonesty that characterized the Nixon Administration" (Clarke "American Assassins" 98).

After being cut off from his children and wife, Byck began spiraling out of control. He spent most of his time alone in his apartment talking into his Sony tape recorder. He recorded and sent in the mail hours of tapes various celebrities including Jonas Salk, the man who created the polio vaccine, and famous composer Leonard Bernstein (Clarke American Assassins 133-34). He also began writing scores of letters to lawmakers, Clarke writes:

if he could not communicate with his family, he would tackle the communications problems of the world; if he could not salvage his deteriorating marriage, he would save a deteriorating society from the government that, in his view, caused it. The cards were stacked against him, and his only recourse—the only way to salvage a degree of self-respect and release his terrible frustration and anger—was to get the dealer, the nefarious Richard M. Nixon (132).

Byck's plan to assassinate President Nixon germinated during the 1972 Presidential campaign. Because he blamed Nixon for his economic woes, Byck "became a strong McGovern supporter and an outspoken critic of the Nixon administration" (Clarke American Assassins 131). Near the end of the presidential campaign, someone reported to authorities that Byck had suggested, "someone ought to kill President Nixon" (131). Although he was reported as making the threat, available sources do not indicate where he was. Secret Service agents interviewed him and Byck denied he had ever made a statement like that. According to Clarke, "A psychiatrist who treated Byck for his
emotional problems told the investigators that he did not consider Byck a threat to himself or others" (131). This was the first interaction with authorities, but it would not be the last before the assassination attempt.

When his apartment was searched after his failed attempt, evidence was unearthed that Byck was excited and enthralled by an event that occurred in January of 1973. A man named "Mark 'Jimmy' Essex, armed with a high-powered rifle, killed six persons from his sniper's nest on the roof of a Howard Johnson's hotel in New Orleans before he was gunned down by police" (Clarke American Assassins 131). Byck had clipped out newspaper articles and highlighted various parts of the article, underlining slogans the police discovered scrawled on the walls of Essex's apartment. Some examples of the slogans were: "The quest for freedom is death. Then by death I shall escape to freedom" and "Kill pig Nixon and all his running dogs" (131). Byck even wrote on one article about Essex:

"I'LL MEET YOU IN VALHALLA, MARK ESSEX—OK!

SAM BYCK" (131).

Clarke points out in a footnote, "According to Norse mythology, Valhalla is the Hall of Odin, where warriors who have died bravely in battle are received" (131). It would then appear that as early as January of 1973, that Byck had decided he was going to die in battle with the man he viewed as a corrupt tyrant, Nixon.

Four days after the Essex incident Sam Byck, "went to his estranged wife's residence and took the car. He left a note saying he would be away for awhile" (Clarke American Assassins 132). His plan was to see how close he could get to President Nixon during the inauguration. He had some conversations with police setting up the
inauguration site, and perhaps realizing an attempt was futile at that point, he left. When he returned to Philadelphia, he found that he had been reported missing although Clarke does not specify who had reported this information. Byck was "questioned by authorities" but "denied that he had entertained any design on the president's life. Rather, he explained, he simply could not tolerate the loneliness of his existence and left the area impulsively only to meet and talk with someone" (132). He was hospitalized by authorities at Philadelphia General Hospital for observation and was shortly released without further incident (132). Byck convinced authorities both times his threats were in no way serious, and that he was not a danger to himself or anyone else.

Byck would have two more scrapes with the law before the assassination attempt. First when he sent a threatening letter to the Israeli Consulate, he was interviewed by Secret Service. Byck stated, "he felt it was important, as a Jew, to let the Israelis know that he wanted peace in the Middle East and that 'he cared'" (Clarke American Assassins 132). He was also arrested in September of 1973 "for picketing without a permit in front of the White House" (133). He requested permits to demonstrate in front of the White House and showed up two days in November. Then on Christmas Eve, dressed in a Santa suit he asked "passing children about their Christmas wishes" (133). A large sign he carried read, "Santa sez' [sic] ALL IWANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS MY CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO PEACABLY PETITION MY GOVERNMENT FOR A REDRESS OF GRIEVANCES" (133). It was reported in the New York Times that when someone asked Byck what he wanted to give to people his answer was, "If I had the power to give everyone something, I'd get them to give a damn" ("Hijacker Had Picketed White House" 34).
By this time Byck was feeling alienated and suicidal. His sole friend was Bonny, the owner of a tire store where Byck had once worked (133). Inspired by the shooter in New Orleans, Mark Essex, "Byck also read about other assassins (he had photocopied a chronology of assassinations from the pages of the Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence) and was intent upon making his own death and the President's in his own words, a 'smashing success'" (134). He made a tape to clarify his plan which he called, "Project Pandora's Box" to make sure that people would know that this was not just an attempt to commandeer an airliner (134).

From the tape he spoke:

I will try to get the plane aloft and fly it towards the target area, which will be Washington, D.C., the capitol of the most powerful wealthiest nation of the world… By guise, threats or trickery, I hope to force the pilot to buzz the White House—I mean, sort of dive towards the White House. When the plane is in this position, I will shoot the pilot and then in the last few minutes try to steer the plane into the target, which is the White House… Whoever dies in Project Pandora's Box will be directly attributable to the Watergate scandals (Clarke American Assassins 134).

He mailed copies of this tape not only to the reporter Jack Anderson, but also to Leonard Bernstein, Jonas Salk, and to Senator Ribicoff. Byck also claimed on this tape "he viewed himself as a political terrorist, like those in Northern Ireland and the Middle East" (134).

Now that Byck's plan was complete he just needed a weapon, which he stole from his only friend Bonny (Clarke American Assassins 135). In one of his final recordings he says, "I mean I can go back very easily. I could probably even, eh, finagle the gun back
into Bonny's cabinet without him missing it and if not I could always tell him that I was fixin [sic] on killing myself and I, eh, got cold feet" (qtd. in Clarke American Assassins 136). Byck drove all night from Philadelphia to Baltimore recording some final tapes during his drive as he rambled about everything from the ongoing oil embargo, to his friendship with Bonny, all the while claiming these tapes were "political justification" (135). One of the most striking things he says in the hour prior to his hi-jacking attempt is, "One man's terrorist is another man's patriot. See what happens in Ireland. Who's the patriot and who's the terrorist? It all depends on which side of the fence you happen to be on at the time" (qtd. in Clarke 141).

In one of his final tapes Byck states, "I will try not to let nothing [sic] stand in my way from here on in. I will go step by step, try not to panic, which may be difficult" (qtd in Clarke American Assassins 135). Byck however did panic and the hi-jacking did not go as he had detailed. The attempted hi-jacking took place on February 22, 1974, a day noted by Byck in his last tapes as, Washington's Birthday (136). Just after seven o'clock in the morning armed with a .22 caliber pistol and a gasoline bomb, Sam Byck shot a security guard twice at a checkpoint and boarded "Delta Flight 523" (128). He immediately fired a warning shot at the cockpit crew and demanded they "fly this plane out of here" (128). A panicked Byck then demanded they close the door and the flight attendants fled as they closed the door. The pilot informed Byck they could not move "until the wheel blocks were removed" (128).

Given the news the plane would not be moving, Byck's plan crumbled and panic consumed him. Byck reacted to this news by shooting the co-pilot in the stomach and screaming, "The next one will be in the head" (128). He then grabbed a female passenger
and told her, "Help this man fly this plane" (128). Byck, in full panic mode, shoved the passenger back to her seat. He shot two more bullets hitting the co-pilot again and the pilot's shoulder. The pilot desperately called on the radio to ground control:

Emergency, emergency, we're all shot…ah…can you get another pilot here to the airplane…ah…this fellow he shot us both. Ground… I need ground…ah…this is a state of emergency. Get ahold of our ramp and ask the people to come on out to unhook the tug.

