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Reginald Rose and the Journey of *12 Angry Men*

PHIL ROSENZWEIG (2021)

New York: Fordham University Press

pp. 314, illus., \$27.95 (hardcover), \$26.99 (eBook)

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12 Angry Men (Sidney Lumet, 1957) is an iconic film on the meaning of democracy, jury service, and justice, with Henry Fonda in one of his best performances. Indeed, the 1957 film today stands as one of the outstanding productions of Hollywood. Phil Rosenzweig's book sets the film in the context of the other works of screen writer Reginald Rose and offers an explanation why only white men are on the film's jury at a time when women served on American juries already and the civil rights movement gained ground. Based on a range of historical sources, the book by Rosenzweig tells the story of early U.S. television and retraces the life of one of its key protagonists and his most prominent drama.

Rosenzweig paints Reginald Rose (1920-2002) as one of the pioneers of television shows developing them into a serious form of entertainment with a social message. In those early years, television productions had to be cheap. Shows were staged live in a studio. Content was restricted, not least by what the sponsoring companies associating their consumer products with the teleplays deemed unoffensive to a white middle-of-the-road audience. But Rose fought for intense dramas addressing social injustice. He started to write scripts for shows in which individuals stood up for the rights of others and challenged prejudices. *12 Angry Men* was part of this. In one of Rose's early teleplays, *The Remarkable Incident at Carson Corners* (Paul Nickell, 1954), children turn their class into a courtroom and investigate the death of a classmate, taking evidence from adults involved. In the proceedings, the initial subject is exonerated. Another of Rose's teleplays, *Thunder on Sycamore Street* (Franklin Schaffner, 1954), dealt with prejudice and how a courageous individual challenges it successfully. Both shows drew positive responses from audiences and critics alike and earned Rose a salaried job at CBS. In the same year, Rose was summoned for jury service. As a result, he started developing the idea for *12 Angry Men*. The initial teleplay aired on 20 September 1954 and was well received, as Rosenzweig documents. However, at the time, television technology and practice limited the quality of presentation and the audience to be reached. A film made for cinema based on the script would be a quantum leap.

As is generally known, film making is a speculative and expensive business. Star actor Henry Fonda and script writer Rose co-produced *12 Angry Men* and had to agree to unfavourable financial conditions. For many years, Rosenzweig reports, it was uncertain if they would see a profit from the film. While *12 Angry Men* stands as a masterpiece today, initial U.S. audience response was disappointing. Other productions soon replaced it on cinema listings. The most successful film of the year was the opulent war drama *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957). In contrast, *12 Angry Men* had a much smaller budget, was filmed in black and white and had retained some of the atmosphere of the live teleplay with almost all action taking place in one room. Rosenzweig works out that *12 Angry Men* was saved by a couple of factors. There was the popularity of the script with lay actors given the sparse

scenery required. The film also encountered strong interest overseas, where it was received as an example of democracy at work. *12 Angry Men* also was adopted by lawyers who welcomed its treatment of issues of law and justice. Many socio-legal publications ensued, and Rosenbaum mentions only some of them. On top of this, in other countries, remakes and adaptations of often remarkable quality were made for cinema and television.

One aspect has made commentators wondering: why are there no females among the twelve, given that the film is set at a time in which women were participating in jury service? And why is the jury all-white? Rosenzweig now provides an answer. Namely, Rose wanted to create an atmosphere of immense pressure in the deliberation room, so tense that it is close to actual violence between the jurors. This would have been implausible when women were part of the jury: men would behave differently in their presence. And all jurors being white allows them 'to express openly any racial prejudices' (p. 63).

When it comes to the puzzle of whether the defendant is guilty or not, Rosenzweig sides with those, who assume the boy indeed had killed his father. But the key point is that the jury must find the evidence conclusive 'beyond reasonable doubt'. Juror number 8, played by Henry Fonda, insists on a thorough discussion, despite everyone else initially voting to convict. What follows is high drama, as one piece of evidence after the other is examined and found lacking, more and more jurors decide to acquit. The group works its way through misperception, prejudice, and false certainty. The vexed issue of racism forms part of the case as the defendant is from an ethnic minority. The problem of false eye-witness accounts is addressed. A key film motif is laid bare when an immigrant juror professes that jury duty is one of the finest characteristics of American democracy. The final holdout is confronted with him mixing up the case and his disappointment over his own son. Many of those topics touched by *12 Angry Men* have led to the film being discussed in law schools worldwide and it is being used as an example for social group dynamics and for issues of perception and persuasion in general.

12 Angry Men proved a timeless story with international appeal because it speaks to a key interest of people to see justice done. Rosenzweig's well-written book provides scholars and students alike with additional background to better assess Rose's masterpiece and to understand its unique presence in popular culture.

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