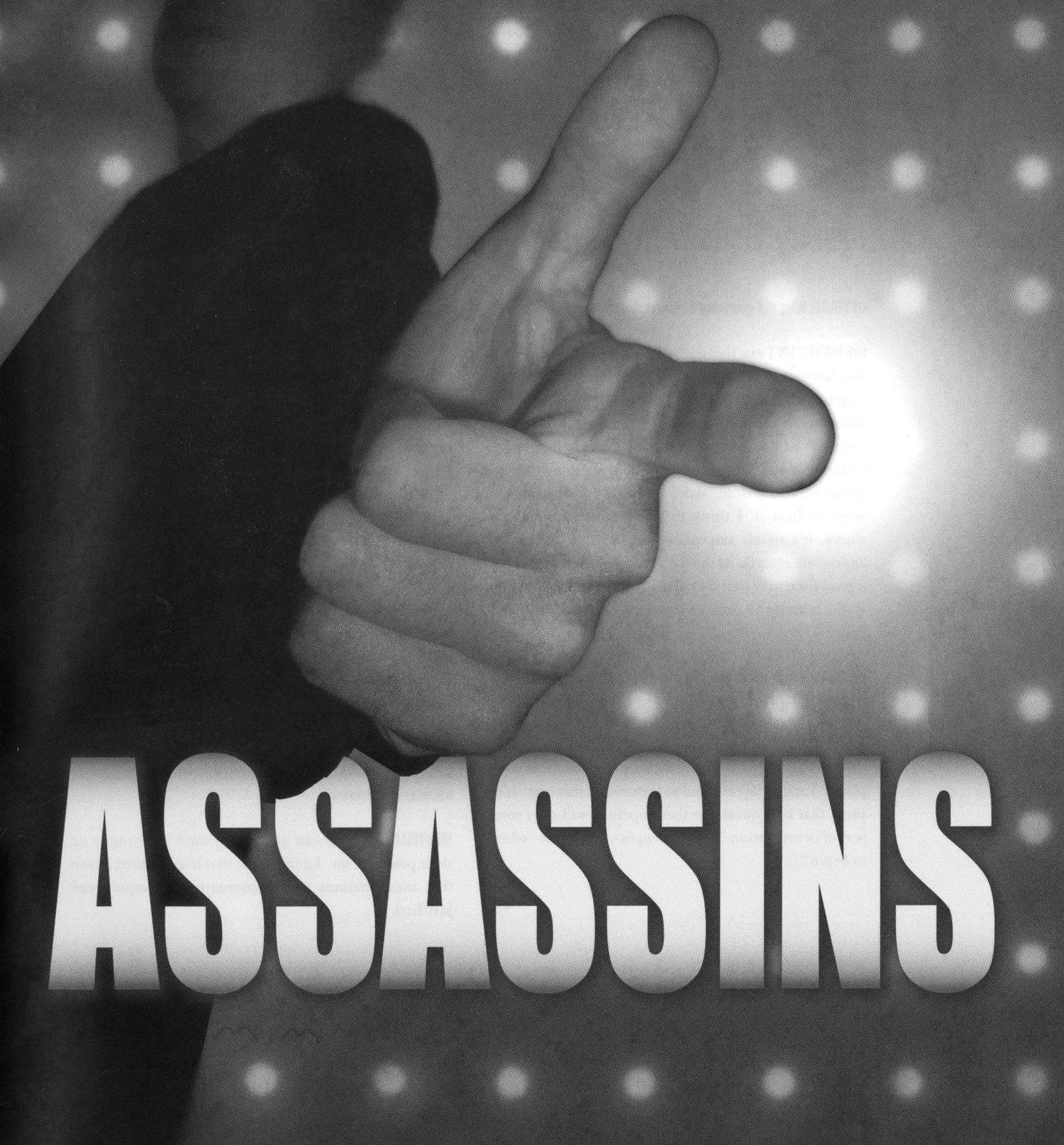


# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY SPRING 2004



# ASSASSINS

# American Dreams



*Assassins* costume design rendering  
by Susan Hilferty

## UPSTAGE VISITS WITH *ASSASSINS* DIRECTOR JOE MANTELLO

**UPSTAGE:** Why did you want to direct *Assassins*?

**JOE MANTELLO:** I saw the original production in 1991 and I was fascinated by it. The Gulf War broke out while the original production was playing and I thought it was unfortunate timing for the play because it was then reviewed in a larger context than it ever attempted to address. It was not written to address anything that was going on at the time, and I think that people weren't ready to hear it. I think that with a lot of Sondheim shows, it's nearly impossible on the first hearing to appreciate everything that he's doing. Now it seems like a good time to revisit this play because it seems that the world is ready to process the questions that are being posed.

**UPSTAGE:** What would you say it's about? What are the challenges in directing?

**MANTELLO:** I don't presume to know what any piece that I direct is about, particularly with a piece that is as complicated and as layered and as textured as this one. It's a piece that asks questions that hopefully will start some sort of conversation. The challenges of the piece—where to begin?

**UPSTAGE:** Some people refer to it as vaudeville; do you see it that way?

**MANTELLO:** I think that there are elements of vaudeville to it. Vaudeville images were in a lot of research that we did in terms of visual vocabulary: carnival midways, shooting galleries. Obviously, there's that kind of gaudy, show-business, kind of look -- a little tattered, something a little tawdry.

**UPSTAGE:** It feels as though it is a series of sequences as opposed to something linear.

**MANTELLO:** It isn't linear, but it does have its own set of rules—that there are no rules. We are trying to get away from the kind of episodic nature of the piece so you don't feel like you are starting over every time. One scene, one song informs the next so that there's a cumulative effect to the evening.

