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REGINALD ROSE
TWELVE ANGRY MEN

EDITED BY STEVEN PRICE

B L O O M S B U R Y

Twelve Angry Men

Reginald Rose (1920–2002) was an American writer, best known for his play *Twelve Angry Men*. He received an Emmy for the teleplay and an Oscar nomination for the film adaptation (1957). Other works include *The Porcelain Year*, *Black Monday*, *Dear Friends* and *This Agony, This Triumph*.

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Twelve Angry Men

REGINALD ROSE

with commentary and notes by

STEVEN PRICE

Series Editors: Jenny Stevens and Chris Megson

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Chronology

- 1920 Reginald Rose born on 10 December in New York City.
- 1948 CBS begins television broadcast of *Studio One*, an anthology series presenting original, hour-long live television drama.
- 1949 Broadway premiere of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.
- 1951 December, CBS broadcast of Reginald Rose's first television play, *The Bus to Nowhere*.
- 1953 Broadway premiere of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.
November: Rose's first hour-length television drama, *The Remarkable Incident at Carson Corners*, for *Studio One*.
- 1954 Early 1954: Rose called up for jury service.
April–June: live television broadcast of the McCarthy-Army hearings.
Rose writes teleplay for *12 Angry Men* in five days.
20 September: live television broadcast of *Twelve Angry Men* in the *Studio One* series.
- 1955 The Dramatic Publishing Company publishes Sherman L. Sergel's stage adaptation of Rose's teleplay.
- 1956 Rose's original teleplay published in *Six Television Plays*.
Tragedy in a Temporary Town, written by Rose and directed by Sidney Lumet, broadcast by NBC.
Filming of *Twelve Angry Men* for cinema, co-produced by Rose and Henry Fonda; the first feature film directed by Sidney Lumet.
- 1957 Release of film version of *Twelve Angry Men*: a critical success, but a commercial failure.
- 1961–1965 Rose creates and writes for *The Defenders*, a multi-Emmy award-winning legal drama series.
- 1964 Rose's own stage version of *Twelve Angry Men* performed at the Queen's Theatre, London.
- 1965 Publication of Rose's stage version by Samuel French, London.

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- 1977 Rose copyrights 'revised and rewritten' text of the stage play.
- 1994 O. J. Simpson arrested and charged with the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman.
- 1995 Governor George Pataki reinstates death penalty in New York.
O. J. Simpson trial in Los Angeles ends in Simpson's acquittal.
The American Century Theater stages *Twelve Angry Men*, using the 1957 screenplay as its script.
- 1996 Rose reworks his 1957 screenplay for the forthcoming Showtime television production.
Bristol Old Vic production, directed by Harold Pinter, opens at the Comedy Theatre, London.
Publication by Methuen of Rose's revised text for the stage play.
- 1997 Showtime screens *Twelve Angry Men*, with revised screenplay by Rose.
- 2002 Reginald Rose dies in Norwalk, Connecticut, on 19 April.
- 2004–2005 Broadway premiere directed by Scott Ellis, using Rose's theatrical script.
- 2006 Penguin edition of Rose's 1996 text, with an introduction by David Mamet.
- 2006–2008 Touring productions of the Broadway show.
- 2007 Lumet's film selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.
- 2013 Birmingham Rep production; later transfers to Garrick Theatre, London.
- 2015 The American Century Theater makes a revival of *Twelve Angry Men* its swansong production.

Commentary

Twelve jurors sit in a stuffy room in a New York courthouse, debating the case of a teenager accused of murdering his father. The judge has cautioned that a guilty verdict carries a mandatory death sentence. Aside from the Guard, no one can leave or enter the play's single set. Eleven jurors hold the accused to be guilty, but one is unconvinced, and over the course of ninety or so increasingly fractious minutes, one by one the others are persuaded that there is sufficient doubt for them finally, and unanimously, to return a verdict of not guilty. It is a simple premise, relentlessly gripping in its narrative development, the tension accentuated by a physically and mentally claustrophobic setting and the audience's recognition that, sooner or later, the jurors must all arrive at the same conclusion: but the views of many are so entrenched that we cannot yet see *how*.

This is the greatest work of Reginald Rose, whose life and work returned many times to the legal world he explores in his masterpiece. His father and grandfather were both qualified lawyers in New York City, where Rose was born into a Jewish family in 1920. He served in the US Army from 1942 to 1946, and on returning to New York took a job as a publicist for Warner Brothers. By 1951 he was working as a copywriter for an advertising company – another profession that plays its part in *Twelve Angry Men* – but was also trying to develop a career writing dramas for television. In December of that year CBS's *Out There* show broadcast Rose's first script, *The Bus to Nowhere*, which the writer would later describe as 'a half-hour original, written in sheer desperation as a protest against the nightly agonies television had to offer' (Rose 1956: ix). For the next two years he continued to write 'uniformly mediocre' thirty-minute television plays (Rose 1956: ix), before receiving encouragement from the story editor at CBS's flagship series *Studio One* to write his first hour-length script, *The Remarkable Incident at Carson Corners*.