Byck "reloaded his pistol and then seized another passenger by the hair and dragged her forward to the entrance of the cockpit where he again shot the wounded pilot and dying co-pilot as they slumped over the controls" (Clarke American Assassins 129). An officer shot through the window of the door of the plane and the spray of glass cut Byck's hostage on the thigh. Byck let go of the hostage and told her to go back to her seat. Right after she moved Byck was hit with two more bullets in his "lower chest and stomach. Clutching his chest with both hands, he staggered and dropped to the floor. Reaching for his pistol, he rested the barrel against his right temple and squeezed the trigger" (129).

Samuel Joseph Byck, the would-be assassin of President Richard Milhous Nixon achieved his wish to die but did not accomplish his goal of ridding the world of the, "pig Nixon and all his running dogs" (Clarke American Assassins 131). Surprisingly, there was little coverage of the events that took place that early morning in Baltimore.

According to Kristen Hoerl in her article "Deranged Loners and Demented Outsiders? Therapeutic News Frames of Presidential Assassination Attempts, 1973-2001" she points out there were only eleven articles in both the New York Times and the Washington Post.
in the first week after the attempt (Hoerl 39). Of these eleven only two mentioned the assassination attempt, and it was due to the tape mailed to Jack Anderson, who coincidentally, was a target of the Nixon administration for his investigative reporting (Feldstein).

Stephen Sondheim

In order to successfully create and understand the character of Sam Byck, an actor must research and understand the production's creator. The man responsible for the musical is Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim has a very long and illustrious career spanning decades. This thesis will attempt to summarize his major works, and explore his methods of creating a musical, with particular emphasis on his work with John Weidman in Assassins. Martin Gottfried writes in his book Sondheim, "Stephen Sondheim is the giant of the modern musical stage. He is to today's Broadway what Kern and Gershwin, Hammerstein and Hart were to yesterday's" (Gottfried 8). Stephen Sondheim, for the past five decades, has impacted and continues to influence the art form that is the American musical.

March 22, 1930, Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born to a successful dress manufacturer Herbert Sondheim and his wife Janet Sondheim, who also happened to be the main designer for the company (Secrest 11). His parents travelled to Europe quite often to discover new fashions for their garment business, so Sondheim often spent summers at camp, with nurses, or was in boarding school (16). He lived, what has been described by some as a lonely childhood, however Sondheim does not remember it that
way. He has been quoted as saying, "I don't remember it. I really don't. I didn't cry myself to sleep…" (21).

When Stephen was ten years old, his father left his mother and married Alicia Babé, Sondheim reported that his mother sort of transferred the husbandly responsibilities to Stephen, which affected their relationship negatively, therefore, he enjoyed his time away from her. One of the defining moments of his life occurred at age eleven when his mother and a long time friend Dorothy Hammerstein came to visit. Along with Dorothy was her ten-year-old son, Jimmy. Stephen and Jimmy became fast friends and Gottfried writes, "He 'osmosed,' as he put it, into the Hammerstein household. 'They were my surrogate family. My mother was a difficult lady and I had a difficult time with her'' (qtd in Gottfried 13).

It was his friendship with the Hammerstein's that most transformed Sondheim. Lyricist and composer, Oscar Hammerstein II created a positive influence on Sondheim during time spent with the Hammerstein family. Compared to the relationship with his mother the warm and caring atmosphere at the Hammerstein house was a welcome change. Eventually Sondheim was given his own bed and was thought of as part of the family (Gottfried 13-14). Sondheim claimed, "I wrote for the theater, in order to be like Oscar. I have no doubt that if he'd been a geologist, I would have become a geologist" (13). It is a lucky thing for American Theatre, that Oscar Hammerstein was not a Geologist, but a talented lyricist.

In 1942 Sondheim began prep school at a rather expensive private institution, the George School in Newtown Pennsylvania (Gottfried 13). Shortly after his entrance into the George School, Sondheim's role model Oscar Hammerstein scored a hit with
Oaklahoma!. In perhaps an effort to become more like Oscar, Stephen wrote his first musical, at age fifteen By George!, "a satire of campus life with the teachers' names changed for laughs" (14-15). While Stephen thought the play was a good piece of work, he wanted to know what Oscar thought of it. He asked Oscar to look at the play like he would anyone that was submitted to him as a producer. Hammerstein gave Sondheim his honest opinion saying that the play was in fact, "the worst thing I ever read in my life" (15).

Undaunted by this honest criticism Sondheim sat with Oscar for the next four hours and went over every part of the play, "beginning with the first stage direction" (Gottfried 15). During this conversation Hammerstein broke down the play and taught Sondheim a great deal about writing and composing, including, "how to structure songs, how to build them with a beginning and a development and an ending…how to introduce character, what relates a song to a character…four hours of the most packed information. I dare say, at the risk of hyperbole, that I learned more that afternoon than most people learn about songwriting in a lifetime" (15). Hammerstein was honest with Stephen about some of the awful lyrics he had composed feeling it would be deceitful to pretend otherwise. Hammerstein reminisces in Notes on Lyrics about a terrible song he had written "about Indians sung by a female chorus in bathing suits and deep suntans—'and the lyric featured the double meaning of 'redskin'" (Secrest 52). Armed with the knowledge that he was going to have to work hard to improve Sondheim took up the challenge.

Sondheim continued writing musicals under the tutelage of Oscar Hammerstein. He was given four major assignments: his first task was to write a musical based on a
good play; second was to write one based on a "flawed play"; third was to write a musical based on, "a work not written for the stage at all, such as a short story or novel," and lastly, Sondheim was to write an original play (Gottfried 15). The four musicals that resulted from the assignments given to him by Hammerstein over the next decade were as follows, *All That Glitters*, an adaptation of a comedy called *Beggar on Horseback*, which was produced at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where Sondheim studied composition and piano. The flawed play he chose was *High Tor*, by Maxwell Anderson, but the play was never produced. The play from a novel he chose was *Mary Poppins*, which Sondheim recalled was, "very difficult" (Gottfried 18).

His final project for Hammerstein would ultimately be the reason he got his first job on Broadway. The show was called *Climb High*, and though it wasn't produced Sondheim played the score to Lemuel Ayers (co-producer of *Kiss Me, Kate*) and Ayers liked the score enough to offer Sondheim a "three-song tryout (at $100 apiece)" (Gottfried 23). The year that he got his first paying job on Broadway was 1954. *Saturday Night*, the musical he was paid to write was not produced in 1955 as planned due to Ayers death from Leukemia (Secrest 110).

Sondheim's first major success came when he was brought in to a project initially titled *East Side Story* but was later changed to *West Side Story* (Secrest 115). This was a project in which Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins were collaborating. Stephen was reluctant to be a lyricist, because, "his impulses, his training, his ambitions, and most important of all, his sense of identity were tied up with being a composer" (Gottfried 45). Oscar Hammerstein convinced Stephen to take the job so that he would be able to network and, "get started on Broadway (45). *West Side Story*, although panned by some
critics, was immensely successful and Sondheim would serve again as lyricist for two other shows, Gypsy and Do I hear a Waltz (45).

Sondheim made enough money by the age of thirty to live comfortably the rest of his life, on royalties from West Side Story and Gypsy; however, he never stopped working (Gottfried 60). Unwilling to be pigeonholed Sondheim began creating with great intensity. Working tirelessly Sondheim created his first hit as a composer, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, which opened in the spring of 1962 and was produced by a great friend, and long time collaborator of Sondheim's, Harold Prince (60). After the success of Forum, which ran for 964 performances at the Alvin Theatre, Sondheim attempted an experiment. He wanted to show the world that talent and hard work could give birth to great art (67). What he found instead was his first failure, Anyone Can Whistle, which "tested Sondheim's professional mettle" (67). Closing after only nine performances, Anyone Can Whistle is credited by Gottfried as the show where, "Sondheim's own voice—a musical voice that begins to emerge in this show like a butterfly from a cocoon" (73). Undaunted by failure Sondheim would continue to write musicals.

Sondheim's willingness to experiment with the format of a musical facilitated his transformation from ordinary to revolutionary. It was in his creation of a different type of musical—a concept musical—that Sondheim set himself apart from other composers.