**UPSTAGE:** Do think the text is voice to the disenfranchised or outsiders in America?

**MANTELLO:** If you mean advocating their philosophy or their position, no. I don't think that it is building a case that assassinations and assassination attempts were justified.

**UPSTAGE CONTRIBUTORS** ARLENE JORDAN *Education Director*; RENÉE FLEMINGS *Senior Curriculum Advisor*; TED SOD *Research Consultant*; MEGAN WALTZ *Director of Educational Programming*;  
LINDSAY ERB *Education Program Associate*; TIM McCANNA *Design*; ADRIANA DOMINGUEZ *Education Intern* **COVER:** Artwork for the Roundabout Theatre Company production of *Assassins*

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY 231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10018

Telephone: 212.719.9393 Fax: 212.869.8817 www.roundabouttheatre.org Copyright © 2004 Roundabout Theatre Company, Inc. All rights reserved.



**UPSTAGE:** Do you think it romanticizes getting attention in a negative way?

**MANTELLA:** No. It deals with the fact that there are people out there who don't feel that they are partaking in the American Dream; whatever that is. There is a very interesting character of the Balladeer who at first glance may appear to be the voice of reason and the American spirit. I think that he sentimentalizes the grief and pain that the country may be feeling and sort of says: that was a mad man; but he doesn't say let's look at the many reasons or conditions that might have created this person. There is something kind of unnerving to me about that character.

**UPSTAGE:** Do you have a sense of how much artistic license has been taken with history by the authors?

**MANTELLA:** While every episode in the piece may not have literally happened, it's all based in some sort of fact. I feel that my responsibility is to the rules of *Assassins*--Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins*. I don't feel responsible to history. It is not a history lesson; it is a theatrical vaudeville based on the lives of these people.

