

Article by Linda Deutsch, Associated Press special correspondent. Courtesy of <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/19970816/news/308169940>

The O.J. Simpson trial, which led many to re-examine the American jury system, was the catalyst for a new TV revival of the most enduring dramatic saga of a jury “Twelve Angry Men.”

The seed for a new production was planted when director William Friedkin’s 14-year-old son, watching the Simpson criminal trial on TV, wanted answers How do juries work? What do they mean when they talk about reasonable doubt?

“I went out and got a tape of ‘Twelve Angry Men,’ the old black-and-white movie with Henry Fonda,” Mr. Friedkin recalls.

As he and his son watched the film, he said, “I realized it was also a great script which still had tremendous validity. It was an American classic like ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ and ‘Death of a Salesman.’ And it had not been seen for well over 40 years. ... I wanted to do it for television.”

Mr. Friedkin’s TV production will have its debut on Showtime on Sunday with a blockbuster cast of top actors. Jack Lemmon, George C. Scott, Ossie Davis, Hume Cronyn and Edward James Olmos are just a few of the stars. Mr. Lemmon takes on the role that brought Henry Fonda an Oscar nomination -- the lone juror among 12 who holds out for innocence when all are inclined to vote guilt.

For Mr. Rose, now retired and living in Connecticut, the rebirth of his script for TV was a bonus. He had seen stage productions of “Twelve Angry Men” mounted around the world. One is running in France and others are scheduled in Germany and Japan. Productions have been seen in Argentina, Israel, Holland and Belgium.

Not bad for a television play he wrote in five days in 1954 for the old “Studio One” TV drama series. The idea came from Mr. Rose’s own stint on jury duty.

“I felt when I wrote it that I wanted to say something about the justice system,” Mr. Rose said in a phone interview. “I had served on a jury and I was so impressed with the solemnity of the proceedings, the big wood-paneled courtroom and the silver-haired judge sitting on high. I was kind of overwhelmed with it and taken with my own responsibility.”

In that case, he said, “There was a terrific argument in the jury room that lasted seven or eight hours. ... I had started to write television shows and I thought, ‘Wow, what a wonderful idea.’ To my mind it had never been done before -- a whole story that takes place in a jury room.”

A success on TV, “Twelve Angry Men” was expanded into the 1957 film starring Fonda. The story is simple a young Puerto Rican man is charged with murdering his father. In the jury room, 11 men agree he is guilty but one man hesitates, votes not guilty and asks to talk over the evidence.

The dynamics of deliberations uncover hidden prejudices among the men and their emotional interaction is crucial to the outcome.

Mr. Friedkin sees a subtext involving male egos.

“This is about testosterone,” he declared. “It says that juries are swayed by emotionalism.”

Mr. Rose says the heart of the story is prejudice in the justice system. Some jurors are portrayed as biased against the defendant.

O.J. Simpson prosecutor Christopher Darden, who visited the set while “Twelve Angry Men” was in production, said it is timeless.

“These issues of bias and prejudice and racial animus have existed since the beginning of jurisprudence,” Mr. Darden said. “The law is designed to allow people to bring into the jury room their own life experience. Will people bring in their own prejudices? It’s unavoidable and it’s expected. That’s why we give instructions about it.”

The Showtime script is little changed from the original, but there is some updating. A broken fan in the jury room became a broken air conditioner. A reference to the Dempsey-Firpo fight is now the Tyson-Holyfield fight. The purchase price of a switchblade knife is increased from \$6 to \$25.

The biggest difference is the addition of three black jurors. Mr. Rose and Mr. Friedkin discussed adding women but rejected the idea.

“It’s about male egos and their interaction,” said Mr. Rose. “If there were women on the jury, it wouldn’t be ‘Twelve Angry Men.’ It would be ‘Twelve Angry Jurors,’ and it wouldn’t be the same.”

The judge is a woman in the 1997 version, while a male plays the role in the 1957 version. In the 1957 movie, the defendant's race is not specified, but one juror in particular continually refers to the defendant as one of 'those people.' In the 1997 version, the defendant is Latino/Puerto Rican. In the 1997 version, four of the jurors are black, one is Latino, and another is German. In the 1957 version, the jury is less diverse, although we do find out that one juror grew up in a poor Jewish neighborhood and another is a European immigrant. The greater diversity in the 1997 movie adds to the tension in the story. In the 1957 version, the most racist juror is a white man while in the 1997 version the role is played by a black man who goes on a much more offensive racial tirade than in the original, using several racial epithets to describe the Latino defendant. He sees the Latino community as a threat to the black community.