Assassins
An Application to Direct by
Anastasia Foley and Zoe Jasper
Part Two: The Play
1. Provide a brief summary/synopsis of the play you are proposing.

**Assassins** is a musical written in 1990 with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by John Weidman. The play examines the men and women who have assassinated or attempted to assassinate U.S. presidents. Since all of the assassins come from different time periods, the show is set in a limbo like carnival in which all of the assassins, alive or dead, interact and exist.

The show begins with the Proprietor of the carnival distributing guns and ammunition to Leon Czolgosz, Sara Jane Moore, Samuel Byck, John Wilkes Booth, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, John Hinckley, Giuseppe Zangara, and Charles Guiteau (“Everybody’s Got the Right”). At the end of the scene, the audience hears “Hail to the Chief” and an offstage gunshot as John Wilkes Booth exits.

The scene shifts to the Balladeer singing Booth’s story (“The Ballad of Booth”). Trapped in a barn, a wounded Booth is forcing his accomplice David Herold to document his motivations for assassinating Abraham Lincoln as threats are heard offstage from outside. As Booth dictates to Herold, the Balladeer counters that his motivations were more personal. Herold finally surrenders to the attackers outside and Booth is forced to throw the diary to the Balladeer in hopes that she will tell his story. Booth expresses that this will not be enough the fix the country and commits suicide as the barn is burned to the ground. The Balladeer decides that Booth is a madman who inspired future madmen and rips his account from the diary.

The assassins gather and Guiteau toasts to the President, excited at his future as Ambassador to France (“Ladies and Gentlemen a Toast”). Booth encourages Zangara to cure his chronic stomach pains by shooting Franklin Roosevelt. Hinkley breaks a bottle and Czolgosz is sent into a rage, telling his story about working in a factory and how many people had to work and suffer to make that bottle. Guiteau argues with him about the validity of the American Dream, defending it against Czolgosz’s anger. Booth tries to convince Czolgosz to take control of his life by breaking a bottle, but he can’t.

Over the radio, the Proprietor describes Zangara’s failed attempt to shoot Roosevelt. 5 Bystanders of the scene describe how they’re responsible for Roosevelt’s safety while Zangara sings that he does not regret his actions before meeting his end in the electric chair (“How I Saved Roosevelt”).

Czolgosz listens on as anarchist Emma Goldman gives a speech from offstage. He approaches her and declares his love for her, but she does not reciprocate, instead encouraging him to take up the social justice fight. Next, Lynette Fromme and Sara Jane Moore meet to share a joint. Fromme describes her life as a lover and slave to Charles Manson while Moore juggles her purse, a Tab, and a bucket of KFC. They bond over a
hatred for their fathers and shoot the image of Colonel Sanders on the bucket of chicken. When Moore realizes she knew Manson in high school, they squeal with delight.

Czolgosz, accompanied by Booth, Guiteau, and Moore, sings in barbershop quartet style about the many men who die making a gun before it shoots anyone, as well as the immense power it holds while being easy to use (“The Gun Song”). Ultimately, Czolgosz decides to shoot President McKinley. He gets in line at the Pan American Exposition and shoots McKinley when he reaches the front, as facilitated/observed by the Proprietor and the Balladeer (“The Ballad of Czolgosz”). Samuel Byck records a message to Leonard Bernstein while wearing a dirty Santa suit encouraging him to save the world by writing more love songs. He reveals his plan to assassinate Nixon by crashing a 747 into the White House. He ends the message in a rage because Bernstein ignores him just like all the other celebrities he tries to communicate with. He angrily sing the chorus of “America” from West Side Story and exits fuming.

Hinckley sits alone in a room strumming a guitar. Fromme enters and notices a picture of movie star, Jodie Foster, and Hinckley claims that she is his girlfriend. Fromme taunts him for being in love with a woman he’s never met while she is a lover to Manson. Hinckley declares that his bravery and American activism will win Foster’s love, and then Hinckley and Fromme sing a love song to their respective partners (“Unworthy of Your Love”). An image of Ronald Reagan appears overhead which Hinckley shoots repeatedly to no avail, as the Proprietor mocks him with Reagan’s words about the failed attempt.