Scott Miller in his essay "Assassins and the Concept Musical" writes:

In 1970 Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's new musical Company burst upon Broadway, a musical unlike most people had ever seen, a concept musical with no linear plot, with a completely passive protagonist,
and an equivocal ending. In 1990, *Assassins* was the first New York musical in twenty years to tread fearlessly the same path, a concept musical with even less plot and no protagonist at all (187).

Although *Assassins* did not initially transfer to Broadway, it has been performed all around the world. Sondheim's personal assessment of *Assassins* in Mark Eden Horowitz's book *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* was, "the show wasn't that popular" (67).

Every composer has a distinct approach to the creative process they like to work within while creating their music. Gottfried writes, "Sondheim's approach to composing music is, in at least one respect, like Oscar Hammerstein's approach to writing lyrics: the first step is thinking" (Gottfried 34). Gottfried makes the assessment that Sondheim's modus operandi is to fully assess what kind of, "tone", "style", and "sound" the music he wants to create should have before ever penning a single note (34). However, in Meryle Secrest's book *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, Sondheim admitted that whenever he was stuck, "Marijuana also helped a lot" (265). Many of the plays Sondheim has created are not typical Broadway fare. Sondheim himself would say, "I write the unexpected" (Gottfried 183). Unexpected subject matter, and the complex music accompanying the story lines may not seem suitable for commercial theatre; however, critics praised Sondheim's innovative spirit.

Sondheim eventually felt his style of creating a musical especially a work, which was not necessarily "commercial" in a Broadway setting, was becoming more difficult. When he began work on *Sunday in the Park with George* he moved his work off Broadway in conjunction with Playwrights Horizons (Secrest 330). Here at the smaller
off-Broadway theatre Sondheim was able to workshop the production both at a lower cost, and a more intimate workspace. He found a place that could serve as, "a consistent venue for mounting his shows" (331). Regarding Sondheim's move to an off Broadway venue, Andre Bishop, Playwrights Horizons artistic director at the time said Sondheim, "moved on" from the old Broadway system, and in the process, "his talent changed and refined itself" (331). It was in this comfortable creative atmosphere that Sondheim would create *Assassins*.

Harold Prince was responsible for bringing together Sondheim and the man who would eventually write the book for *Assassins*. Prince was given a script about Japan called *Pacific Overtures* by a young lawyer named John Weidman. At the time he read the play, Prince was interested in continuing the experimentation and "progress made by *Company*, in departing from traditional book structure "(Gottfried 115). Although Prince was impressed with the play, he asked Weidman to re-write it in Kabuki theatre style, and then transform it into a musical (114). The resulting musical *Pacific Overtures* looked historically at 125 years of Japanese life and the "gunboat diplomacy" that took it from a secluded island nation to forced trading with the Western superpowers. This was the first time Sondheim would work with Weidman, and while the experiment "failed on entertainment grounds" Weidman would be Sondheim's first choice to collaborate on *Assassins* (115).

The idea for a musical about assassins was initially thought up and produced by Charles Gilbert Jr. who is currently the Director of the School of Theatre Arts at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia (Gilbert). Sondheim approached Gilbert after having read his musical *Assassins* years earlier when he was working as a judge for
young playwrights at the Musical Theatre Lab (Secrest 361). When approached by Sondheim about using his idea, Gilbert relates, "I was pretty cheeky—I offered to work on it with him—it was like writing a letter to God. He phoned, very cordial, and said he had someone else in mind" (361-2). Gilbert is forever connected with Sondheim's *Assassins*, however, due to the fact every production of the show is required to say that the idea for *Assassins* came from Gilbert in the program (Gilbert). Weidman and Sondheim used the basic idea for Gilbert's musical but wanted to "examine our history of assassination and to portray it as perhaps a perverse tradition, but as an American one nonetheless" (Gottfried 183).

Initially Sondheim and Weidman attempted to make a musical about assassins all the way back to Julius Caesar, but found the idea "unwieldy" (Horowitz 69). So next they attempted to "restrict it to American assassinations" but again found it was still too large a scope and so they further restricted the subject to just include presidential assassins (69). With the freedom to try different ideas because of his association with Playwrights Horizons, Weidman and Sondheim took advantage of the supportive environment to truly experiment with different ideas. One such idea was a song in which the vice presidents of the assassinated presidents received a "phone call" that they were in charge (69). Sondheim muses, "three people totally unprepared for what's been thrust on them. It would have been very funny. But there were a lot of ideas" (69). Trading ideas and trying them out seemed to work well with Weidman and Sondheim and the resulting work became *Assassins*.

The initial production at Playwrights Horizons opened January 27, 1991 and closed February 16, 1991 after 71 performances (Lortel.org). The production did not
succeed in the way Sondheim and company had hoped, partially due to the timing of the production's opening. The play opened when patriotic fervor was at a fever pitch "in the middle of the first Persian Gulf War" (Bishop vii). Pianist for the production Paul Ford remembered, "There was a television set downstairs in the dressing room and the actors were all watching developments and groaning, because they knew the implications" (Secrest 364). While audiences lined up in cold weather to see the show many critics were dismissive of the production including John Simon who wrote:

> When the terrible events in the Gulf began, Sondheim & Co.—all affluent folks in no great need of turning a buck—could have done the gallant thing and shut down, or shot down, their not very viable brainchild (qtd in Secrest 364).

Despite the negative reviews the show received The New York Times reviewer David Richards printed, "Nothing…quite prepares you for the disturbing brilliance of Assassins" (qtd in Secrest 365). Although the show did not move to Broadway as everyone involved in the production had hoped, there was still life after the short run at Playwrights Horizons.

The next major Production to mount was a production in the West End of London. It opened October 29, 1992 at the Donmar Warehouse and closed January 9, 1993 after 76 performances (Hutchins). The main difference between the New York and London performance was the addition of a new musical number. During the run of the off-Broadway show, Sondheim was working on a new number for the show, which was included for the first time in the London performance. The number "Something Just
Broke" Sondheim stated was to represent, "what happens to the country when a president gets assassinated" (Horowitz 66).

Reviewers in London, many of whom reviewed the New York production of *Assassins*, were much more complementary in their reviews. One Sunday Times reporter called *Assassins* evidence that "America was 'a breeding ground of simple, ordinary megalomaniacs busy in the pursuit of happiness brandishing a gun" (Secrest 366).

Another reviewer writing about the Lee Harvey Oswald scene said that it, "encapsulates *Assassins* eerie, enthralling appeal—dangerous Americans possessed and ruined by dreams" (366).

Another major production of *Assassins* was to debut eight years later, this time on Broadway. The production however faced events that caused some unfortunate timing as well—rehearsals were to begin at the end of September, 2001. However the events of September 11, 2001 halted the production. In a statement in the insert to the Broadway Cast recording John Weidman writes, "people who were in mourning 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 effectively engage an audience so soon after the awful events New Yorkers had witnessed" (Weidman). While the production was postponed it was not abandoned. Opening April 22, 2004 and closing July 18, 2004 after 101 performances the show opened to rave reviews and eventually won 5 Tony Awards (Hutchins).

*Assassins* while an initial disappointment to Sondheim and Weidman, has taken on a life of it's own in being produced in regional theatres and college campuses all across America. Weidman writes, "Between 1992 and 2003, there were only twelve
professional productions of the show in the entire United States; at the same time, there were almost 400 amateur productions” (Weidman). The very fact that college students are exposed to *Assassins*, and are excited by the work, and challenged by the ideas seems to be satisfying to Weidman, and one hopes to Sondheim as well.

History provides a fertile source for drama. Although the dramatic structure for Sondheim's *Assassins* does not follow a conventional structure, the historical events, which inspired the production, were not conventional either. Nixon, arguably one of the most corrupt leaders of the United States, was the fuel that drove a mentally ill man to end his life, in order to free the world. Stephen Sondheim and his collaborator John Weidman succeeded in harnessing the negative energy surrounding presidential assassination to create a thought provoking insight into the hearts and minds of these killers. Ultimately, that is why *Assassins* continues to grow in popularity, and will continue to challenge the beliefs of actors and audiences.
CHAPTER II: ANALYSIS OF TEXT

Researching a musical does not end with simply just researching the historical aspect of the production. The text itself is also filled with information to analyze; a complete understanding of the text allows for anyone involved with the production to aid in telling the story. The second chapter of this thesis is an exploration of the text of the musical. This will include an examination of the style of the production as well as the dramatic structure of the musical, and a character analysis of Sam Byck. The character analysis will include information gleaned from the text; along with information invented by the actor to create a more complete and believable character.