This breakthrough was consolidated by the success of another *Studio One* script, *Twelve Angry Men*, which Rose wrote 'about a month' after serving on an all-white, all-male jury in early 1954.

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Finding himself ‘hugely impressed’ by the event, he realized that ‘no one anywhere ever knows what goes on inside a jury room but the jurors, and I thought then that a play taking place entirely within a jury room might be an exciting and possibly moving experience for an audience’ (Rose 1956: 156). He wrote a twenty-seven-page outline in which he worked out the blocking and movement of the characters in detail, a process that enabled him to write the first draft in just five days. Broadcast on 26 September 1954, it was to become the writer’s best-known work, partly due to the critical success of the film version of 1957. His profession as a writer for film as well as television blossomed thereafter, and during a lengthy and successful career he wrote the screenplays for around a dozen films, including *The Wild Geese* (1978) and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1981), while continuing to write acclaimed scripts for television, including the *Studs Lonigan* miniseries (1979), *Escape from Sobibor* (1987), and a new version of *Twelve Angry Men* that aired in 1997. Perhaps most notable, however, was his creation of the series *The Defenders*, which ran from 1961 to 1965 and was, again, set in the world of the law courts.

Despite certain recurrent thematic concerns, the stage version of *Twelve Angry Men* fits a little awkwardly into this picture. Rose started as a television writer and consistently wrote for that medium and for film, but only occasionally for the stage. It would make little sense to begin our critical commentary with an analysis of the text of the stage play, and then proceed to a history of its productions – as we might do with any number of other plays – because that text already had a lengthy production history behind it. Put simply, Rose wrote a script for a fifty-minute television drama in 1954, and retained almost all of its material when he expanded it for Sidney Lumet’s 1957 film. When Rose was nominated for an Academy Award, it was therefore in the category of ‘adapted’ rather than ‘original’ screenplay, and the later stage play is another ‘adaptation’: this time of the screenplay, which the stage version follows very closely, rather than of the earlier television script, to which it bears a more distant relationship. This does not, however, diminish the status of the theatrical version. From the beginning, Rose conceived of *Twelve Angry Men* as a work to be played in real time by actors working in the confines of a single, three-dimensional

space. He wrote it for television, but the television of that era was produced in distinctly theatrical circumstances and preserved much of the ethos of the dramatic stage, and Rose retained these qualities in each version, regardless of the medium in which it was to be performed.

We can think of the relationships between these multiple versions in several different ways. First, we can be medium-specific in our approach: that is, we can ensure that we are aware of the different properties of each of the media for which Rose adapted the piece, and pay attention to those properties in our discussion. Later in this commentary, for example, we take a detailed look at the play's dramaturgical and theatrical techniques. It would be misleading to confine ourselves *only* to its stage properties, however, because the script incorporates material from the preceding television and film versions, and is only lightly adapted from the screenplay. These previous versions help to explain the specific form the stage play takes. Moreover, audience and critical reaction to the play is likely to be informed by some knowledge of the famous Lumet film, at least, and this has some bearing on how we think of important elements such as the character of Juror 8, who in Henry Fonda's portrayal became very much the hero of the film and, therefore, of most productions of the play.

This gives us a second, more surprising way of thinking about *Twelve Angry Men*: as an inter-medial, multi-platform event. Rose was comfortable in framing substantially the same material within different media, with each version incorporating, and making minimal alteration to, the text of the previous one. The screenplay includes almost everything from the teleplay, but adds a great deal to it; the theatrical script incorporates almost everything from the screenplay, minus two exterior scenes. Rose emphasized as early as 1956 the 'importance' of '[w]hat *Twelve Angry Men* has to say about democracy, justice, social responsibilities and the pressure of the times upon the people who live them', and this thematic and historical significance remained in place when he reworked the piece for film and then theatre, which allowed him to address instead 'the meager development of some of the characters' in the television version (Rose 1956: 157). It is always problematic to discuss the themes of a work independently of its form, but this does not

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seem to have particularly troubled Rose, who does not allow the work in any of its variations to comment overtly on its own construction. Today we are more familiar with the idea of a work existing simultaneously in television, film, soundtrack, computer game, social media networks, and so on, and although it would be anachronistic to pursue this line too extensively, it is as least possible – as many critical essays reveal – to discuss *Twelve Angry Men* as a kind of concept, event or idea, rather than as a single text or version.

A related but less radical way of thinking about these relationships is to see them as a series of alterations or ‘iterations’, with one version succeeding another in a chronological sequence; to use a modern phrase, *Twelve Angry Men* is a ‘living document’. Rose did not think of it as a piece that attained a definitive, final form: instead, throughout his life he kept returning to it, altering the text, albeit usually in fairly minor ways, to suit the medium and/or to make it more directly relevant to the times in which the production was set. Again, this complicated, evolving history, and a willingness to regard it as being alterable by events or other contributors, gives *Twelve Angry Men* a more modern feel than we might recognize from the on-stage action alone.