Guiteau flirts with Moore, giving her shooting tips and trying to kiss her. When she refuses him he gets angry and her gun fires at his face. He exits proclaiming his greatness and that he will be the next Ambassador to France. He encounters James Garfield and asks for the aforementioned position, only to be scoffed at. This motivates Guiteau to shoot him. In the next scene, Guiteau is taken to the gallows where he recites a poem he wrote and then sings, accompanied by the Balladeer, hiding his fears about death under forced optimism (“The Ballad of Guiteau”).

Fromme and Moore meet to assassinate Gerald Ford. Moore has brought along her son and dog, the latter of which she accidentally shoots. This sparks an argument between the two women as Ford arrives. When the pair’s bullets spill on the ground, he helps the women, who do not recognize him, pick them up. Fromme tries to shoot him when he reveals his identity, but her gun jams. In a panic, Moore picks up the bullets and throws them at the president as he exits, shouting “bang”. The attempted assassination is an overall disaster.

Samuel Byck is driving to the airport to hijack a plane and crash it into the White House. He records a message to Nixon about the nature of American life and asserts that the only way to fix the government is to kill him. Although not shown, we know this to be a failed attempt because of his reaction during the following scene.
The assassins congregate again to discuss their respective motivations. As led by Byck, they lament that they weren’t given what they were promised by the Proprietor. As they slip into desperation that no one cares about them, Byck and the Proprietor lead them in a song to rally those who have been let down by the American Dream (“Another National Anthem”). The Balladeer attempts to be optimistic and encourage them to find other ways to be happy, but she is overtaken and pushed offstage.

Lee Harvey Oswald sits in the Texas School Book Depository, prepared to take his own life. Booth appears with extensive knowledge about Oswald’s life and encourages him to shoot John F. Kennedy instead of himself. He summons the rest of the assassins and tries to tell Oswald that by shooting the President he will finally make a difference, but he still refuses. The various assassins sing about how his actions will inspire others, calling themselves his family. They convince him to make a leader out of someone nobody cares about or knows, and he takes to the window to shoot (“Scene 16”).

A group of citizens sing about their lives after the President was shot and how it disrupted the country and themselves (“Something Just Broke”). The assassins, now with Oswald among their ranks, gather a final time to remind the audience that “everybody’s got the right to be happy” (“Everybody’s Got the Right Reprise”).

2. Include a breakdown of all roles with detailed character descriptions.

We made a decision not to include vocal parts because we are willing/expecting to transpose music in order to cast actors as roles written for the opposite gender.

Leon Czolgosz

“I did it because it is wrong for one man to have so much service when other men have none.”

Czolgosz (1873-1901) comes from a poor family of Polish immigrants and worked in both glass and steel factories in Detroit, Michigan. He lost his job after the economic crash of 1893, inspiring him to protest social and economic injustice. Eventually, his interest in radical socialism and anarchism leads him to listen to a speech by anarchist Emma Goldman. Czolgosz, enraged by the inequality of American society
and exploitation of poor workers, blames the government and shoots President McKinley at the Pan American Exposition. He is serious and impassioned about his beliefs.

Sara Jane Moore

“I did it so I’d have some place to come from and some place to go.”

Sara Jane Moore (1930-present) schemes with Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme to assassinate President Gerald Ford. In the past she worked for the FBI, but she was fired. Although she is always seen smoking a joint and with things falling out of her purse, Moore secretly yearns to prove herself to her friends and have the other assassins take her seriously. Unfortunately, she and Fromme fail to kill Ford. The actress who plays Moore will require great comedic timing and will have a spacey but endearing presence.

Samuel Byck

“I deserve a fucking prize!”

Samuel Byck (1930-1974), an unemployed and depressed former tire salesman, has held resentments against the government since he was denied a loan by the Small Business Administration. He sends tape recordings of his long rants to celebrities, including composer Leonard Bernstein, and he is shocked and hurt when they do not send him a reply. Finally, his depression and feeling of entitlement to a better life drive him to attempt to assassinate President Richard Nixon. His failed plan, detailed in a tape recording to Nixon, is to hijack a plane and crash it into the White House.
John Wilkes Booth

“I did it to bring down the government of Abraham Lincoln and to avenge the ravaged South.”