_Assassins_ by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman, is a play about United States Presidential assassins through history. All of the assassins congregate in an ethereal limbo, how else could one explain the presence of all of the presidential assassins throughout United States congregating in one place. Each assassin recounts his or her story explaining the reasons behind his or her acts. All of the assassins pressure Lee Harvey Oswald to validate them in the most famous of presidential killings, the John F. Kennedy assassination. _Assassins_ is first and foremost a musical. Stephen Sondheim is a master of his craft and creates haunting melodies to encircle the characters in a discordant slightly askew world. Not only does the music reflect the out of kilter nature of the characters of the musical, but the ethereal limbo in which assassins throughout time can mingle together influencing and inspiring one another while letting the audience know that something spectacular is about to happen.
Style is a word that gets bandied about somewhat haphazardly at times, so a discussion of style is something that should be approached carefully. A discussion of style in regards to one particular production, in this case the mounting of *Assassins* by the University of North Dakota will have to take into account the director, designer, and costume designer's vision, and perhaps most important to the analysis of character, the actor's vision.

The musical *Assassins* has been described as a concept musical, meaning that although there is no through-line in the plot the entire musical is centered on one theme. Scott Miller in his article "Assassins and the Concept Musical" writes:

> Most shows labeled as concept musicals essentially fall into four categories: musicals built upon a central concept (usually an important social issue) instead of a linear story; musicals whose central concept is most important but that still employ a linear plot; musical character studies with no linear plot but no unifying concept either; and musicals that do not fit into any other categories (Miller 187).

This non-linear plot allows this particular production to have some flexibility in staging and visual themes.

The designer, Brad Reissig, created a non-specific playing space where the actors can transform the empty space into whatever they need it to be at the time. Explaining the space to the actors the designer pointed out that there would be many levels of playing space allowing many different stage pictures to be developed. The lighting includes smoke machines and eerie lighting adds to the discordance of the assassin's existence.
Furthermore, the only vivid colors on stage will be in the costumes of the assassins, designed by Michelle Davidson, since the set will be drenched in grayscale.

Emily Cherry, the director of this production has made it quite clear that this musical is not meant to be a literal translation of historical events. The style Cherry has determined to use for the production is, "sparse realism…with surrealistic elements" (Cherry). Because Assassins is, "stylistically so different throughout" a blending of styles is necessary in order to make the production come to life (Cherry). Sondheim and Weidman have congregated people from different time periods into one playing space where they can interact but still truly experience their reality. Although the set is not realistic the characters are "fighting for real emotions that are… semi rational" (Cherry). To conclude Cherry simply stated, "sometimes the play doesn't fit the mold…to me it is more about concept, and making sure that all our puzzle pieces fit together" (Cherry).

Once the style of this unique production has been determined, it becomes the task of this author to examine the dramatic structure of this musical. This will include decisions about the protagonist, the antagonist, the intrusion, the climax, major and minor conflicts, themes, symbols, images and recurring motifs. The protagonist of the play is the collective body of assassins. They each want to kill a President of the United States to get their prizes, which is different for each individual. The Antagonist is the American People embodied by the Balladeer; he wants to perpetuate the lie of the "American Dream" in order to block the assassins from fulfilling their goals.

David Ball, in his book Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays writes an, "intrusion is a pushing, thrusting, or forcing in" (19). The intrusion in Assassins comes when, in scene two, the Balladeer sings, "Every now and then the
country goes a little wrong. Every now and then a madman's bound to come along. Doesn't stop the story—story's pretty strong. Doesn't change the song…” (Sondheim 8).

From this moment on, the Balladeer defends the belief structure of the American people. The idea taught to schoolchildren all across the United States: if you work hard, you can get your dream. Anything is possible as long as you are willing to put in the work. Each of the assassins in the play, however, feel disillusioned and abandoned by main stream society and this idea.

The battle between the Balladeer and the assassins is the main conflict in the play. The Balladeer is constantly trying to undermine the confidence of the assassins. Trying to keep them from realizing their full potential as a group. For example in scene two he attacks Booth:

They say your ship was sinkin', John… You started missing cues… They say it wasn't Lincoln, John. You'd merely had a slew of bad reviews—

(Sondheim 10-11).

It is interesting to note—the three major songs the Balladeer sings with different assassins are the three assassins who succeeded in killing the presidents they targeted. The Balladeer exerts extra pressure on the three successes to dissuade them from realizing the power they wielded when disrupting the nation.

Some of the minor conflicts involve each of the assassins and the President they feel has wronged them. Booth feels that Lincoln ruined the country and must pay for his actions. Czolgosz believes inequality between the ruling elite and the poor needs to be addressed, and the only way he can find to make this statement is to kill the commander in chief William McKinley. Sam Byck wants to topple the presidency of Richard Nixon
to cleanse the government from the top down. Nixon represents all that is keeping a "non-conformist" such as Byck down.

Another minor conflict in the musical for Sam Byck is being rejected and forgotten. He has been recording tapes and sending them to notable celebrities, without ever receiving a response. His plea to Leonard Bernstein appears to be him encouraging Leonard Bernstein to change his behavior and write more love songs. What he is really trying to communicate is how abandoned he feels by Bernstein. In scene three Byck complains to his cassette recorder, "Maybe one day you could've picked a phone up. Just picked up a phone and said, 'Hey Sammy, how's it going? Hang in there, Sam. This bud's for you.' How long would that have taken you" (Sondheim 39)?

Ball defines theme as "an abstract concept which part or all of the play is 'about'" (76). The major theme in this play is if you want something then go and get it. All of these assassins want to believe that their actions will change the world. Some of their ideas may be unpopular; some of their actions proved to be unpopular as well. Never giving up on their dreams allows them to make a statement. In the case of Sam Byck his dream would be realized by giving up his life to destroy the head of a corrupt government. Through what he sees as a noble death, Byck's life would have meaning, finally making people listen.

The obvious climax of the play is when the assassins converge in the book depository and use their collective influence to convince Oswald to kill the president. Truly many of these assassins and would-be assassins would be, "footnotes in a history book" (Sondheim 77). With urging from the assassins to, "[b]ring us together," "[c]onnnect to us" and "[e]mpower us" the group coerces Oswald to act thus connecting the group
indelibly. The climax, summed up in one line is when Booth says, "You have the power of Pandora's Box, Lee. Open it…" (Sondheim 78). It is in this moment Lee is pushed to his decision, forever sealing his fate, and enacting the most well publicized Presidential assassination.

A Symbol as defined by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard in the book *A Handbook to Literature*, "is something which is itself and yet stands for or suggests or means something else" (478). Recurring symbols have a great power in revealing hidden truths within a story. Sam Byck's recurring symbol emerges in both of his monologues it is one of the most celebrated drinks in America: Budweiser. A distinctly American beer, Budweiser sponsors athletic events, car races, and is analogous to rewarding oneself after a long hard day's work. It represents everything that Sam cannot have; there is no reward for not having a job. At the end of the day Sam cannot be proud of what he accomplished that day, which makes his consumption and obsession with Budweiser somewhat pathetic.

