
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Grab a Gun. Take a Shot.

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, February 9th, 2022

Stephen Sondheim fans anticipated an LA spring brimming with productions marking the legendary composer/lyricist's 90th birthday. The line up included Gustavo Dudamel conducting a concert version of *Sunday in the Park with George*, Boston Court mounting *Passion*, and East West Players devoting its always anticipated spring musical to the gun-wielding president killers Sondheim assembled for *Assassins*.

East West was the first to open, well at least its initial mid-March 2020 preview took the stage for one night. The following day, the state of California closed down in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. That sole preview was the only Sondheim tribute to take the stage as theaters and much of the rest of California shuttered for the rest of the year.

Two years on, perseverance pays off as East West's *Assassins* emerges from suspended animation for a five-week run starting February 17. So far, it is the only one of the three Sondheim shows from 2020 to return. East West's producing director and *Assassins* director Snehal Desai not only was able to reopen the show, he reassembled all of his original 2020 cast of wanna-be president killers.



George Xavier, Gedde Watanabe, and Trance Thompson in “Assassins.” Photo by Steven Lam.

Set in a carnival shooting gallery that some commentators have described as a sort of a purgatory, Sondheim’s music and lyrics along with the book by John Weidman draw the audience into a problematic universe where President Abraham Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth cajoles, berates, and entices Lee Harvey Oswald to salvage his own failed and insignificant life by killing President John F. Kennedy. Booth gets help from a parade of presidential assassins, many not entirely successful in either killing or gaining the notoriety level of Booth or Oswald.

One of the plum parts Charles Guiteau, belongs to Gedde Watanabe, a veteran of multiple Sondheim shows including the original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures*.

Watanabe talked about performing Sondheim, how two choreographers helped the director stage the musical, and how the pandemic, presidential elections, and events of January 6 have added new weight and insight into Sondheim’s words as he returned to Guiteau, a fascinating figure among the lesser known assassins.



Gedde Watanabe as Charles Guiteau in “Assassins. Photo by Steven Lam

“Guiteau took on additional resonance in the aftermath of January 6, because his assassination attempt was motivated by a conviction that President James A. Garfield should die for not awarding him a desired diplomatic post,” Watanabe said. “Today there would be serious questions about Guiteau’s mental stability and Garfield likely would not have died. The actual gunshot wound was not initially fatal, but afterwards the doctors did not wash their hands or equipment at that time. The wound became infected. Two months later Garfield died of sepsis.” Watanabe explained. Five months later, Guiteau was hanged.

Watanabe describes Sondheim’s *Ballad of Charles Guiteau* on his way to the gallows as something of a delusional cakewalk. Although Guiteau was a writer and lawyer, Watanabe had always seen in Guiteau someone working with almost religious belief in false facts including his significance in getting Garfield elected which fueled his justification for killing. Watanabe found that thread even stronger after the January 6 insurrection and the comments of those voicing entitlement to the presidency based on furiously fervent belief in demonstrably false facts.

“Guiteau sings about ‘going to the Lordy’ as if he had been doing the lord’s work and had a corner on the truth that justified shooting a president,” Watanabe described. “After January 6 and its aftermath, what fueled Guiteau seemed even more immediate and contemporary than when we were rehearsing two years earlier.

“Before this show, I had never held a gun before, and as we rehearsed, I realized the guns are as much a character in *Assassins* as any of the humans,” Watanabe noted. “I approached Guiteau’s gun-handling with something of a wild west feeling. Fortunately, the director and movement directors went with my approach,” he chuckled.

The movement directors Preston Mui and Jasmine Rafael, both choreographers, were brought in by Desai in 2020 and returned to work with the cast.

In an interview just before the 2020 preview, Desai talked about the pleasures of staging Sondheim, East West Players' long history with the composer, and how the two choreographers aided with challenges of staging the show.

The organization's relationship with Sondheim and Weidman dates back to 1976 when the original Broadway cast of *Pacific Overtures* was populated with founding members of East West Players. A few years later East West, with many of the original Broadway cast mounted a jewel box staging of *Pacific Overtures* that cemented the the organization's status on the SoCal theater map.

East West's current venue was formerly a church and a bank. While easily overlooked from the comfortable audience side of the stage, the conversion to the current incarnation as a theater presented architectural realities that restricted backstage, wing space and a formal front curtain. Having directed multiple musicals in the venue, Desai has deep experience on handling the theater's challenges and the absence of a main curtain is less of an issue with Sondheim.



Gedde Watanabe, Joan Almedilla, George Xavier, and Trance Thompson in "Assassins." Photography by Steven Lam. Instagram @stevenlamphoto

"*Assassins*, like many Sondheim shows, segues from scene to scene without really a need to ring down a curtain," Desai said. "While *Assassins* doesn't have choreography per se, I knew movement directors Preston Mui and Jasmine Rafael would bring a choreographic eye to the scene shifts and aid the individual actors to coalesce in their characters."

Watanabe also credited Mui and Rafael's help. "They observed us for a long time and then would make suggestions, usually seemingly small things that read large in clarifying the character and the action," he said. "What was particularly impressive were the ways their suggestions helped us move as an ensemble when that is called for."

"Working again with this terrific cast was like a reunion and we're all eager to be back on that stage," Watanabe summarized, even with the addition of Covid protocols.

Unlike surfers look to move into oncoming waves, after the two year pandemic delay, East West Players is hoping for a five-week ride in calmer tides after the Omicron surge.

Info, tickets, & Covid protocols at the website. East West Players presents *Assassins* at 1220 Judge John Also St., Little Tokyo; Opens Thurs., Feb. 17 to Sun., March 20, mostly Thurs.-Sat., 8pm, Sat., 2pm, Sun. 5pm, Mon., Feb. 21, 8pm pay what you can. Check the website for specific dates, \$25-\$75. <https://eastwestplayers.org/>

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