John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865) is a well known actor and confederate sympathizer. Booth is unable to reconcile his values with post civil war America and seeks vengeance for the South, so he shoots President Abraham Lincoln in Ford Theatre. After fleeing to Maryland, he desperately justifies his actions in a diary which he hopes will preserve his legacy. He dies in a burning barn shortly after. Booth is also the confident and charismatic leader of the other assassins.

Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme

“I did it to make them listen to Charlie.”

Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme (1948-present) is romantic and naive, yet desperate to gain control over her life. After being disowned by her father, she was discovered by murderer Charles Manson and became his lover and follower. Believing that she must make a bold gesture to prove herself worthy of Manson, she conspires with Moore to kill President Gerald Ford but fails. Fromme is the serious and committed one of the pair and does all of the real preparation. The actress who plays Fromme will require great comedic timing.
John Hinckley
“I did it to prove to her my everlasting love.”
John Hinckley (1955-present), after failing to realize his dream of professional song writing develops an unhealthy obsession with actress Jodie Foster. When he can’t get her attention through writing her letters and stalking her, he decides to assassinate Ronald Reagan, at which he fails. Hinckley is awkward and desperate and ideally should be able to play the guitar.

Lee Harvey Oswald
“Free country! Means you get to connect!”
Lee Harvey Oswald (1939-1963) is soft spoken and bitter about his broken marriage. He is about to kill himself in the Texas School Book Depository, when Booth enters. He is convinced, by all of the assassins, that killing President John F. Kennedy will earn him the attention from people he always wanted and earn him a place in the assassins’ “family”. The actor who plays Oswald will also be a member of the ensemble.

Giuseppe Zangara
“I did it ‘cause the bosses made my belly burn.”
Giuseppe Zangara (1900-1933) is an Italian immigrant who is no longer able to work as a brick layer due to his chronic stomach pains. His fiery temper and hatred for capitalism motivate his attempted assassination of President Franklin D. Roosevelt during a speech in Florida. After failing to hit his target, he rails against the unfairness of his life and claims not to care that he is about to be killed in the electric chair.

Charles Guiteau
“I did it because they said I’d be Ambassador to France.”
Charles Guiteau (1841-1882) wants nothing more than to be the center of attention. He is a jolly and arrogant man, convinced that he will be appointed the ambassador to France by President Andrew Garfield and constantly promoting the sale of his book. When Garfield dismisses him as crazy and ignores his request to be ambassador, Guiteau shoots him. He attempts to retain his cheer and optimism as he makes his way to the gallows, dancing and singing a song about “going to the lordy”.

The Balladeer
“There are prizes all around you, if you’re wise enough to see.”
The Balladeer is the omnipresent narrator of the show. She often wonders what drove the assassins to commit their crimes and praises the opportunities provided to American citizens. She represents the American Dream and is the foil of the Proprietor. However, she fails to appease the assassins when they feel deserving of a greater reward for their murders and is pushed off the stage. The Balladeer must be a very strong singer.

The Proprietor
“Hey, fella, feel misunderstood? C’mere and kill a president!”
The Proprietor runs the carnival in which the show takes place. She begins the show by distributing guns among the assassins and imploring them to kill a president in order to solve their problems. Throughout the show, she assists the assassins in various ways and eventually they choose the Proprietor’s cynicism over the Balladeer’s idealism. The Proprietor has a dark, sensual, and mysterious presence.
Ensemble

“Something just went a little dark...I was scared of what would follow.”

The ensemble of Assassins will be a group of five versatile and dynamic actors. They will play many roles, including the spectators of the assassination attempts, President Ford, David Herold, Emma Goldman, Sara Jane Moore’s son, the secret service, Lee Harvey Oswald, James Blaine, and President Garfield. They will also be incorporated into the songs sung by the assassins as carnival workers. The ensemble will have solo singing opportunities in “How I Saved Roosevelt” and “Something Just Broke”.

3. Why did you choose this play? How does your play reflect part of the Theatre Ink mission statement?

Assassins was our final choice for a variety of reasons. It features both large and small roles, a variety of music styles, opportunities for both strong singers and strong actors, and is a contrast to the typical musical that Theatre Ink puts on. As we will discuss in the following questions, we strongly believe that this show is a unique challenge which grapples with themes that will intrigue the audience and production team alike. Above all, Assassins is a perfect fit for Newton North because of its accordance with the Theatre Ink mission statement, which praises opportunity, diversity, fairness, and a balance between teaching and working.