Another symbol, specific to Sam Byck is the cassette recorder. It is the ultimate symbol for him to know that after he has said what he wants to say, that someone will be able to hear him articulate his thoughts and ideas. He is not going to scrawl down ideas on a page so someone reading them can misinterpret the words. He is going to laboriously detail his ideas onto a cassette tape, which will allow the recipient to hear the gravity of his voice and the anger he bears in his heart. The very act of recording his voice means that long after he is gone his voice has the possibility of still being heard; in his mind this almost makes him immortal.
Of the symbols in the play, the one that helps to connect the assassins most completely is the gun. In the opening scene all of the assassins are given their weapon, and with the gun they are entrusted with the power that comes with the weapon. The audience is made aware that the Proprietor is selling guns so the assassins can take the life of the President of The United States; it emboldens the assassins and gives them a pleasure that they can be responsible for that kind of change. In "The Gun Song", in scene seven Charles Guiteu reminds the audience, "when you've got a gun—everybody pays attention" (Sondheim 32). Every assassin and would-be assassin embraces the gun and the mystical powers it gives to him or her.

An image according to David Ball in his book Backwards and Forwards, "is something we already know or can easily be told that is used to describe, illuminate, or expand upon something we don't know or cannot be easily told" (69). There are many images used throughout the musical, the one that repeats the most is the image of a prize. The mention of the word prize evokes panoply of different images. Ribbons from athletic events, trophies, perhaps even a medal. The carnival atmosphere Assassins begins with also evokes the flimsy little doll, or trinkets one might win at the county fair. Although the carnival prize may be an inexpensive piece of trash, people will spend untold amounts of money to attempt to win that prize. The prize is symbolic of the fun time they spent at the fair or carnival; it also is a reminder of their prowess. The same is true for the assassins in the musical; they are willing to give their lives to achieve their goals. All of the assassins are seeking their own prize, however collectively their prize is convincing Oswald to take action.
Another image is that of sunshine, the cleansing enlightening rays are mentioned at the beginning of the musical and the end. Both in scene one and scene eighteen various characters remind the audience, "Everybody's got the right to some sunshine, not the sun but maybe one of it's beams (Sondheim 7 & 87 ). This image is a powerful one—the Sun is representative of a new day, a rebirth on a regular basis. It is also the force, which allows for life here on Earth so if everyone has the right to some life giving sunshine everyone has the right to grow and progress.

The most striking image Byck brings to the table connects to light but brings its own meaning along. In his second monologue he compares the American people to, "children waking in the dark" (Sondheim 56). Nightmares are a universal experience and it evokes nights of dark roomed terror when in scene fourteen, Byck cries out, "Mommy! Daddy! Sammy had a nightmare" (56)! The arrival of his parents shows that even though there is light, there is not always clarity. In this scenario, both of his parents come in separately and tell Byck the other parent does not care for him. He bemoans, "…And then where are we? Who do we believe? Who do we trust? What do we do?" (56). Byck shows the audience that just bringing light to a situation does not always make the situation any clearer.

Motif according to Thrall and Hibbard in the book A Handbook to Literature is "a simple element which serves as a basis for expanded narrative; or, less strictly, a conventional situation, device, interest, or incident employed in folklore, fiction, or drama" (294). The first and foremost motif, in the musical is assassination. Assassins, being the title of the play, nine of the main characters are assassins, or failed assassins, and time and time again killing the president is mentioned. The Proprietor tempts the
assassins with the refrain, "C'mere and kill a president" (Sondheim 1 & 3). In "The Ballad of Booth" Booth claims, "What I did was kill the man who killed my country" (12). Zangara sings about how he decided to "kill Roosevelt" (20). Sarah Jane Moore states, "Look, we came here to kill the President" (Sondheim 33). Sam Byck states, "We do the only thing we can do. We kill the President" (56).

The killing the assassins envision is much more than just killing a person; it is the killing of an ideal. In the School Book Depository scene this is made evident by the mouthpiece of the group, Booth:

OSWALD: I'm not a murderer.

BOOTH: Who said you were?

OSWALD: You just said I should kill the President.

BOOTH: Lee when you kill a president, it isn't murder. Murder is a tawdry little crime; it's born of greed, or lust, or liquor. Adulterers and shopkeepers get murdered. But when a President gets killed, when Julius Caesar got killed…he was assassinated (Sondheim 69)

In this moment Booth presents the idea of assassination as an idea born of a high moral ground; there is no higher a calling than to be an assassin.

Another motif running throughout the play is happiness, in this case happiness for the assassins entails reconciling their beliefs within the spectrum of the prevailing "American dream". Beginning in the opening salvo, and ending at the closing shot, many of the characters reference what it will take to make them happy. In the Opening the Proprietor states outright, "Everybody's got the right to be happy" (Sondheim 2). In "Unworthy Of Your Love" both Fromme and Hinckley sing about the desire to have
someone love them. Hinckley just wants to "prove worthy" to an actress he has never met (Sondheim 43). Fromme imparts that she would "crawl belly-deep through hell" to prove her love to a madman locked in a correctional facility (43). This type of devotion to finding happiness is singularly focused to the point of mania. And in the finale, "Everybody Has the Right" Booth reminds us again, "Everybody's got the right to be happy. Don't be mad life's not as bad as it seems" (Sondheim 86). All of the assassins in the play are unhappy with their lives until they take action; acting toward their goal brings the happiness they desire.

Another motif throughout the play is connecting with other people. At the play's beginning all of the assassins are single entities living in their own sections of this ethereal limbo. As the play progresses however different characters begin to reach out and make connections. Inspired by her ideals of equality Czolgosz reaches out to Emma Goldman, convinced he is in love with her. She connects with him in a much more intimate way than love, saying, "something you can embrace with more passion than you can with any woman" (Sondheim 25). She hands him a pamphlet outlining the ideas she is speaking about, social justice and equality for all people. Inequality among men is what drives Czolgosz to take action and kill McKinley. While he was simply looking to connect with Goldman, she revealed that he was already connected with everyone else who was suffering.

Guiteau attempts to connect with the other assassins as an inspiring example of greatness, loudly proclaiming in scene three of the musical, a toast to, "A grand and glorious office to which at least one among us may one day aspire" (Sondheim 14). Guiteau also attempts to make a connection with Moore as he gives her tips on her
shooting stance, "Come, let me steal a kiss" (45). Moore and Fromme connect in a very different way, they both have difficult pasts and bond while discovering that they both know Charles Manson (26-31). Sam Byck's attempt to connect revolves around his recordings, attempting to reach out beyond the small world he lives in to connect with people he has never met.

In the pinnacle scene when the assassins converge on Oswald in their attempt to push him to action they all attempt to make Oswald feel connected. "We need you, Lee", "Finally, we belong", "Bring us together, babe", "You think you can't connect. Connect to us" (Sondheim 77). It is also important to note here that all of the other assassins have connected to one another by this point, and they realize that one piece of the puzzle is missing. Booth tells Oswald, "You're the big one. You're the one that's going to sum it all up and blow it all wide open" (74). The refrain "Connect!" is also repeated three times in the finale cementing the motif while bringing the story home (Sondheim 87).

The next major step in the process of creating a character is analysis of the text for given circumstances, and filling in the information that is not supplied by the text. Knowing the character of Sam Byck that will be created for this production cannot be true to the historical information researched in preparing for the role is a freeing thought. Yes, historical consideration has to be paid, however Sam Byck can become what is created, unfettered by the literal interpretation of the man. Discussions of character with Emily Cherry revealed that her vision of Sam Byck is that of a disgusting slob. She likened it to her sixth grade teacher who was overweight, out of shape, and disgusting. The baseline, beginning physical characteristics, will be in accordance with the director's vision. This is not to say that only the director's vision will be considered in the creation
of the final character, through the rehearsal process exploring all aspects of the physical and emotional characterizations will bring Sam Byck to life. The following analysis is a combination of textual analysis, noted by citations of the text, and given circumstances invented to help make Byck a more complete character.

Would-be Presidential assassin Sam Byck is a lonely man; he lives alone in a small apartment with very few amenities. Every piece of furniture he owns was either found in dumpsters or given to him by sympathetic neighbors. The bathroom in his apartment is filled with mold growing in the walls. Prevented from contacting his ex-wife and children, and because he disowned his brothers, he has no family (Clarke 130). He has only one friend, a tire shop owner named Bonny. He makes mention of Bonny in the last set of tapes he recorded (Clarke 138).

