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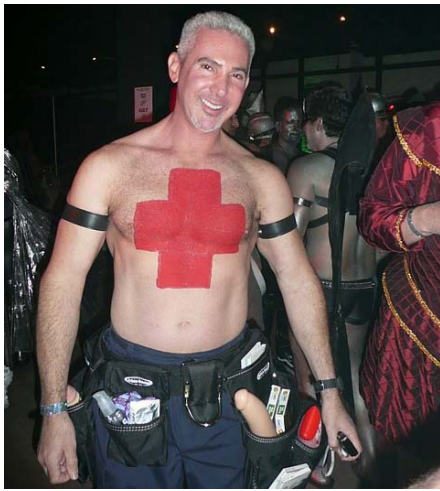
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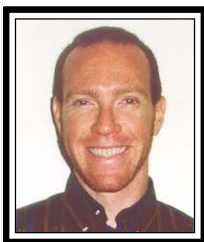
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## TRODDING THE BOARDS

by Brian Sands  
E-mail: bsnola2@hotmail.com

### Assassins at Le Petit's Muriel's Cabaret Theatre

The NOLA Project's recent production of *Assassins* was not for those who like their musicals neatly wrapped with a happy ending. For everyone else, however, it was an opportunity to see Stephen Sondheim's award winner in a production that is unlikely to be surpassed here in our lifetime.

An off-Broadway flop in 1991, *Assassins* returned in 2004 to connect with critics if not necessarily with the masses. As it explores the psyches and motivations of actual and would-be killers of American presidents, this ground-breaking musical demonstrates a hideous corruption of America's can-do spirit, the flip side of *Oklahoma's* optimism. Given its local premiere on the eve of another presidential election, *Assassins* remains relevant, the instant fame that accrued to its *dramatis personae non gratae* upon firing a history-altering shot being a distant relative to Sarah Palin's overnight celebrity upon becoming the Republican Party's vice-presidential nominee.

I'll admit that I liked, but didn't love, *Assassins* when I first saw Roundabout's version a few days after it won 5 Tony Awards; it was not always easy to figure out who was killing whom and why, and it was a bit of a challenge to follow Sondheim's deliciously intricate lyrics. Four years and countless listenings to the original cast recording later, I'm a fan.

Even so, I was not fully prepared for Director AJ Allegra's pitch-perfect production which found a way to make John Weidman's interesting, though

disjointed, script work. If one misses the bells and whistles of Joe Mantello's Broadway interpretation, Allegra's less busy approach allowed for greater clarity while still finding humor in this grizzly subject. And unlike the emotionally-distancing vastness of Studio 54, Allegra used the in-your-face intimacy of Muriel's Cabaret Theatre to white knuckle effect.

In one of the most outstanding ensembles ever to be seen on a New Orleans stage, two performances stood out. Richard Alexander Pomes unleashed volcanic depths of fury as Sam Byck who had planned to crash a hijacked plane into Nixon's White House. Though least similar in appearance to "his" assassin, Pomes nailed Byck's grandiose bitterness.

And Lisa Picone's Sara Jane Moore was the finest characterization I've yet seen of hers and a personal triumph for this courageous breast cancer survivor as she returned to trodding the boards after an *annus interruptus*. Picone found the hair thin line between the comically desperate and the dramatically crazy sides of this dowdy would-be killer of Gerald Ford, and walked it expertly from start to finish.

In addition, Jimmy Murphy made an intense John Wilkes Booth who truly believed he was doing the best thing for his country by killing Lincoln; Ricky Graham captured Charlie Guiteau's eccentricities while giving depth to Garfield's killer; Gary Rucker was unassuming yet pointed as the Balladeer and didn't overplay it as Lee Harvey Oswald; and Vatican Lokey was suitably demonic as the Proprietor, using a lighter, and hence more effective, touch



Eleanor Bernstein, Kirk Bush and Jessica Greenberg in *The Arabian Nights*

than he employed in *Miss Saigon*.

Newcomers Sam Dudley (Leon Czolgosz), Lauren Elens (Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme) and Alex Martinez Wallace (Giuseppe Zangara) all held their own with the veterans on stage. Elens seemed a bit too tough as Fromme but she made up for it in a fine *Unworthy of Your Love* duet with Matthew Mickal, unrecognizable as John Hinckley.

Tara Brewer, Paul Broussard, William Bryant, Andrew Farrier, Kate Kuen, Angela Papale, and young Aaron Richert excellently completed the cast.

>From the superb *Opening* onwards, Musical Director Jefferson Turner did a brilliant job with this difficult score. Under Scott Sauber's ominously candy-colored lights, Cecile Covert filled Eli Grove & Kyle Herbert's simple but effective set with period appropriate outfits for each assassin.

I'm writing this a week before Election Day. If by the time you're reading this, Barack Obama has been elected President, as seems likely tho by no means definite, let's hope certain predictions prove false and there'll be no need to add another character to any future productions of *Assassins*. Only time will tell.

### The Arabian Nights at Tulane's Lupin Theater

After seeing *The Arabian Nights* recently, I gave a silent prayer: O Allah, permit Lorenzo Gonzalez many happy years of directing plays so that his time on earth is so well-filled that he shall never again have the time to act in any.

I'll say no more about his lamentable forays into Shakespearean acting earlier this season (his Ali Hakim in Summer Lyric's *Oklahoma* was slightly better), but on the basis of *The Arabian Nights* and last year's *The Wedding Dress*, I am already looking forward to whatever directorial assignment he takes on next.

*The Arabian Nights* is a compendium of the tales that originated hundreds of years ago in India, Persia, Egypt and other Arab lands said to be

told by Scheherezade to delay her execution by Shahryar. (She succeeded indefinitely.) Mary Zimmerman rearranged and rewrote them, and this version was first produced in Chicago in 1992.

Scheherezade's brilliant imagination, or whomever's it was who came up with these tales, encompasses a panorama of human emotions and situations. We're given genies, kings, thieves, slave girls, sheiks, princesses, and caliphs sprinkled among tales of knowledge, loss, honor, dishonor, calumny, fortunes found and lovers lost. At times, it's reminiscent of the complexity of an Escher drawing with stories within stories that lead onto other stories.

Gonzalez used the Lupin's small space to its fullest extent, found the script's humor without overdoing it and, overall, did a beautiful job of directing with a light hand and imaginative flourishes. The group of belly dancers, choreographed by Stephanie Herring, was a nice touch.

Zimmerman challenges actors by using language that is in league with Shakespeare's; the Tulane cast generally mastered this although some accents seemed a bit jarringly out of place.

*Arabian Nights'* Story Theater-ish nature encourages a innocent childlike approach to the material. If some in the young cast were not as polished as others in this presentational style of acting, every single ensemble member conveyed an emotional aptness as right as the sun's glow or the greenness of grass. As the show progressed, the actors eased into their characters and seemed more comfortable quick-changing between broad comedy (e.g., fart jokes) and the most intimate of human feelings.

Giving the most assured performances were Samuel Repshas and Susan Lanigan in multiple roles, and Eleanor Bernstein, luminous as Scheherezade. Though the entire rest of the cast displayed lots of potential,

[continued on Main-16]



The cast of *Assassins*



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