

Gentlemen of the Jury

Critic: Hollis Alpert

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Criticism about: Reginald Rose (1920-2002)

Genre(s): Adaptations; Film scripts; Television plays

Henry Fonda has a most reassuring face. Something about the set of the jaw, the leanness of the cheeks, the moodiness of the eyes, inspires respect and confidence. The parts he has played in films and on the stage have made him close to an American symbol of the unbiased, uncorrupted man, and he is just about perfect for the role of Juror ♯8 in Reginald Rose's Twelve Angry Men. Fonda, in this study of a jury's intimate deliberations, must stand alone, at first, against eleven men who are convinced that a tough boy of the slums has killed his father. They're ready, all except Juror ♯8, to wrap up the case, send the boy to the chair, and then go home and forget about it. Out of this situation Reginald Rose makes a tight, absorbing drama.

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One of the jurors is anxious to get it over with and get on to the ballgame; another remembers a boy of his own, who at just about the same age escaped his authority; a third is a crowd-pleaser--he wants to be part of the majority; and a fourth is a man of reason who has added up all the evidence in his own mind and has found no reasonable doubt of the boy's guilt. If Twelve Angry Men does nothing else, it reminds us, like a catechism, of the function and responsibility of the people of the jury. It is also a primer in the definition of those important words, "a reasonable doubt." The entire action is concerned with establishing it.

With so single a notion, the story is bound to be limited. Sidney Lumet, however, has given it some sharp, restless direction--what might be called a maximum of movement in a minimum of space. Since practically all the action takes place in the small jury room, there's not much chance for vistas and scenery. Thus, the emphasis was placed on the actors; their faces and movements provide the mobility and, surprisingly, it is enough. This is because they're all--those who play the twelve jury men--exceedingly capable and playing at peak ability. From E. G. Marshall's calculating but reasonable businessman to Lee J. Cobb's study of a neurotic sadist they are remarkable performances. It's unfair to single any of them out; Ed Begley is fine as an elderly man shot through with prejudice, so is Jack Warden as the guy in a hurry to get out to the ballpark. And there's Fonda's own sensitive work.

The French picture, *Justice Is Done*, explored some of the same ground, and left the audience seeing an almost visible question mark on the screen at the end. It probed more, it was perhaps more vital. And perhaps the thesis of Twelve Angry Men pins too much faith on the presence in a jury

of the open-minded man, the one who looks at all the evidence and even comes up with evidence that neither the lawyers nor the judge suspected existed during the course of the trial. If this man had not been on the jury, if he hadn't deduced facts that no one else during the course of the trial, nor in the jury room, had been able to deduce, then, presumably, the boy would have been sent to his death. It is this stacking of the story that gives it its weakness.

Beyond that, *Twelve Angry Men* is remarkably successful at establishing its atmosphere, from the sultriness of the room on a hot summer day to the tension created by the clash of overheated minds. Reginald Rose's screenplay is considerably improved and developed over its original version seen a few seasons ago on TV; Sidney Lumet's direction (his first in the movie medium) is expert enough to qualify him as an important new talent; and it looks as though Henry Fonda, in his first time out as a producer, has come up with a winner.

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