Without many means he has no way to become socially active, or to find new friends. When he does attempt to connect with people he encounters, they shy away from him due to his anti-social behaviors. Convinced his opinion is the only correct way to view the world, he lets his opinions flow freely from his mouth. Jobless and desperate, and with nothing else to occupy his time, Byck plunges into long-winded diatribes to famous people in a last attempt to connect. Lack of social support, drives Sam to reach out to people he has never met; he does this using the relatively new medium of compact cassette tapes. Armed with the power of new technology he is convinced that his passionate voice can be heard.

His plan to change the hearts and minds of important figures in the world is an obvious failure; another failure heaped upon the mounting pile of failures in Byck's life.
He is aware that his words are not reaching the intended audience. In scene three Byck acknowledges he is not being listened to when he says:

BYCK: You're just like all the rest of them—Jonas Salk, Jack Anderson, Hank Aaron… You knew where I was. You all did and you know what you did? You left me there. You Jerks! You Shits! You Pricks! You had your chance and now it's too damn late (Sondheim 39)!

Completely defeated and realizing his impotence to exact any social change, Byck becomes more and more frustrated and desperate.

Aside from his time in the Army, Sam has lived in Philadelphia his entire life. He loves Philadelphia; a pride is instilled in him that he is in the city that was the birthplace of American Democracy. However, he feels American Democracy is now a corrupted fallacy in which corruption and greed are the norm. In Byck's second monologue he rants:

BYCK: Let's hold an election! Great. The Democrat says he'll fix everything, the Republican's fucked up. The Republican says he'll fix everything the Democrats fucked up. Who's telling us the truth? Who's lying? Someone's lying. Who (Sondheim 56)?

To keep his mind off the corruption in the government Byck takes great pride in the successes of the city's sports teams. He follows every move the Philadelphia Eagles, the Phillies, the Flyers and the 76ers make; he spends a small portion of the little money he has, every day on a newspaper in order to keep up with the team statistics. He is also very fond of the architecture realized throughout the city. On many of his journeys around town he will sit and admire a specific building for hours.
The setting for the musical *Assassins* is set in an ethereal limbo, because of the ethereal nature, Byck is stuck living in 1974. This means that all of his recent life experiences are still weighing heavily on his consciousness. His estrangement and eventual divorce from his wife, his inability to provide even for himself let alone a family, and the knowledge he is living in the shadows of his more successful younger brothers, keep his mind constantly clicking.

Sam Byck is a forty-four-year old loser. He blames everyone else for his failures. Byck is overweight, and out of shape, he has not done any substantial exercise since he was in the military eighteen years prior. His sedentary lifestyle combined with his love for fatty meats and baked goods and his disdain for fruits and vegetables has left him overweight and feeling depressed about his body. Along with his inability to exercise his body is taut, he is so inflexible that he has a hard time even washing parts of himself, so most times he does not even make an attempt. The result is a bad complexion, greasy hair, and a stench that follows him like the dust that follows Pigpen in the Peanuts comic strip. The added pounds he has carried around for years has destroyed the joints in his legs making it difficult to walk at times. Poor diet and lack of physical activity have made it difficult to even go up a flight of stairs easily.

Since Byck was born January 30, 1930 he is an Aquarius. Aquarians according to Linda Goodman, a prominent astrologer, are typically smart, stubborn and march to the beat of their own drum. They are intelligent and their minds are constantly questioning the world around them (394-5). While star signs may not always accurately determine what attributes a person exhibits, it is fair to say that Byck definitely marched to his own tune. He was a non-conformist and proud of it, in scene six Byck informs Bernstein:
"Well, Lenny, it's a fact that my unwillingness to compromise my principles and kiss ass like some people I could mention has cost me the so called good life which others have enjoyed" (Sondheim 38). Using both the text and an astrological assessment helped inform decisions made in creating the character of Byck.

Irrational fears and mental problems leave Sam as an outcast isolated from everyone around him. He says things that bother others, making them uneasy. People avoiding him acts like a feedback loop as he tries harder to connect to someone they become more wary of him. He attempts to engage other men in conversations about sports, but very few of them have the depth of knowledge about the statistics and scores as he does. It irks Sam that no one else he encounters cares as much about his beloved teams as he does.

Byck is not completely oblivious to his mental problems; he did check himself into a mental hospital in an attempt to help alleviate his anxiety and depression. Despite being treated for manic depression or what would be called bi-polar disorder today, his symptoms have not disappeared. Byck has no barometer for his emotional state; wildly moody he can go from laughing and joking with someone to yelling at them in a flash. This is evidenced in his first monologue, one moment he is asking Leonard Bernstein to save the world, and the next he is telling him off. "You had your chance and now it's too damn late! Fuck me?! Fuck you" (Sondheim 39)!

The divorce from his wife is perhaps one of the most depressing issues for Byck. He was not the ideal husband, but it is obvious he loved his wife and children and now he has access to neither of them. With all of these disappointments, Byck feels betrayed by the "American Dream" His whole life he was told he could be whatever he wanted. He
feels that his ideas have value and deserve to be heard. A victim of the system he feels that he is owed something, it is not his fault that he will not compromise, the system is flawed and he has to bring it down.

Byck feels like he is the only moral voice in his life. If everyone would just listen to him the world would be a better place. He spends hours recording advice to famous people to try and sway their actions. In the world of the play he tries to convince Leonard Bernstein to continue writing love songs. In scene six of Assassins, during Byck's first monologue, Byck pleads, "Forget the long hair shit and write what you write best. Love songs. They're what we need! There what the world needs" (Sondheim 38)! Furthermore he tries to convince Bernstein to help fix the world after he has rid the world of Nixon. He pleads for Bernstein to go on living:

So you can keep on writing love songs! Yes! There's a gorgeous world out there, a world of unicorns and waterfalls and puppy dogs! And you can save it! Through the medium of your God-given talent! Do it, Lenny! Save the world! Is that too much to ask (Sondheim 38)?

Despite his beliefs, his moral compass is obviously flawed. He even steals a gun from his only friend Bonny when he decides to go through with his plan (Clarke American Assasins 136).

Sam Byck's change of character comes when he is making the aforementioned tape for Leonard Bernstein. There is a moment where he assures Mr. Bernstein, "Lenny, you did everything you could…" (Sondheim 56). After a brief moment an outraged Byck proceeds to say what Bernstein could have done, namely call him and tell him to, "Hang in there" (56). While he is already planning to execute his plan "Pandora's Box" this is the
moment in the play that the plan becomes crystallized and what little self-control he has left vanishes. This is the moment where his fate is sealed. He is going to die trying to kill Nixon, period.

The animal essence of a character can be a useful tool in helping to embody that character. Sam Byck therefore could be represented as an American badger. American badgers are typically stout, strong animals, with incredibly powerful legs for digging extensive tunnels (Neal 209-10). Aside from breeding the male American badger lives a solitary life and can be ferocious if threatened (213). Byck's tunnels are mental and connect the unfortunate events of his life irrevocably to the President Richard M. Nixon. When he feels that his life is adversely affected by the evil deeds of the President, he decides to lash out.

Politics during this stretch of Byck's life are very divisive. There are clear-cut lines in the belief structure of both major political parties in the United States. Not only are the two parties divergent in their aims, the Democratic Party appeared to be crumbling into chaos. The 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago ended in a riot (Small 25). This apparent self-destruction is one of the reasons voters turned to the Republican Party in 1968 and elected Richard Nixon (30). Even Byck voted for Nixon, "I gave you my vote, my sacred democratic trust, and you know what you did with it? You pissed all over it" (Sondheim 55-6)!

America has always been a Protestant Christian oriented society. There have been other movements that have emerged, but the majority of the nation embodies a Christian belief structure. Nixon used this to his advantage in the 1968 election appealing to what he called the "silent majority" conservative people or moderate people who disliked
"hippy culture" (Small 81). Many people began looking inward and isolating themselves from others in response to the communistic views of the 1960's. Others pushed back against what they had seen as a godless time in the 1960's and became much more conservative and Christian. Conservative religious groups were able to spread their messages through the conduit of the President. Since Sam Byck was born Jewish not only was he physically alienated from others, but he was also ideologically alienated from the central religious beliefs of the nation. It is perhaps apropos that Byck decides to don the Santa Claus costume to stage his protest, almost in an attempt to connect to the prevailing religious ideals of most Americans.