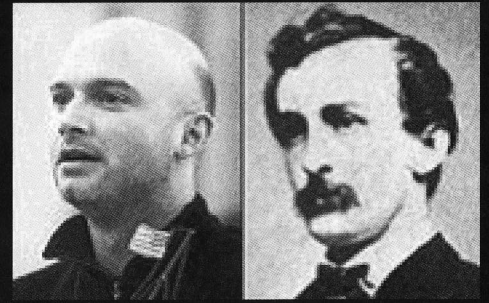
**UPSTAGE:** Will the design choices underscore what is fact and what is fiction?

**MANTELLA:** The proprietor lures the assassins to this broken-down carnival roller coaster where these assassination attempts are played out. By the end of the evening, you've seen each one assassinate or attempt to assassinate a president and ultimately not get what they want, so they're forced to watch the others. That sense of

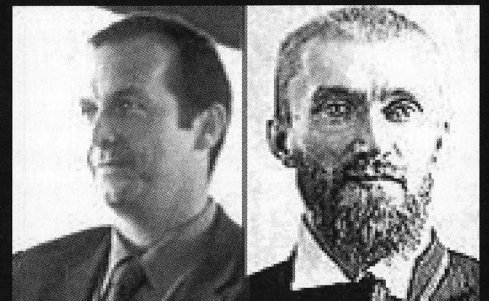
continued on page 10



*Assassins* costume design rendering by Susan Hilferty



**JOHN WILKES BOOTH**, played by actor Michael Cerveris, assassinated President Lincoln on April 14, 1865.



**CHARLES GUTEAU**, played by actor Denis O'Hare, assassinated President Garfield on July 2, 1881.



**EMMA GOLDMAN**, played by actress Anne L. Nathan, aided in an attempt to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick in 1892 as part of her crusade to fight for civil liberties, free speech, and women's rights.

# Protest Songs



*Assassins* costume design rendering  
by Susan Hilferty

## **UPSTAGE TAKES A LESSON IN MUSICAL DIRECTION FROM ASSASSINS MUSICAL DIRECTOR, PAUL GEMIGNANI**

**UPSTAGE: What does the musical director do? What are the differences between doing musical direction and conducting for a show?**

**PAUL GEMIGNANI:** A musical director supervises all of the musical aspects of a production. He teaches the actors the music, and he is the liaison between the director, the composer and the orchestrator. He works with the orchestrator closely on getting the orchestrations correct for the production. He hires the musicians and the rehearsal pianist. They can be two separate jobs, musical director and conductor, where one conducts the orchestra and does the performances and the other does all the rest. But usually there is only one.

**UPSTAGE: What gives you an affinity for Sondheim's work? What makes his work and your work unique?**

**GEMIGNANI:** I think that different composers speak to different people. Sondheim's music has always spoken to me in a certain way. It's just an aesthetic thing; it's not something I can put my finger on. I like his musicality, the way he writes, his ideas; they correspond to a lot of musical ideas that I have.

**UPSTAGE: What kind of pre-production work do you have to do?**

**GEMIGNANI:** I hire the rehearsal staff, audition the artists, coach them or get them ready if they get a callback, and prepare all the music. I have to make sure all the actors have what they should have. If we were doing a show that no one had ever done before, we would go to creative meetings to meet with the choreographer, director, and the composer.

**UPSTAGE: How is music employed in this piece to tell the story of the assassins?**

**GEMIGNANI:** I think that the composer has taken his idea of who these people were and put them into perspective. For instance, Charles Guiteau was a very religious man, so he has sort of this cakewalk religious comic song. The ballad of Booth is a more serious sort of folk song, but it is all very Americana. It's not the harmonies or the music per say, but the style is very American, and you can hear it immediately.

**UPSTAGE: What do you look for when casting for a Sondheim piece?**

**GEMIGNANI:** I think especially in the American theatre today people have to be able to do everything. It's not like one can say: I'm a dancer, I don't sing; you have to do all three--act, sing and dance. That is what every-



body looks for, people who are multi-talented. Fortunately, most of the people in the theatre today are versatile.