As a result of the musical’s uniquely abstract style and format, Assassins will provide the backstage team with limitless opportunities to get involved. To cite the mission statement, our process will require the “artistic collaboration” that Theatre Ink fosters so consistently. Because the setting and blocking are left so open-ended by the text, the production team of this show will require “critical and creative thinkers” in the design and creation stages. This piece provides “hands-on learning experience in all aspects of theatre arts, both on and off stage” because of the nuanced characters and level of detail required of the technical elements. The actors we cast will have to be able to combine real facts, our direction, and their own thoughtfulness in order to give the believable performances expected of Theatre Ink. There are 14 real historical characters of different time periods in this show which through costumes, hair, and makeup need to be represented thoughtfully and accurately, a job which our department is ready to tackle. The set, which we hope to be some form of a slowly deteriorating carnival, will give the designers and crew an opportunity to create with their own hands a world which calls into question the American Dream. The character development, mood changes, and variety in stage pictures will be conducive for the expertise of a lighting team with free range to express each theme of the story. Czolgosz and Booth speak in Polish and Southern accents respectively, and Zangara speaks both with an accent and in Italian. This will
provide ample opportunity for accent coaching and language work. In addition, we hope to work with the history department to get some insight into these characters, inform our process, and help connect Theatre Ink to the other areas of Newton North. We think that recruiting community members not usually involved with theatre both enriches and diversifies our department as well as our relationships with the Newton North staff. Our peers and faculty mentors will be needed to “participate in all areas of production” unlike any other. The design, research, thought, attention, and overall expertise needed backstage will give the talented members of our community the opportunity they deserve to do what they do best and be featured in an essential way. You certainly do not have to be in this show to “be in the show”, in fact the most important people aren’t.

Furthermore, Assassins is the kind of unique and challenging show that Theatre Ink so readily tackles. In being so committed to “diverse theatrical traditions,” Theatre Ink is the perfect place to do a show with complex themes, a range of musical styles, dark comedy, nuanced motivations, and an ensemble of characters which feed off of each other in key moments. Because it takes place in the present, the show is the perfect opportunity to explore modern times and the various world views of the characters in terms of current day. The group of Assassins will bring the “dynamics” and “energy” which Theatre Ink consistently creates, and will help improve ensemble skills within the bigger roles. The eight assassins are important both as individuals and as a part of the larger group, a theatrical and real world lesson. This show will bring together “open minds” from all aspects, teach important skills, and be a “new experience” which reflects many of the Theatre Ink mission statement’s most important points.

4. What other plays did you read? Why did you ultimately choose the piece you did?

After deciding that we wanted to do a musical and doing an initial search, we read Spring Awakening, Dogfight, A Chorus Line, and Addams Family. Although these are plays which we love very much, we came to the conclusion that Assassins was the best fit for us as a pair and that the downsides to it as a show were within our capacity to conquer.

Dogfight, although a brilliant musical, we found did not reflect the talent of the Theatre Ink audition pool. A central theme of the play is its critique of masculinity, and, unlike Assassins, we decided that casting girls in those roles would take away from the show instead of adding opportunity. In addition, the music in Dogfight is very difficult and does not provide the same opportunity for people of varying musical ability that Assassins does. Another play that we read was Addams Family. Ultimately we agreed that we were more passionate about doing a show with deeper themes. Even though the show is fun and features a unique ensemble, we struggled to find deeper meaning in the
text. The themes in Assassins are much more complex and the difficulty for actors will have a huge payoff when the final product is dark and thought provoking.

Our third favorite play was A Chorus Line. We believe that this is not a show which translates easily into the Little Theatre, whereas Assassins would thrive in either the Little Theatre or Auditorium. We also had reservations about doing a dance heavy show for the little musical, as we hope to provide an opportunity for strong singers and actors who don’t fit into the traditional musical format with our production. By deciding against A Chorus Line we hoped to create a challenge for singers and actors without adding the pressure of having to dance. The last show in our top three which we read and loved was Spring Awakening. It was a difficult choice for us between this show and Assassins. When push came to shove, we found that the potential issues with Assassins are much more manageable than those that would accompany Spring Awakening. Since deciding on Assassins we have been able to come up with a thoughtful solution to its biggest issue, the gender breakdown, which actually adds to our production. We anticipated that attempting to address and work with the suicide and onstage sex in Spring Awakening would have drained the time and energy we have been putting into developing a vision. Because we were equally passionate about both pieces, we decided that the potentially triggering content in Spring Awakening would ultimately take more away from our process than anything else.