Prior to the start of the musical Sam woke up early, unable to sleep, then walked down to the corner market to pick up a paper. After tromping around his apartment for a few hours his hunger overtakes him. Byck heads to his favorite deli three blocks away from his run-down apartment building to purchase his favorite tongue on rye. Although Byck has been applying for work on a regular basis, he has yet to have any interviews. Bothered by the lack of interest in his skills and because the weather is pleasant, he decides to take a walk to Independence National Park and vent to someone on his tape recorder. When he enters the scene his lack of exercise convinces him he is done walking and he finds a spot to sit.

The next time Sam appears on stage he has stolen a .22 pistol from his friend Bonny. He then "borrowed" his wife's car and filled the tank with gas using some of his remaining money. In the process of filling his tank, he loses his wallet. He is so bothered by losing the last of his meager means he simply hopes he can make it to the airport in Baltimore. Desperately hungry, he scrapes around the car and finds change in the seat,
the ashtray and the glove box, just enough to buy a cheeseburger, and fries. He cannot afford a Coke, so he is glad he still has beer left from the six-pack that has accompanied him from Philadelphia. Byck finishes a recording for Jack Anderson, which he plans to mail just before entering the airport. Now that his plan will be revealed to the world, Byck decides he needs to address the man he is going to kill. Byck knows his plan is foolhardy and he hopes that if he fails, Nixon will at least be aware that he tried.

Approaching the role of Sam Byck began by researching the limited information about his history, in order to gain insight into what life events prompted him to act in the manner he did. Since the information regarding Byck is scant, any further character development becomes dependant on a character analysis using the text provided, namely the two monologues laden with clues regarding Byck's mental state and moral justifications for his failed attempt on the life of Richard M. Nixon.

The bookwork, was the first step in identifying what Sam Byck wants. Initially, after reading the text several times this author initially identified Byck's super-objective. Once the super-objective was discovered, the next step was to pour over the text identifying Byck's minor objectives, and mark them, to determine what action Byck was taking in each beat of dialogue. Action verbs are the most useful tools in making active choices as an actor; therefore, action verbs are used to identify the objectives. Within the objectives, the script was broken down further marking tactics, also using action verbs.

Setting aside the bookwork the actors will be able to focus on mounting the musical. Some of the problems foreseen in this production involve the music. The composing style of Stephen Sondheim is certainly by no means simple, and the complexities of the musical arrangements can be overwhelming. Although somewhat
familiar with the score, studying it for several months, the execution of many parts of the score is still a struggle. The discordant melodies are important for the feel of the show and many of the lines the cast is required to sing are counter-intuitive. Timing is also crucial in many of the songs, so the challenge will be to become comfortable with the other cast members and create a trusting environment to assure each other that we will not let each other, the director, and the audience down.

The only issue of a technical nature that concerns this author is during my character's two monologues he is constantly eating. Never having had a role where food is consumed on stage, it could develop into a trouble spot in a performance. Will it look convincing? Is there a possibility the actor could choke while delivering the monologue? Will the audience and the actor be distracted by the constant ingestion and be unsure of the character's objectives?

Understanding Byck's past is important, but ultimately this particular characterization of Sam Byck will not be a replica of the man himself. Peter Brook writes in the *Empty Space*, "Theatre = R r a" (Brook *The Empty Space* 137). The last part of the equation he says are, "repetition, representation, assistance" the three things "which [are] needed for the event to come to life" (140). The importance repetition or constant and consistent work on the piece, i.e. vigorously going over Byck's monologues and vocal parts, will benefit the performance. Conversely, bringing "immediacy" to the role, constantly trying to discover what is new in the role will help with this approach (139). The last of these is to trust the director to give me the "assistance" to prepare to expend all energies on stage, fully committing to the audience so there can be a communion in the theatrical event all will be sharing (139).
Participating in the process of mounting a production with the cast and crew who have been assembled will be an exciting endeavor. The role of Sam Byck is a complex and challenging role. Researching facts and historical events became an intellectual exercise that harkens back to days as a History major at Arizona State University. The knowledge the bulk of that work will now have to be set aside, so this author may fully engage with the director, fellow cast members, and ultimately the audience is daunting. The challenges of the next few weeks of rehearsal and performance are exciting and terrifying. Preparing for the production by putting in the work beforehand will allow for greater creativity and experimentation, bringing the performance to a greater level.
CHAPTER III: REFLECTION ON PRODUCTION

An important aspect of any production for a student actor, or perhaps more appropriately, any actor passionate about improving his or her art, comes at the end of a production. When the sound of applause has died away, when the set has been struck, and the show is finished, the actor can truly reflect on the production. The University of North Dakota's production of *Assassins* was no exception for this author. Completing the show, which ran from November 15\(^{th}\) to November 19\(^{th}\) 2011, created a vast amount of free time, which had been previously filled with rehearsals. In the malaise which settled onto a previously busy actor, this actor was able to reflect back on the process of creating a production as challenging as *Assassins*. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to reflect back on the production, the process of researching the role, the rehearsal process, what went well, what did not go well, what this author would change, and various responses to the production.

The process of researching the role of Sam Byck could have been one, which completely ignored the facts of his life. Certainly there is enough information given within his two monologues in the text of *Assassins* to make assessments regarding his character, however both the director and this actor felt that without the historical background the character could come across as clownish or just an angry lout. Delving into the limited information about Sam Byck's life was an essential part of the process. Especially useful was the historical information about the Nixon Administration, not only
did the Administration's corrupt policies anger Byck, they broke the American people's trust in the infallibility of the government. While Sam Byck was not the only person in America angry with Nixon he was one of the few in the nation to take his anger and attempt to turn it into a horrific action.

Once the research of the history was completed, the complex work of learning the music began. The cast started the whole process by working with our music director, David Henrickson. He scheduled one on one, and group sessions to teach all of the music to the cast prior to beginning formal rehearsals as a complete cast. This "pre-game" instruction proved to be quite beneficial due to the complex nature of Sondheim's score. The one on one instruction and review of the discordant harmonies benefitted not only the author, but also the entire ensemble. Since each cast member was able to initially learn the correct notes, melodies and harmonies the cast should have been able to come together vocally at a much faster rate then they may have otherwise.

Although the cast was able to have this individual beginning, it would not be enough to make the music be any less difficult. Some members of the cast were involved in another University of North Dakota production, and due to this scheduling conflict the complete cast was unable to work through the entire score. The resulting first time in rehearsals the cast was able to work it all together could have been described kindly as a train wreck. Actually, a train wreck probably would have been more interesting to look at than our first run. Reflecting this rather poor performance was both the director's face and the profuse amounts of dismay displayed by our director of music. Immediately the rehearsal schedule was changed to allow time at the beginning of each rehearsal to run through the music to allow the entire cast to cement the score into their bodies and souls.
Although the end product of the score was fully realized, there were moments where a lack of musical training hindered the rehearsal process. In any future musical endeavors more attention and care must be infused into my rehearsal process, to compensate for the lack of true musical training. As an actor who wants to hone his craft, it may help to actually get some musical training including music theory, voice lessons, and perhaps even some rudimentary piano lessons to make embracing the music an easier task.

One of the most challenging portions of the score was "Another National Anthem". There are many different moments in that song where different actors have to sing in different combinations, and there are moments that require everyone to hit the timing or the song collapses into shambles. The difficulty of the music was compounded with a lack of musical training for this author. Due to the fact that Byck is the first character to sing it was truly important that the entrance be on time, or the whole ensemble might follow. For much of the rehearsal process our musical director, knowing it was a difficult entrance would give a sound cue in the measure before the entrance. This was impossible to do with the three-piece band. The first run with the band left my entrance late and my fellow actors displeased with my tardiness. The solution to this dilemma was a simple one; simply count the measures from the start of the song until Byck's first line.