**UPSTAGE: How do you collaborate with your director?**

**GEMIGNANI:** We both talk about the show and hopefully we are on the same page. If I can help him with some underscoring because he has extended something, or if it means we have to make a cut, I would accommodate all that. I try to accommodate his ideas for the show without compromising the composer's work.

**UPSTAGE: Can you give us a sense of what you think *Assassins* is about?**

**GEMIGNANI:** It shows the grotesqueness of these guys but also makes them human. It is not preaching right or wrong, or putting them up as heroes; it's simply looking at them as individuals. Instead of de-humanizing these people, I think the show takes them for what they are, and simply tells the truth.

**UPSTAGE: How has the show evolved over the years into what we'll see on this stage?**

**GEMIGNANI:** The first production was thrilling and the cast was great. In the evolution of the piece, the length of time it has been around, and through the postponement following 9/11 there have been some losses, but mainly there have been gains. The fact of the matter is that the cast assembled now is perfect. It just so happens that we clicked on every burner. For this production, a new song has been added. It goes just before the last piece. It is a combination of the country mourning and the bystanders commenting on what has happened. I think that this piece resonates better now than it ever has. In my mind, it is really fortunate that it is being produced during an election year.

**UPSTAGE: Where did you get your training? What advice do you have for young persons looking into your profession?**

**GEMIGNANI:** I got my training in San Francisco, California. The best advice is, stick to your dreams. I think you should go to school and learn the craft, but I don't think that you should spend your life in school; I think you need to go out and work in your art form

continued on page 10



**SAMUEL BYCK**, played by actor Mario Cantone, attempted to assassinate President Nixon on February 22, 1974 by hijacking a commercial airliner with the intent to fly it into the Executive Mansion. He shot at two pilots, killing one, before police shot into the plane, injuring Byck before he killed himself.



**LYNETTE "SQUEAKY" FROMME**, played by actress Mary Catherine Garrison, attempted to assassinate President Ford on September 5, 1975, but failed because there were no bullets in the firing chamber of her gun.

# Dress Code

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSES COSTUMING, COLLABORATION, AND CAREERS WITH ASSASSINS COSTUME DESIGNER, SUSAN HILFERTY

**UPSTAGE:** I want to talk a little about process. Did you have to take any liberties with the authentic looks of the period that are represented?

**SUSAN HILFERTY:** Well, to be really serious; very few people really know what the period is. It's my field, it's my job, but I know sometimes when I make really specific choices, audiences don't necessarily recognize them. I've designed things that I've completely made up and people were accepting it as completely realistic. So, I wouldn't call it liberties. What I'm trying to do is find the real emotional center in working with the clothes instead of trying to reproduce something.

**UPSTAGE:** What do you look for from your director? How do you collaborate with your other designers?

**HILFERTY:** What I expect from the director, and I have to say that with somebody like Joe Mantello, I truly get it, is leadership. I think a good director has a real clear hit on the direction that he wants to go with the material. In terms of collaborating with other designers, it's important that the other designers and I are responding to each other. If you would ask me what any of us do, I would say that we are storytellers. We are trying to tell one story that has many factors. One of the things that is great about *Assassins* is that though *Assassins* was done before, we can do a completely different production; it's all new, not only new people but also a new vision.

**UPSTAGE:** How do you accommodate actors who aren't happy with what you're asking them to wear?

**HILFERTY:** I would say that forty to fifty percent of my job is literally dealing with the complexity of working with the actor. I think that one of the reasons that I am successful is that I am totally appreciative of how dangerous the actor's job is. Their bodies are their instruments; they are taking all of the risks. I'm always amazed at the kinds of insecurities that the greatest actors may have. Understanding that makes me a sympathetic designer. They are going through the same journey that I'm going through in the sense of getting at a truth, but they're doing for themselves. They have to physically transform their bodies. It is most dangerous when you actually get an actor to change their body either by corseting them or padding them because suddenly the thing that they're familiar with, you have changed, so suddenly it's a different instrument. The greatest actors are the ones who can really transform.