Compared to the other shows we looked at, Assassins is the most appropriate challenge for both the cast and production team. The depth of content and availability for opportunity made it stand out from the rest and be our eventual choice. It features a unique format which is largely left up to the directors for interpretation. Although linked thematically, the vignette style scenes of the show are nonlinear. This and the metaphysical state in which the assassins of different time periods interact with one and other characterize the abstract nature of the show. We are excited about how different it is from the other pieces traditionally featured in the Theatre Ink season, and we are proud to be bringing something dark and new to the table which we feel prepared to fully support. This show will call into questions major themes like what it means to be American and what American entitlement looks like throughout history. In no other show did we find the opportunity to explore such a complicated idea. Assassins grabbed our attention as soon as we heard about it and we fell in love with it as soon as we read it. We didn’t know right away that it would be our final choice, but as soon as we did decide on it, we felt our brains bursting with ideas for our vision, our interpretation of the American dream, and even our rough set design. Assassins is a piece that inspires us to create art and do it justice every single time we read it. Its many perspectives on what it means to be an American make us question our own identity in thought provoking and interesting ways that are a testament to the piece’s depth. We can’t wait to continue thinking and growing this show into something that conveys our love and passion for the text and the
music. By and large, *Assassins* brings together the best traits in our other options as well as thrives in the areas they were lacking.

5. What do you think the public benefit of your play will be?

We believe that *Assassins* will have a widespread benefit with the Newton community. Most parents and students will likely not have seen a musical in the vignette revue style of *Assassins*. By doing this show we will help show the community a new kind of theatre which they might not know about. As with every Theatre Ink show, *Assassins* will help broaden the community’s understanding of what theatre is, and possibly inspire audience members to look further into this format of play.

In addition, doing a show with historical background will inspire the students of Newton North, especially juniors taking U.S. History, to look more deeply into our country’s history. It is rare that Theatre Ink puts on a show based on real, iconic figures. In fact, we plan on displaying biographical information about each of the assassins in the lobby, so that audience members have an opportunity to further educate themselves on a dark but important part of American history. Even with its abstractness, *Assassins* still presents a story that is grounded in reality and speaks to a diverse range of audience members. Audience members of different ages may find their interests captured by characters who they remember seeing in the news or hearing about, adding a personal element to the show. As with the *Hamilton* craze, our production will show the audience that history can be cool, accessible, and relevant as well as encourage them to continue looking into the real stories of these characters.

As discussed throughout this section, should the show be done in December again it will happen between the election and inauguration of our new president. This will force the audience, cast, and production team to think about these assassinations in the context of modern day. It will help the audience stay engaged with our show and continue thinking about it even after the play ends. It will give them a new lense on iconic characters which they likely have pre-formed opinions about. We feel that the audience will have a unique experience both watching our show and discussing it after. We would love to organize a talk back/forum after the show for the production team and audience to discuss their ideas on the show, characters, and our portrayal of them. It is our hope that the themes explored in *Assassins* continue to circulate through audience members’ minds long after seeing the production.

All in all we have chosen a show which we are not only passionate about ourselves, but believe the community will benefit from as well. The audience and production team will have the opportunity to think deeply, learn about a new style of
theatre, become more engaged in history, and try something new. **Assassins** will both teach and inspire the Newton and Theatre Ink communities.

6. How have you chosen a play that represents diversity in our school and society? What research have you done in this area?