Prior to the beginning of the production the score was somewhat daunting for much of the cast, and it became apparent it was something the whole cast had to come together to correct. The cast did overcome their fear of failure on this part, both through working harder on the difficult sections and through the encouragement of our director.
Emily Cherry was very aware that something was troubling the cast. She one day threw out the intended rehearsal for the day and just sat down with the cast and asked what was holding us back. Many in the cast stated that they were afraid of failing the amazing score they had been given. When faced with this possibility the director basically reemphasized she would not have cast this group of actors if she thought they were going to fail. Encouragement, and a faith in the cast were affirmed in this moment and the cast was able to let go of their fears. This moment was a turning point for this production. After this moment the cast jelled into a cohesive unit making the production into a show bringing the words and music to life. Despite the early challenges the ensemble was able to conquer the score, this was one of the many positives of the production.

Sam Byck has two very long monologues in Assassins there was some trepidation on the part of this author to attack the memorization of the large chunks of monologue. The techniques used in the past to memorize monologues did not seem sufficient to commit the long sections to memory. Some new technique had to be discovered. Taking a page from the arsenal of Sam Byck the monologues were both recorded (using a computer instead of a cassette tape) and were subsequently transferred to a compact disc. One long journey to Minneapolis later, by car, the monologues playing on repeat, the monologues started to stick. This was the catalyst needed to allow both the words and the structure of the monologues to set root in the actor's mind.

Once the main hurdle of memorization fell by the wayside, the next crucial part of the process began. Working one on one with the director, Emily Cherry, in the early days of the rehearsal process was an invaluable tool, both in the formation of character, and the journey of discovery in the monologues. Cherry pointed out that there are very
distinct changes in both the objectives Byck is pursuing, and the building resentment he displays in the monologues. Cherry asked questions pertinent to both the character on stage and to the actor pursuing the objectives of Sam Byck. Cherry's process of guiding an actor while still allowing them to make their own discoveries truly helped polish Byck's monologues into a workable and enjoyable finished product, which was consistent, both with the historical aspects of the character, and the imaginary circumstances of the play.

Creating a character like Sam Byck involves making some justifications for an actor to connect fully to the anger and resentment underlying the character's ideas. While not all of Byck's ideas resonated within this author's psyche, some of his resentment towards the government proved to be the most direct way to connect with Byck's anger. The current political climate in the United States can only be described as caustic. The divisive nature of the two major political parties mirrors Byck's monologue in scene fourteen. "Who's telling us the truth? Who's lying? Someone's lying. Who? We read, we guess we argue, but deep down we know that we don't know. How can we" (Sondheim 56)? The feeling of helplessness, which Byck expresses, was the insight this author needed to connect most fully with the character.

The two monologues became a point of pride for this actor. The pacing and the journey of words were moments on stage where Sam Byck truly came alive. The moments lived on stage, alone, venting to a tape recorder, were high points for the author. In prior productions the characters this author played were never alone on stage, and this was a new experience. Taking the time to properly analyze Byck's objectives, and pouring oneself into the passions and disappointments of a mentally disturbed man
became a sort of therapy. Opening night of the production Byck's two monologues were polished works, which kept the pace of the show flowing despite their length.

Being able to work with a collaborative director elevated the final product and performance; however, there are some aspects of this process that the author would change. Due to the nature of an art form like theatre, there are many aspects of performance, which can only improve through experience. Some of the experiential lessons gleaned from this production are the very things the author will attempt to change when embarking on a new production. Unlike some of the cast members this author started researching the role of Sam Byck months ahead of the production. One aspect of this experience that would be attacked differently in the future would be to begin memorizing both words and music at a much sooner occasion. In a role and production as complex as *Assassins*, more memorization could not possibly hurt, and by all accounts could only make the final product ascend to a much higher level.

One of the technical aspects of Byck's monologues that were daunting (aside from the memorization) was the consumption of food on stage. Much like any other aspect of performance, movement, voice, gesture, the consumption of food on stage should have been practiced prior to the dress rehearsals. Driving and ranting were practiced, since the final monologue was supposed to take place while driving. However, adding cold French fries and a cream soda was not something that had been practiced prior. In the future, every aspect of the performance will be something this author will try to accomplish outside of rehearsals. Lack of practice created a situation on at least two occasions where food, (particularly pesky potatoes) became lodged at the top of the author's windpipe.
Panic ensued and the integrity of the second monologue was compromised, since the choking and coughing brought me out of the moment.

Another aspect of the production that went well was the collaborative nature of our group scenes. In scene three, the bar scene, every actor on stage worked together to create a cohesive group experience. All of the actors listened and responded in appropriate ways. As the hyper Charles Guiteau (Tyler Rood) attempted to get each of the other characters interested in his book, he ping ponged around the stage and was rebuffed over and over. And the moment when John Wilkes Booth (Daniel Dutot) threw a beer bottle off stage everyone erupted with some sort of reaction. Those reactions and interactions made the scene come to life by creating realistic interactions in an imaginary setting, which is ultimately the goal of any production.

Another moment when the cast worked well together was during the song "Another National Anthem". As all of the assassins and would-be assassins crowded onto the stage they all voiced reasons for doing what they did, however the cast made non-verbal communications to one another elevating the meaning behind the song. This is also a wonderful example of a director helping the cast understand the complexities their interactions should have. Emily Cherry had the cast work this number over and over once the blocking was complete, employing open ended questions regarding objectives to help each cast member commit to their choices. Time and time again, the leadership of the director facilitated the actor's decisions allowing them to push beyond the rudimentary meanings of the score.

External reactions to the production included a review in the Grand Forks Herald, by Paulette Tobin, and also our respondent for the Kennedy Center American College.
Theatre Festival (KCACTF), Hardy Koenig, who is a professor at North Dakota State University. Both reviews had mostly positive things to say. The Herald review was titled, "Review: Dark brooding, 'Assassins' is worth seeing" (Tobin). Tobin lauds:

This is another successful show for the UND Department of Theatre Arts and director Emily Cherry, with strong performances and singing by a talented cast. Kudos also for a set that was sparse but lent itself well to drama and movement in a show where drama and movement were more practiced than showy. This is a performance worth seeing and a show that will leave you wondering, 'Why?'" (Tobin).

In a town where the local paper is still widely circulated and read, this is a true compliment. Tobin wrote regarding the character of Sam Byck specifically, "Samuel Byck (Hyrum Patterson in a wonderfully profane performance)" (Tobin).

Our KCACTF respondent had only wonderful praise for most things in the show. "I loved this show, I think you guys did a great job", furthermore, he said, "This is gonna be really boring because I'm gonna tell you a lot of good stuff" (Koenig). These words came as sweet relief to probably the whole cast and crew, validating all the months of hard work which had been put into the production. Not only was the cast lauded with praise but Koenig also had wonderful things to say regarding the set design, lighting design, the band, and the costumes. Once he located Michelle Davidson, the costume designer he proclaimed, "The costumes were exactly right" (Koenig)!

The comments Koenig had regarding Sam Byck were not necessarily negative, however he did pose the question, "Did you feel that your first monologue was comic relief?" The author responded that was not the intent of the monologue to which he
replied, "I wanted to see a little more scariness; what has driven Sam to his acts.
Unfortunately the comedy overshadowed the seriousness" (Koenig). Responding with the
requisite "thank you" for his critique then reflected back on the work and collaboration
with Emily Cherry, which helped to shape the monologue. The progression, and direction
of the scene, the choices made in scene nine, this author would not have changed a
moment.

The entire process of researching and creating a character as unique as Samuel
Joseph Byck has been quite revealing. In undertaking a performance role in the past
research was conducted, however, the depth and complexity of research during this
experience produced a more complete character than any previous role. The methods
employed in analyzing the text, researching Sondheim, and breaking down the character
of Sam Byck brought a greater understanding of the entire process of creating a character.
Future endeavors in theatre, whether acting or directing, will rely heavily upon the
methods used during this experience. Although this author may never get a chance to
play Sam Byck again, Sam Byck has forever changed the author's process of creating a
character.
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