**UPSTAGE:** Where did you get your training? Do you have any advice for someone who thinks they would like to be a designer?

**HILFERTY:** I was a painting major. Then I studied in London for a year, and when I was in London, I went to the theatre all the time and I began to understand the relationship of design to the whole. Before then, I thought the costumes to *MacBeth* were the costumes to



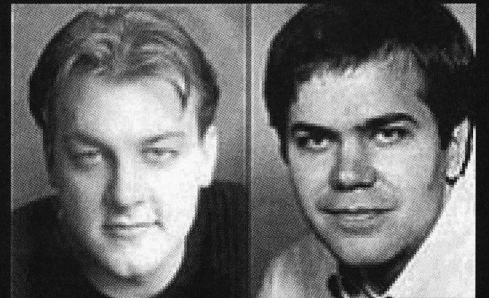


*Assassins* costume design rendering  
by Susan Hilferty

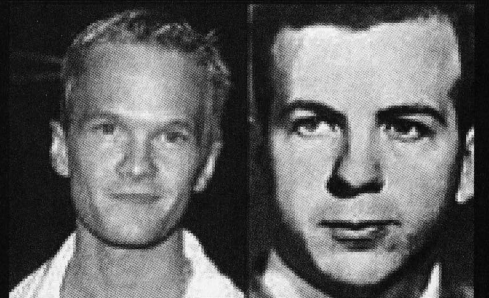
*MacBeth*; they could not change or be different. But then, as soon as I understood it, literally a light bulb went off in my head and it is what I did from then on. I came to New York, and worked for two years and then I did my graduate work at Yale School of Drama, which was a great experience. Ming Cho Lee was the definitive teacher for me -he's an incredible thinker and theatre artist. My advice to somebody who is interested in being a designer is to recognize that it is not just about pretty clothes; it's about telling a story. ●



**SARA JANE MOORE**, played by actress Becky Ann Baker, attempted to assassinate President Ford on September 22, 1975.



**JOHN HINCKLEY**, played by actor Alexander Gemignani, attempted to assassinate President Reagan on March 30, 1981, in an attempt to impress the woman he had been stalking, actress Jodie Foster.



**LEE HARVEY OSWALD**, played by actor Neil Patrick Harris, assassinated President Kennedy on November 22, 1973.

# Student Voices

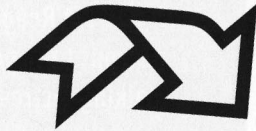


UpStage recently spoke to students at a matinee of *Twentieth Century*. In this play, Oscar Jaffe is driven by fame and fortune. In *Assassins*, the characters go to great lengths for attention and fame, often with dire consequences. If you sought fame, how would you achieve this goal?

**"I would practice a lot. I would work very hard to become famous. I won't lie like Jaffe."**  
Gladys Urgiles, Martin Luther King Jr. High School

**"I wouldn't do anything that affected my morals."**  
Mary Alice, Pershing IS 220

**"First, finish school and then get better at singing and/or acting."**  
Marcus Martinez, Parsons JHS 168



UpStage recently spoke to some students who were preparing to see *Assassins*. Like other artists, *Assassins* lyricist Stephen Sondheim creates songs that look at the world around him. What kind of music reflects the world around you?

**"'War All the Time' by Thursday. There is so much war nowadays and this song describes its bad effects."**  
Brian Tien, Parsons JHS 168

**"'I Can' by Nas because it tells you that if you try and if you put yourself into it, you can achieve anything you want."**  
Amantina R., Martin Luther King Jr. High School

**"'Where is the Love' by Black Eyed Peas because it talks about war, gangs and racism."**  
Arunima Chandra, Pershing IS 220



frustration as a group then changes the power that's harnessed when all of them come together and they essentially create the scene where Oswald shoots Kennedy.