   We do not believe that this text displays diversity in the biological sense of the word, such as through race or gender, but we later will address how we intend to reinvent the show to fit Theatre Ink’s diverse audition pool. Furthermore, we think of diversity in more complicated terms. Although they are white, our characters embody a wide range of backgrounds and political beliefs. In Newton, the dominant political party is the Democratic Party, so it can often be difficult to have conversations that challenge the town’s accepted views. For Newton North students of any political standpoint, it is crucial to be able to consider the other side of an issue, even if doing so challenges one’s own values. **Assassins** provides exactly this opportunity, in that it forces the actors portraying these characters and the audience watching the show to empathize with people who are viewed as villains. Even if they still hate him for his racism, it is an interesting experience for Newton audiences to listen to John Wilkes Booth justify murdering Lincoln. Similarly the show sheds light on the lonely past of Lynette Fromme, seen by most as crazy for being the lover of the infamous Charles Manson, and helps the audience gain empathy for her. The show also portrays characters of varying socioeconomic statuses. Many of the assassins are unemployed or struggling financially, providing insight into the desperation they feel to achieve the American dream. Zangara and Czolgosz come from immigrant families and are especially vocal about the struggles of poor laborers, presenting classism as an important theme of the show. As a whole, the diverse political beliefs, backgrounds, and classes of the assassins challenge some of the homogeneity of Newton and paint a picture of greater society.

   We also recognize that the diversity of the student body necessitates a wide range of opportunities for performers. Socioeconomic status and other factors can give some students additional resources, such as coaching and the spare time to devote to theatre, which help them to feel more confident auditioning for a show. **Assassins** works well to accommodate students of different backgrounds, in that the roles require varying levels of time commitment, prior experience, and different skill sets. The assassins, who are all zany and over the top characters, are vastly different from one and other. Some, like Booth, Czolgosz, and Byck fit serious, dramatic actors, while others like Fromme, Moore, Guiteau, and Zangara are much more comedic. Similarly, the required musical talent varies greatly between characters. For instance, Byck does not have any solo singing, while the Balladeer sings in almost every scene. The ensemble will provide
opportunities for actors with less experience or time on their hands to still be involved with the production. The characters in *Assassins* provide many actors with opportunities to reflect their diverse backgrounds.

7. Justify the gender breakdown in your proposal. Is it good for our program and why?

   We feel it is important to acknowledge that the written gender breakdown of the show—8 male and 2 female principal roles—is not suitable for Theatre Ink and does not provide enough female opportunity. However, we have decided that we will be casting non-traditionally. The Balladeer and Proprietor are traditionally male parts, but in our production, they will be portrayed as and by women. Since they are the only two characters not based on real people, we see no reason not to change their gender to give female opportunity. In regards to the eight assassins, we will be casting gender blind. Although we wish the characters reflected the diversity of the audition pool, they are based on real and iconic historical figures and an accurate portrayal of them is critical to our vision. The gender breakdown was a major concern for us at first, but we’ve thought carefully about it, and we think that non-males auditioning will still have the same opportunities, if not more than they would have for other shows with more equal gender breakdowns. Because the non-male auditioners are not limited to the parts written for their gender and displaying stereotypically feminine traits, we are providing them a chance to pursue any and all parts they picture themselves as. Our decision will also compensate for the lack of strong female roles by allowing girls to still play strong characters. Another justification for our decision to portray the assassins as their written gender is that we want to explore the influence of gender constructs on the characters and their dynamics. For instance, when Hinckley is mocked by Fromme for his inability to win the love of Jodie Foster, the break of his fragile sense of masculinity motivates him to attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan. Additionally, Guiteau feels entitled to sexually harassing Moore just as he feels entitled to the position of Ambassador to France. His sense of entitlement to success and power is parallel to his innate male entitlement to women. Were we to portray the assassins as the gender of the actors, we would lose a crucial element of character development. Finally, there will be two to three women cast in the ensemble. Not only will these women be crucial to the plot in their appearances during pivotal moments, but they will also be featured singers. This opportunity accounts for non-male actors who are not ready for a principal role but still can be a great asset to the show. Overall, we feel that we are doing everything in our power to open up the show to non-males while still honoring its original intent.
8. What controversy do you think could arise from this selection? How would you deal with potential issues?

We foresee potential controversy within the production arising from issues such as the gun violence and sexist portrayal of women. In regards to the use of guns, we anticipate audience members feeling triggered or unsafe. To prevent an audience member from having a bad experience watching the show, we will include a trigger warning on the poster, in future announcements, on the Theatre Ink website, and on signs placed strategically throughout the lobby at the show. By making the content of the show clear in advance of ticket sales, no one will arrive to the show and be taken by surprise or feel inclined to leave. When staging the show, we will make sure that the guns are never pointed directly at the audience to ensure that no one feels unsafe. We will also make sure that there is no onstage shooting, as this may make the audience feel uncomfortable. When a character is killed, it will happen in a blackout or the noise will be heard from offstage. Additionally, we are very willing to work with a guidance counselor or other faculty member to help the cast feel safe and comfortable being onstage with a gun. In our general interest meeting and casting process we will make sure that the auditioners fully understand the incorporation of guns into the show before they make a commitment to the process.

