

## Unreasonable Doubts: "12 Angry Men," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through May 18

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 14 May 2008 02:16

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Near as I can tell, there are two types of people: those who like Reginald Rose's jury-room drama *12 Angry Men*, and those who haven't seen it yet. So speedy and smart, so filled with personality and (mostly) unforced emotion, the work seems practically indestructible, and I actually fall into a special subset of people: those who love *12 Angry Men* with a passion bordering on mania. (Between Sidney Lumet's 1957 film version and the 1997 television remake, I've watched it - and this is a conservative estimate - more than three dozen times.) So it was with nearly delirious excitement, and just a touch of dread, that I attended the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's Saturday-night presentation of the show, the first stage production of Rose's piece that I'd seen.

If you're a fellow fan of the material, the first few seconds of Playcrafters' offering - beautifully staged by Craig Michaels - are enough to get you grinning. It's all there: The stern, measured instructions of the judge; the plaintive oboe of Kenyon Hopkins' original film score; the modestly furnished deliberation room in which Don Madson's guard and *12 Angry Men*'s 12 angry men (known only by their juror numbers) slowly enter. And before any dialogue is uttered, your grin

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will likely expand as you begin matching the actors with the familiar tics and traits of their characters: Juror Ten (Tom Morrow), with his edgy irritation and head cold; Four (Chris Browne), with his humorless deadpan and eyeglasses; Seven (Bill Hudson), with his sweaty neck and loud jacket.

Yet what's most intriguing, albeit occasionally off-putting, about this production (at least if you, too, are unacquainted with *12 Angry Men* on stage) is that nothing that occurs after the characters' entrances happens quite the way you expect it will. Written years after the film's release, Rose's script retains the original plot - Juror Eight (James V. Driscoll), standing alone in defense of an alleged teenaged killer, attempts to prove the existence of reasonable doubt - and numerous heated debates, but there are so many subtle, specific changes that the play never feels like a mere carbon copy. You can know (or

*think*  
*you*

know) the material by heart and still be surprised throughout.

Not all of the surprises are necessarily welcome. By cutting several of the best lines and most memorable peripheral bits - I particularly missed the touching football memory recounted by Juror One (played here by Bill Bates) - Rose's stage version isn't as wholly an ensemble piece as the films are; though the actors portraying them are continually focused and alert, the characters of Five (William Pepper), Six (Joshua Kahn), and Twelve (Don Hazen), especially, seem to be given short shrift.



Many of Rose's alterations, however, are smart ones - Driscoll's Eight now has a terrifically edifying, enjoyable monologue on just how many lingering questions must be ignored for guilt to be proven - and Michaels makes some shrewd directorial decisions that heighten the tension, and the comedy, considerably; Driscoll's lightning-quick reveal of the second switchblade

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produces a deserved gasp-and-laugh, and the group reaction to the first "guilty or not guilty?" vote, with most of the jurors wailing like their team just lost the World Series, is a hysterical sight - grown men behaving (and not for the last time) like infants.

Which leads to a built-in perk in the *12 Angry Men* stage version that even Lumet's masterpiece can't claim: You're able to watch the reactions of whichever juror you want, whenever you want. And when the actors are giving the kinds of lived-in, thoughtful performances that Michaels' cast is here, that's a mighty perk indeed.

Certainly, there's no shortage of explosive moments, the most powerful ones coming from Jerry Wolking's Juror Three. Tall and intimidating, Wolking spits out hateful rants with spectacular enthusiasm, and similarly vibrant portrayals are offered by Morrow, delivering racist screeds with appropriate obnoxiousness (he suggests that you'd be an idiot to disagree with him), and by Hudson, who pulls off the neat trick of making you laugh both at and *with* his uncouth lout. But the quieter performances are no less impressive: Joe Mital offers a sweetheart of a comedy turn as the slow-witted Juror Two; Browne's Four is inscrutable in the wittiest, most entertaining way; Spiro A. Bruska is a wonderfully dignified, levelheaded Nine; Michael B. Miller displays ace timing and poignant understatement as the European-bred Eleven. And the ever-admirable Driscoll, as the play's moral conscience, is stalwart and righteous without making a big deal of it; his unfussy, truthful work never shouts "Henry Fonda Role," and he blends in effortlessly with his co-stars.

Running a zippy 100 minutes - and that's *with* a 20-minute intermission! - Playcrafters' latest allows you to enjoy the continually committed work of whichever topnotch performer you choose, and I'm pretty sure I picked the perfect seat (center section, off to the side) for optimal viewing of the show's jury-table configurations. But given the strength of Michaels' presentation, I'm guessing that no matter where you sit at

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*Angry Men*

, your eye will land on someone -

*many*

someones, actually - well worth watching.

*For tickets, call (309)762-0330.*