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Stage review: Prime Stage does justice to '12 Angry Men'

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By Bob Hoover, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Daryll Heysham, left, plays Juror #3 and Joe Eberle is Juror #6 in the Prime Stage production of "Twelve Angry Men."

Prime Stage Theater describes its worthy goal as "to bring literature to life," so the choice of "Twelve Angry Men" as its current production is a puzzlement. The play was never literature, but started its life as a TV drama on "Studio One" in 1954, hosted by the queen of the refrigerator, Betty Furness.

Written by Reginald Rose, it was a civics lesson for a nation whose principles seemed threatened by the Soviet Union. From Red China to the Atom Spies, democracy was under attack -- as were some screenwriters by the blacklist -- and Rose ran to the rescue with his 90-minute drama about the virtues of the U.S. legal system.

The Rosenbergs had been executed June 19, 1953, and many on the left criticized that system. This play was Rose's defense.

The 1957 movie version, produced by and starring Henry Fonda as Juror No. 8, has made the scenario familiar to most of us: A jury of 12 white men -- even in 1953 New York unusual -- sits in judgment of a 16 year-old boy accused of the premeditated murder of his father. If the boy is found guilty, he will face the electric chair.

In the first vote, Juror No. 8 is the only "not guilty" vote, stressing that he has "reasonable doubt." That doubt, as Rose explains, is enough to acquit him.

The other 11 men then begin to reveal their various symbolic character roles from the heavily accented foreigner who loves America to the vicious racist who fears "they" are out to take over.

The key jurors are No. 8 (Christopher Spare) and No. 3 (Daryll Heysham), exact opposites in their view of the case. How No. 8 turns his fellows' votes around is the gimmick of the play.

Using a combination of Perry Mason-like tricks (he produces a switchblade matching the alleged murder weapon) and dedication to a reasonable approach, No. 8 represents the virtues and decency of a "good American."

Spare does a nice job of keeping his head while all about him are losing theirs. Heysham, whose character has father-son issues (Psychology 101) is truly an angry man, perhaps a bit over the top. We might call this play "11 Grouchy Guys and One Angry Man."

Point Park University theater professor Rich Keitel largely manages a good balance among the cast of performers, some more polished than others.

However, placing a replica of an electric chair on the back wall above the spare set is as heavy-handed as much of Rose's

'12 Angry Men'

Where: Prime Stage Theatre at the Hazlett Theater, North Side.

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: \$20; senior citizens, \$15; college students and youths, \$10; 412-394-3353 or www.proartstickets.org.

dialogue. "12 Angry Men" is an old-fashioned didactic drama stuck largely in a dim past, but in this tightly controlled production, it manages to provide an evening of good theater.

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