Another potential controversy is the moment in which John Wilkes Booth kills himself. Unlike with Spring Awakening or other shows in which characters commit suicide, the audience is not well connected with Booth because it is towards the beginning of the show and because he is a famously hated figure. In addition, the audience knows that Booth is going to die, so they will not be surprised. Finally, Booth returns shortly after dying and participates in the rest of the show, so his death is virtually meaningless to the audience. Still, we plan to have his suicide occur strategically offstage or in a blackout so as not to trigger anyone or overdramatize the issue. In the beginning of this scene, Booth calls Lincoln a “nigger lover” in reference to Lincoln’s policies during the Civil War. Even though it gives important insight into this racist character, we think it would be better to choose a different and less triggering word to convey the same bigotry.

Our biggest qualm about the show, which we imagine other members of the community will share, is the sexist portrayal of the female assassins, Sara Jane Moore and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme. In the text, Fromme and Moore are depicted as incompetent and foolish in comparison to the more serious male assassins. Although we think that gender is an important construct that determines the motivations and level of entitlement the characters feel, portraying the female characters as three dimensional and more than just comic relief is a priority of ours. In order to change the audience’s
perception of the women without actually altering the script, we have carefully examined
the two most sexist and problematic scenes and changed their blocking and subtext.

In the opening scene when the Proprietor is doling out guns to the assassins, she
dismisses the women as bumbling and incapable of handling a firearm alongside the men.
In our production, we would like to have a brief comedic moment in which Moore enters
with her son, who appears later, so that the Proprietor can direct her patronizing
comments such as “the ferris wheel is that way” and “don’t forget that guns can go
boom” toward a child and not the women. Additionally, we want to introduce the
character trait of Moore always being high from the start, so that her clumsiness and
incapability of handling a gun are not a result of her gender. When the Proprietor asks her
to “give the guy some room” she will be clearly high and unaware of her space instead of
inherently incompetent as a woman. This way, we are giving the actress playing Moore
additional opportunities to build a comedic presence instead of sacrificing those
moments.

The second problematic scene occurs on page fifty when Moore and Fromme
attempt to kill President Ford. Just like earlier, Moore will enter with a blunt and in a
demeanor to suggest that she is high. During the scene, she consistently derails the
assassination through her lack of preparedness and difficulty with her gun. The fact that
she is high gives the audience a reason for why the assassination goes south. We want the
humor in the scene to lie not in the fact that women cannot be taken seriously, but in the
absurdity of the whole situation. Additionally, the idea that women are competent will be
reinforced by the contrast between Moore and Fromme in the scene. Fromme, unlike her
partner, came prepared to the assassination and is frustrated that Moore is not taking it as
seriously as she is. In the script, Ford enters and trips on the bullets that Moore has
spilled then converses with the women without them recognizing him. In our production,
he will not fall and he will be making a conscious effort, as conveyed through his
everyday clothes and cautious physicality, to not be recognized. To remind the audience
of the ridiculousness of the whole situation, Ford himself will be played as dumb and
oblivious, such as when he pets Moore’s dead dog. He will also fail to do a magic trick
with the bullet, so he appears more clumsy instead of suave. Finally, the scene is
supposed to conclude with Moore desperately throwing bullets at Ford and yelling
“bang!” once she recognizes him. We will change this slightly so that it is clear that
Moore does not believe this will actually kill him, and instead is simply amusing herself
in her current state. Fromme will again prove, to the audience as well as her accomplice,
that she is in control by taking the bullets from Moore in an aggressive way.

It is important to acknowledge that our show has many controversial elements
rather than glossing over them. We feel that these are all serious issues, which is why we
have given them so much thought and attention. Having given each problem great
consideration, we feel that implementing these changes will make the audience more
comfortable without taking away from the show. We also feel that our vision for Fromme and Moore will elevate the characters as well as better represent the women of Theatre Ink, ourselves included. Between these two reimagined characters and the strong presence of the Proprietor and the Balladeer, our version of Assassins will feature much stronger female characters.