Twelve Angry Men: From Television to Stage

The 1954 *Studio One* Television Broadcast

The period from 1948 to the end of the 1950s is often termed the ‘Golden Age’ of American television. At the start of the 1950s, only 9 per cent of the American population possessed a television; by the end of the decade, the figure was 90 per cent (Simon 2011a). Initially a minority interest affordable only to the relatively affluent, television nevertheless required a constant supply of original, live programming. This unusual historical conjunction, in which quality and quantity were in simultaneous demand, created a space for serious drama and serious writers. This could be met, in part, by the ‘anthology’ series: a weekly show that featured a different, self-contained, complete story in every episode.

In 1954, the pre-eminent anthology series was CBS's *Studio One*, which like other shows of its kind aimed to give its viewers something akin to both the prestige and the experience of live theatre, partly by drawing on the vast pool of talented actors in New York. The live broadcast and studio-bound production were inherently theatrical, although sophisticated editing from multi-camera set-ups was nevertheless possible. Indeed, one of the reasons why *Twelve Angry Men* became such a success after airing on 26 September 1954 was that it combined the best of both elements, with director Franklin J. Schaffner earning an Emmy award for the broadcast alongside Robert Cummings for his performance as Juror 8. The show's third Emmy went to Rose for his script, which also garnered a Writer's Guild of America Award.

The hour-long *Studio One* slot incorporated two commercial breaks, which with continuity announcements accounted for about ten minutes of airtime. The performance of the script itself occupied the remaining fifty, divided into three sections or Acts, rather like those of many stage plays. Rose's teleplay accordingly creates two dramatic climaxes to encourage the audience to stay tuned during the ads: at the end of Act One we wait to discover the outcome of the first secret vote, while the second Act closes on something more like a theatrical curtain line, as Juror 3 threatens to kill Juror 8, and the latter delivers the devastating retort, 'You don't really mean you'll kill me, do you?' Yet one of the things that gives *Twelve Angry Men* an especially theatrical dynamic is that, instead of taking advantage of the ad breaks to facilitate a change of scene, on each occasion it picks up the action immediately where it had left off, creating the illusion of the piece as unfolding in one continuous action in real time, as if the ads had never happened.

The broadcast concludes with two ambiguous moments that Rose did not retain in later versions. First, after all of the other jurors have exited the jury room, Jurors 3 and 8 are left alone; #3 picks up the flick-knife and holds it point-blank against #8 before retracting the blade, putting down the knife, and exiting. It is an ambivalent gesture, suggesting simultaneously either that #3 remains fuelled by irrational violence or that he has overcome this impulse. As scripted, the ambiguity was then resolved by the camera moving in close to the table on which can clearly be seen a piece of paper with #3's

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‘Not Guilty’ vote written upon it, but Schaffner chose not to film this close-up, with some nagging uncertainty about Juror 3 remaining.

Then, as the closing credits roll, we see the jurors’ seats in the courtroom. The pre-credits scene at the beginning of the broadcast had shown the jurors listening to the unseen Judge delivering his final instructions, but in these closing moments their seats are unoccupied as we hear the identical instructions once more. The circular framing device again produces an ambivalent effect: although we are surely to think the jury has arrived at the correct decision, this optimistic conclusion is balanced by the recognition that other individuals would almost certainly have arrived at a different verdict in what is presented as a disconcertingly impersonal and alienating justice system. The final shot of the empty chairs effectively invites the television spectators to place themselves in the courtroom and ask if justice would have been done had they occupied those seats.

This version is little more than half the length of the film and stage versions that would follow. The television play ‘had been written with an additional twenty minutes of dialogue that had to be cut for the sake of time’ (Munyan 2000: 11), and ‘all of the cuts were made on passages that had been written to give some depth to the characters’ (Rose 1956: 157). Having condensed the script for *Studio One*, Rose would expand it for subsequent versions, with ‘much of the extra time [. . .] spent in exploring the characters and their motivations for behaving as they do towards the defendant and each other’ (Rose 1956: 157).

And yet that first production could well have been the last: both fleeting and definitive, television productions of the time were broadcast live, and rarely had any afterlife. Long believed lost, a recording of the telecast was unearthed in 2003 and is now available on the 2011 Criterion DVD Blu-Ray release of the 1957 film version. That film came about partly because television was starting to develop outstanding writers, but also because the slow breakdown of the classical Hollywood system meant that in-house production and writing teams were starting to give way to independent producers. *Twelve Angry Men* was not the first to make the transition from television to film: Rose’s illustrious peers Paddy Chayevsky and Rod Serling had travelled that path already, with