**UPSTAGE: How do you collaborate with your design team?**

**MANTELLLO:** You kind of spew out everything you think about the play, any idea that you've ever had, and you bring in photos. We talk about what has to happen practically. There's someone driving in a car, do you actually have a car? Little by little as you chip away, what's essential to the piece starts to emerge.

**UPSTAGE: What about the music director?**

**MANTELLLO:** It's not really a technical skill, it's interpretive as well, and certainly, Paul Gemignani is the best of the best. It's really one of the things that I am actually most excited about.

**UPSTAGE: What are the major differences in staging musicals and straight plays?**

**MANTELLLO:** The thing I like about it is that you have a music director, a choreographer, sometimes three authors, in this case two, but everyone gets a vote. While I certainly like the collaboration between the playwright and myself, working on a musical feels less alone. There is a very safe feeling when there are many smart people working together and trying to figure it all out.

**UPSTAGE: What made you want to be a director? Did you have any formal training; any advice for young directors? You were an actor. I think actors can appreciate an actor who can direct.**

**MANTELLLO:** Or they're extremely frustrated by it! People ask me all the time, how do you get started? I don't know what kind of other advice you can get other than, just do it. I have no formal training as a director, so perhaps the best training that you can have is to just do it. It's the only way that you can really learn. ●

**Protest Songs continued...**

somehow. There is no little job; you do everything you possibly can to learn what the business is like. People along the way may discourage you. My father thought it was the dumbest idea because he didn't think that musicians could make money. I've been a freelance musician since 1959, and it's been a great career. You have to follow your heart. ●

## Activities

### BEFORE YOU GO

Identify and Explore aspects of "America" in your everyday life.

- ◆ What are typical symbols of America?
- ◆ What does being an American mean to you?
- ◆ Are there any songs, poems, or pieces of art that represent America to you?
- ◆ What do you think most Americans want or strive for?

Think about what makes people celebrities in America today.

- ◆ How have people achieved celebrity status in positive ways?
- ◆ How have people achieved celebrity status in negative ways?
- ◆ Who are these people and what are their lives like?
- ◆ What do these people want?

### AT THE THEATRE

Watch and Listen for details about these assassins.

- ◆ What is similar about all of these characters? What is different?
- ◆ How do the characters' actions reflect their wants and needs?
- ◆ How do the design choices in lights, sound, set and costume reflect the ideas of this production?

### AFTER THE SHOW

Write a two or three person scene in which someone stops a character in the show from committing the crime they committed.

- ◆ How would the character defend him or herself?
- ◆ Who could be the other person in the scene?
- ◆ What reasoning could be used to stop this person?
- ◆ What kind of research could you do to find out more about this character in order to add authenticity to this script?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *Assassins*.

Mail it to: Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Company, 231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200,  
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: [lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org)

