

The road ahead

Pacific Overtures, Assassins, Road Show and the American Dream

BY RICHARD PATTERSON

If Stephen Sondheim is generally considered an apolitical writer, preferring complex human subjects to lofty sociopolitical ones, there are notable exceptions in his three collaborations with book-writer John Weidman, who, Sondheim has noted, has many political and historical interests. Following the October-December 2008 run of *Road Show* at New York's Public Theater, I would like to draw comparisons among it, *Assassins* and *Pacific Overtures*. They reflect and refract one another as a makeshift trilogy exploring the American Dream.

This concept is as elusive as its promised riches. Coined in 1931 by writer-historian James Truslow Adams in *Epic of America*, the phrase itself postdates many of the events in Weidman's collaborations with Sondheim. Nevertheless, Adams' sentiment is a time-honored one, evident throughout American history, beginning with the Declaration of Independence's oft-quoted promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (perversely echoed in *Assassins*' opening lyrics, "Everybody's got the right to be happy," sung by the assassins and would-be assassins).

Adams wrote that the American Dream "is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

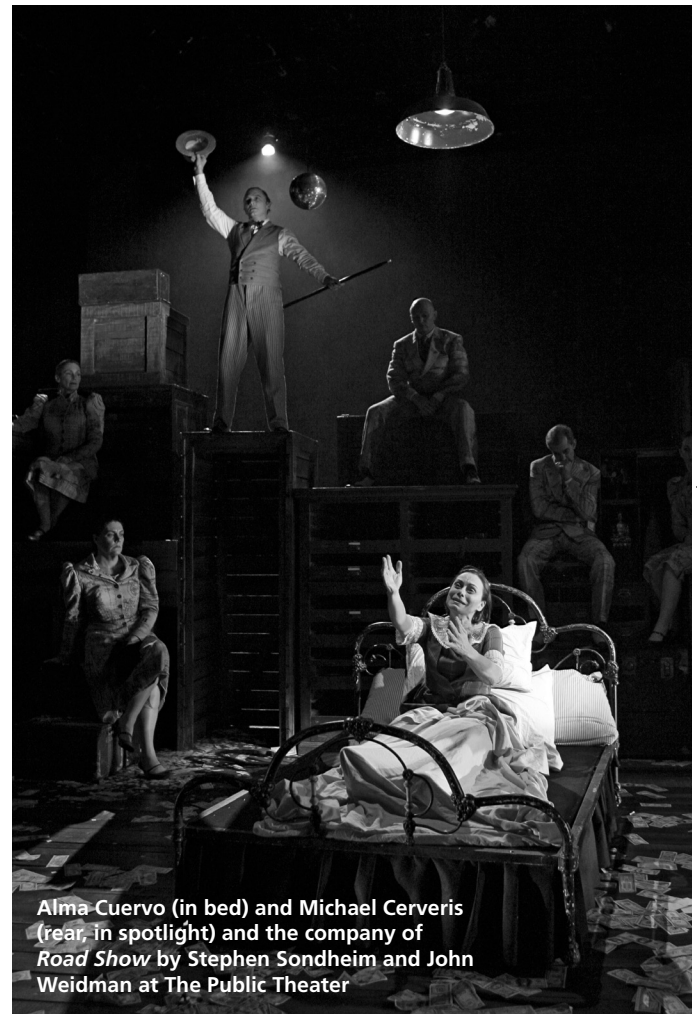
Though pursuit of personal fulfillment, riches and success is constant, the American Dream takes on slightly different shades of meaning as the concept ebbs and flows with the tide of American politics. President Kennedy's killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, a central character in *Assassins*, would have heard similar dreams upheld in the legendary "I Have a Dream" speech delivered by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in August 1963, just three months before Kennedy's assassination. During the lifetime of Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth, Frederick Douglass expressed similarly idealistic sentiments, particularly in his 1859 lecture "Self-Made Men."

In *Assassins*, it's not the pursuit of this towering dream that informs the piece but the sense that the ideal American life can never be fully realized, that there's one national anthem in the ballpark and another outside "for the suckers, for the pikers, for the ones who might have been." The assassins believe that the American Dream has been perverted: The pinnacle of

success is measured not by hard work or merit but by unrealistic rags-to-riches imagery. In a world where "the mailman won the lottery" and "the usherette's a rock star," where is the place for social and political misfits — immigrants, socialists, wannabe ambassadors and racists?

Integral to this questioning of America's rosy melting-pot spirit is Sondheim's pastiche of the American musical idiom, utilizing "Hail to the Chief" as a motif and including the barbershop quartet-inspired "Gun Song." "How I Saved Roosevelt," which appropriates several insistent patriotic melodies from energetic marches by John Philip Sousa, juxtaposes citizens' overzealous pride in saving Franklin D. Roosevelt from assassination against the backdrop of immigrant Giuseppe Zangara's strained musical plea for understanding. Sondheim acknowledges an audience's familiarity with popular song and turns that brassy, optimistic sound on its head for the purpose of critiquing musical clichés.

The same can be found in *Pacific Overtures* when Sousa-style marches play a role in songs such as "Please Hello" and the climactic first-act "lion dance." If *Assassins* is a straightforward exploration of the American Dream, *Pacific Overtures* (first produced in 1976, America's Bicentennial) is, in contrast, a work centered around a particular moment when the United States' belief in the superiority of the American way of life was so strong that the pursuit of its ideals overreached the confines of our nation's borders. When the dreams of Americans could no longer be contained, the imperialist tradition of manifest destiny kicked in, giving way to "civilizing" efforts toward "backward,



Alma Cuervo (in bed) and Michael Cerveris (rear, in spotlight) and the company of *Road Show* by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman at The Public Theater

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