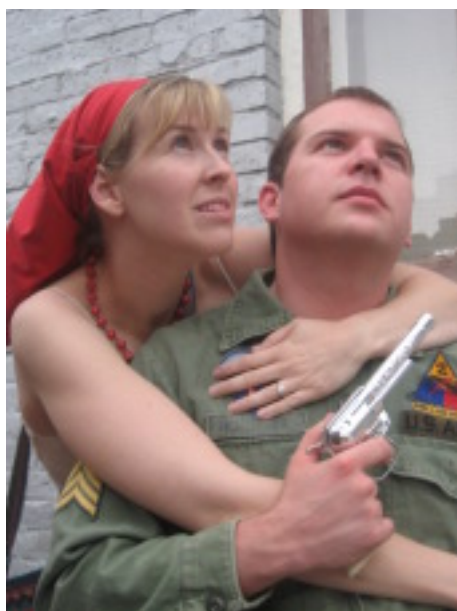


Gunsingers: "Assassins," at the Green Room through August 17

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 06 August 2008 02:03

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If you weren't able to get tickets for the Green Room's weekend presentations of *Assassins*, I'm guessing you weren't alone, as all three performances wound up selling out. But over the next two weekends, I urge you to try again - there are scenes in director Derek Bertelsen's production that are so good they'll give you the chills. And the scenes that don't? They're pretty amazing, too.

For those not acquainted with composer Stephen Sondheim's and book writer John Weidman's musical collage on the notorious killers (and *would-be* killers) of American presidents, that a local venue is producing it at *all* should be reason *en* ough to attend; the characters are endlessly fascinating, the score is magnificent, and the book scenes are both funny *and*

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frightening. But like the Green Room's

Carousel

and

John & Jen

, this is one of those magical stage pieces that you see and immediately want to

talk

about afterwards - about the thrilling performances and vocals, about how superbly produced it is...even about the elements you've got problems with. This

Assassins

keeps you alert, energized, and very,

very

happy; you leave with a total

theatre buzz.

In its year-long history, the Green Room has provided plenty of performance perks, but until now, not a lot of technical ones. The lighting effects here, though, are really quite something. Although Sunday's matinee cues weren't always timed to perfection, designer Tristan Tapscott's choices were bold and smart, and had the effect of making the playing area look larger than it actually was. (All throughout, your eye landed exactly where it *should've* landed.) And while I would've liked more sound-effect consistency as to whether the onstage gunfire - and there's a *lot*

of it here - would be followed by a shocking "

Bang!

" or a muted "click," it barely matters; with Tyson Danner conducting a topnotch live orchestra,

Assassins

remains the most technically adventurous production the Rock Island venue has yet produced.

Thanks to the magnificent cast assembled here, it's also one of the best.

"It gave me *goosebumps*" is such a cliché that you feel like the Boy Who Cried Wolf when describing something that actually *did* give them to you, but I was left shaken by numerous *Assassins'*

performers: Michael Callahan, whose intensely felt Giuseppe Zangara delivers a pre-execution soliloquy that's as emotionally fevered as it is beautifully sung; Ryan Westwood, whose omniscient, guitar-strumming Balladeer turns, with smashing effectiveness, into a nightmarishly tortured Lee Harvey Oswald; David Turley and Melissa Anderson Clark, whose John Hinckley Jr. and "Squeaky" Fromme perform the unsettling love ballad "Unworthy of Your Love" in wholly focused character and perfect harmony. All throughout the show, these actors are so astoundingly strong that they continually knock you sideways, and in a complete embarrassment of performance riches, they're not the only ones in

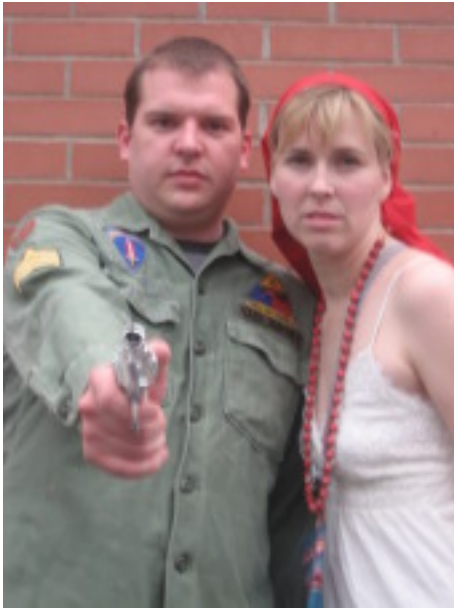
Assassins

who do.

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Louis Hare's portrayal of John Wilkes Booth is sensational in its inspiring effortlessness. Whether dictating a last-ditch justification for Lincoln's assassination or goading Oswald into murder while absent-mindedly feasting on a box of popcorn, he's suave, smooth, and enjoyably scary. Mark Ruebling is spectacularly off-his-nut as President Garfield's killer, Charles Guiteau; the actor's readings and expressions are suitably frenzied, yet subtle enough to suggest the monstrous determination that would lead someone to shoot a commander-in-chief. Ruebling, in *Assassins*, is a giddily unpredictable presence.

Jackie Madunic's gum-chomping Sara Jane Moore is so initially endearing that it takes a while to realize how seriously loco the actress' creation actually is; her character's unthreatening, happy-go-lucky countenance morphs, with lightning speed, into abject madness. (Check out Madunic's handling of Moore's bratty son and tag-along puppy.) And Eddie Staver III is given two sizeable monologues as Richard Nixon's potential assassin Sam Byck, and again proves - as he did in the Green Room's January production of *Fully Committed* - that he can easily be a one-man-show if called to be; his Byck is exuberantly funny, achingly pathetic, and utterly hypnotic.

Magnificent vocals and steely-eyed presences are also offered by Curtis Oelschlaeger and Jonathan Schrader, Linda Ruebling enacts a sensible, accidentally inspirational Emma Goldman, and the beautiful Wendy Czekalski - aided by Bertelsen's wisely minimalist staging - rescues the show's only bum number, "Something Just Broke," through her delicately mournful performance and haunting vocals. (This JFK elegy, which disrupts the show's rhythm by showing [for the only time] public reaction to the onstage madness, was added to *Assassins* after its 1990 debut and never

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should've

been - Czekalski and Bertelsen, however, make an exceptional argument for the song's inclusion.)

And now is probably the time to mention the manner in which I *saw* Sunday's show, which was standing up - the Green Room theatre was so (deservedly) packed that the back-row seats I traditionally favor didn't give me an adequate view of the stage unless I

did

stand. Consequently, I'll advise you to arrive early to secure prime seats, and tell you not to sweat it if you don't. I was so jazzed by

Assassins

that I probably wouldn't have been able to stay in my seat if I

tried

.

For tickets, call (309) 786-5660.