



By Cory Bilicko, Arts & Entertainment Writer

How apropos that Cal Rep's production of *Assassins* is currently being housed at the downtown Long Beach National Guard Armory.

The company had just lost its home at The Edison Theatre, and the new season selection procedure had just begun without a theatre in which to perform. The play's director, Joanne Gordon, an immigrant with "naïve patriotism," was angered by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and at the current administration's eradication of American idealism.

Yet when the Armory became an available space to Cal Rep and Gordon began working amid the active-duty servicemen and women, things changed for her, as the play's concepts were now represented by nearby, concrete, present-day embodiments.

She and the cast and crew then took a renewed approach to the production, moving away from the cynical viewpoint they'd had toward the play's subject matter, which seemed shallow and disingenuous. Instead, the slant Gordon led was more of a "lamentation for the battering of American idealism, rather than a debunking of the American myth," and the production attempts to demonstrate the importance of keeping glumness from prevailing over the hopefulness for change.

*Assassins* is a musical that uses a revue-style interpretation of men and women who have assassinated (or have attempted to assassinate) United States presidents, from John Wilkes Booth (Lincoln) to Squeaky Fromme (Nixon) to John Hinckley Jr. (Reagan).

Based on an idea by playwright Charles Gilbert, it was reconceptualized by Stephen Sondheim who collaborated with librettist John Weidman. It first opened off Broadway in 1990, and a 2001 Broadway revival was postponed to April of 2004 because the content was controversial right after the events of 9/11. The subsequent revival won five Tony Awards in 2004.

The set for this show is a steel, cubic skeleton...a striking, two-story framework in which the actors interact and from which they hang, often precariously, while addressing the audience.

This cast is a quite impressive collection of talent because they're all capable of singing on key and conveying the individual stories, especially those portraying the actual and would-be assassins. Of these, Josh Nathan as Samuel Byck, impresses the most. As the unemployed former tire salesman who tried to hijack a plane to crash into the White House to kill Nixon, in his crusty Kris Kringle garb and bristly face, he excels at shifting smoothly from clowning to pathos so quickly that one's emotional response can't keep up. It's hilarious and pathetic and scary and exciting all at once.

The California Repertory production of *Assassins* can be enjoyed at the downtown Armory at 854 East 7th Street through Oct. 20, Tuesdays through Thursdays at 7 p.m. and Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. General admission tickets are \$20, student price is \$17 and seniors pay \$15. Call (562) 985-7000 for information or visit [www.calrep.org](http://www.calrep.org).