# When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

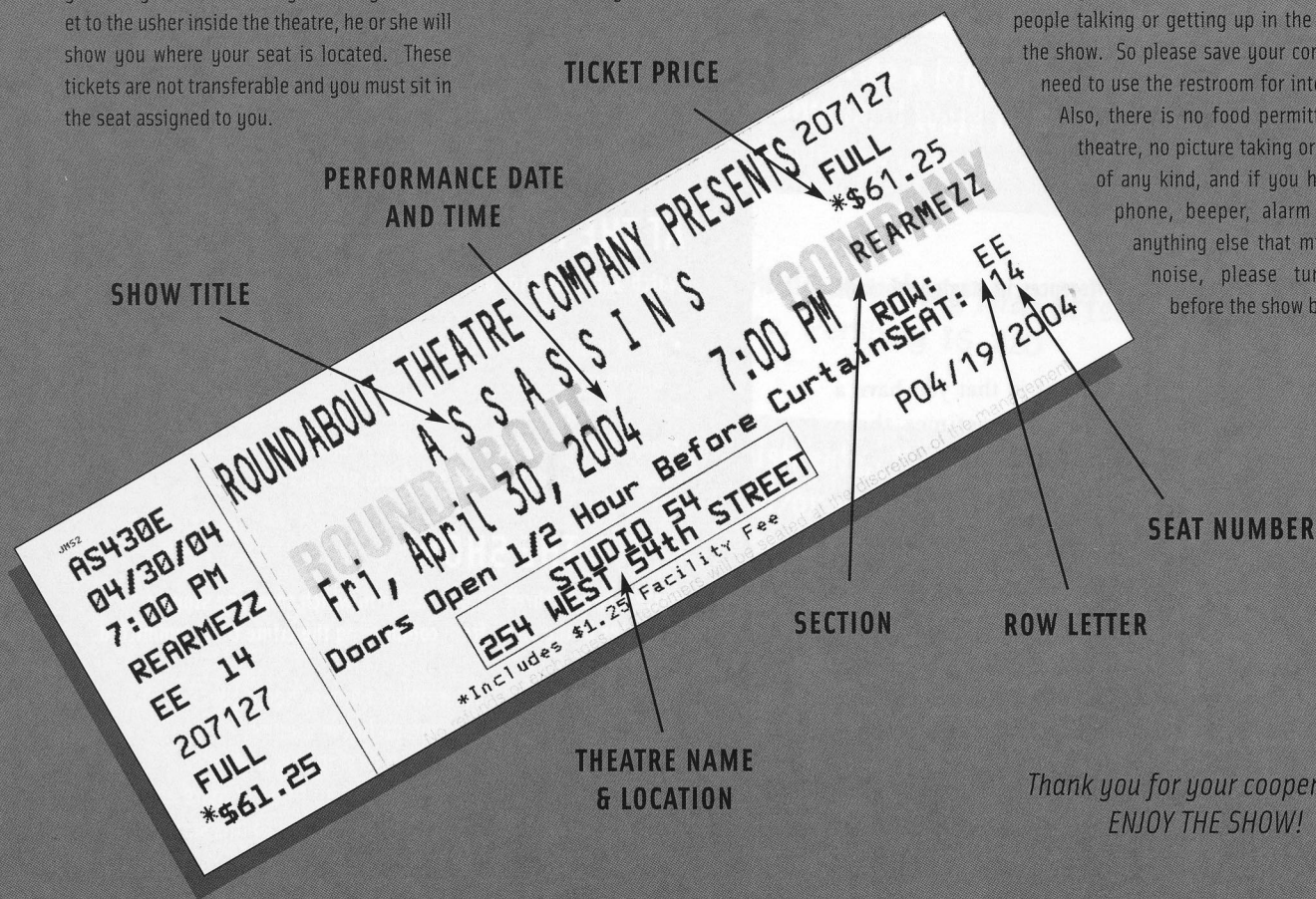
## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the restroom for intermission.

Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



*Thank you for your cooperation.  
ENJOY THE SHOW!*

## ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:

The Aeroflex Foundation  
American Airlines  
American Theatre Wing  
Axe-Houghton Foundation  
Rose M. Badgeley Residuary Charitable Trust  
The Center for Arts Education  
Citigroup Foundation  
Con Edison

The Samuel and Rae Eckman Charitable Foundation  
The Heckscher Foundation for Children  
HSBC Bank USA  
Mark and Carol Hyman Fund  
JPMorgan Chase  
The McGraw-Hill Companies  
Mellam Family Foundation

Merrill Lynch & Co. Foundation, Inc.  
Paul L. Newman  
New Visions for Public Schools  
New York City Department of Cultural Affairs  
New York Community Trust  
New York State Council on the Arts  
The New York Times Company Foundation  
Henry Nias Foundation

One World Fund  
The Rudin Foundation  
Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation  
Adolph and Ruth Schnurmacher Foundation  
The Starr Foundation  
The Michael Tuch Foundation, Inc.  
Verizon Foundation  
Anonymous