

Analysis of the film 12 angry men

Experience, Human Nature



There are very few movies and even less television shows that are important. Many flock to the theatre to catch up on their stars which they robotically follow in the tabloid newspapers. For those who like to be entertained by thought provoking films by way of the mindless blockbusters, there are few to choose from. The Ox Bow Incident, The China Syndrome, Schlinder's List and 12 Angry Men all serve as a different kind of movie: one with a message that needs to be absorbed and recognized.(Maltin, 145)

The criteria for the viewer may be different but all of the abovementioned movies, or rather films, specifically 12 Angry Men, serve to portray a message that is timeless. It is the message that one has the moralresponsibilityand is encouraged in a free democracy, to stand up for injustice by speaking one's mind freely. This premise will always be timeless and the fact that this movie was filmed in black and white, 50 years ago and with 95% of the movie being shot in real time and in only the jury room, has little significance on the importance of the movie and its impact.(Carr, 83)

In 12 Angry Men, 12 jurors are faced with the power to end the life of a young man that is accused of killing his father. It is 1950's New York and the Puerto Rican population, of which the accused is part of, is immigrating to New York in large numbers, causing distress and raising the ire on the majority.(Weiler, B1) Racist assumptions, coupled with the complete apathy of most of the jurors towards the future of the accused make it an uphill battle for Henry Fonda's character to convince the other eleven jurors to at least give the boy a fair hearing and to ignore, for an afternoon, the

prejudices that would compel them to quickly vote for the death of this young man.

The movie works and has stood the test of time because of the actors, the unique way in which it was shot and the subject matter of the film. This movie is required viewing for many law classes and is being studied somewhere in the country nearly every day of the week. One way in which the movie works is that it speaks to the impediments that racial prejudices have on not only society as a whole but on the individual as such. Hatred wars against the happiness and contentment of the individual are all seen in the movie.

The jurors that wanted the accused to get the death penalty seemed to be the angriest. This was specifically the case with the last hold outs towards an acquittal. Jurors # 3 and #10 played by Lee J. Cobb and Edward Beagley. The boy is Hispanic, Puerto Rican to be specific and is referred to as “one of them” on a number of occasions. (Lumet, 1957) If it was not made obvious in the film, our better trained eyes and ears can easily see that the comment has racist overtones within it and will almost certainly cloud the ability for those jurors to vote with an impartial mind.

Movies that have possessed important messages were sometimes lost because either the actors were of an average quality and/or the flow of the movie just didn't work. The most obvious reason that this movie works is because of the stellar performances by Henry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, Jack Warman and Jack Klugman to name a few. Many times, the importance of a

movie and its message is lost because the general public simply did not like the movie.

An example of this is *The Ox Bow Incident*. Made in 1943 and starring Henry Fonda. Its serious content did not translate to an audience during WWII and the movie was lost, only to be rediscovered decades later as an important film. (Maltin, 146) *12 Angry Men*, though not a blockbuster, was seen as an important movie by critics and the *New York Times*, at the time of the movie's release, called it entertainment with a message. The movie works because it is entertaining and as a result, its ability to reach a wider audience and to be respected by said audience is that much more magnified.

The movie also works because a contemporary audience can see that it was ahead of its time in its subject matter and message. The ideas of standing up for one's beliefs were nothing new in film. John Wayne was seen standing up to the perceived evil Native Americans as he helped steal their land and the audiences generally loved him for it.

But the idea that somebody would stand up for the rights of a young man with a violent past who was a minority, was something new in mainstream Hollywood. What was even more important was the fact that Henry Fonda stood up for the boy by pointing out the ageism and most importantly, racism of one half of the jurors and the apathy towards their responsibility of the other half. It is the way in which Henry Fonda and an unforgettable cast portray the message to the audience that makes this movie work and will continue to work for years to come.

The movie also works because it was different from the majority of the movies coming out at that time. There was no love story, no historically inaccurate western, no blockbuster that was high on explosions and weak on story line but a drama in its purest forms. The movie was filmed in black and white when the majority of the studios was trying to combat the oncoming influence of television and was moving strongly towards Technicolor.

There are no dream sequences, no mysterious camera angles or special effects and besides Fonda and Cobb, no real stars. The movie is shot in real time and 95% of the movie was shot in a single room. If this script was shown to any established actor today, the movie would be turned down. On paper, the film just does not work but when put on the big screen and with the performances of the actors and the way in which the message is portrayed to the audience, it would do anything but fail.

The movie also works because ageism, sexism and racism are ongoing problems in America today. A great deal of progress has been made since 12 Angry Men was produced over 50 years ago. And with Barrack Obama announcing his candidacy for President just last week to a rock star welcome, it helps to show how much progress has been made.

However, with hate crimes occurring across the country and people still judging others simply by the way that they look, talk or act, 12 Angry Men still speaks about a subject that a contemporary audience can still appreciate and could learn from. This is the test of any great movie: Will it

stand the test of time? 12 Angry Men does so for so many reasons and that is why the movie works.

The prejudices involved in the movie not only have to do with the accuser's race but also his age and his background. In many court cases, the past of the accused is not allowed in court as it is seen as being prejudice towards the accused. In the movie, the accused had a long list of violent and non-violent crimes since he was ten. Many of the jurors see this as proof enough as to the guilt of the accused.

But Henry Fonda's character, Juror #9 takes a more enlightened view of the situation by saying that this criminal past has more to do with the environment that the boy grew up in and less to do with the type of person that he is. For the 1950's, this ideology is before its time and is contrary to the popular logic of the day which prescribed to the notion that "once a bad seed, always a bad seed" and that many times, a bad reputation was very hard to erase.

"The young age of the accused also plays an important role as juror #3, the last and most vocal standout against the acquittal of the accused sees the problems with his own son mirrored in the troubles that the accused had with his own father." (Weiler, B1) All three factors lead into the idea that the vast majority of people are incapable of being totally impartial on their own but unless they recognize their prejudices and make specific efforts to overcome these impediments, the diseased mind will always prevent the sufferer from being unbiased.

Henry Fonda's character probably has his prejudices and at one time in the movie, was willing to submit to the majority will of the people and vote for the guilt of the accused if he were made to stand alone any longer. Fonda's character was able to recognize any impartiality that he might have and was successful in combating its negative effects within the jury room. He took his civic duty very seriously and it was to the benefit of not only the accused but for everyone in that room as well that he do that. This is the most powerful message in the movie as it relates to not only recognizing one's prejudices and combating its negative effects but more importantly, being willing to stand up against the majority is who is unwilling to do the same.

Being forced to listen to six days of testimony while at the same time being paid only three dollars a day for their services, it is easy to see how some or most of the jurors at the beginning of deliberations, seemed apathetic towards the great responsibility they have to give the accused their undivided attention while deciding his guilt or innocence.

This is the case for a number of jurors; specifically juror #7 who is preoccupied with making the Yankee/Indians game later that day. (Lumet, 1957) He feels rushed by the proceedings and desires quick deliberations followed by a unanimous guilty vote. He feels that the accused is guilty but most likely would have voted the way of the majority if that meant that he could have gone to the game, gone home or just been anywhere other than in the courtroom for any additional length of time. He does not see and cannot be affectively reminded about the awesome power he has to either

put a man to death or to set him free. The issue of the guilt or innocence of the accused should be paramount in his mind but sadly, it is not.

The scholarly criticism of the movie occurred more at the time of its release than today. It did receive Academy award nominations but did not win. The movie did make money at the time of its release and the reception was generally favorable. However, it was easy to see how anyone attached to the film and even the audience at the time of the movie would be unable to see how influential 12 Angry Men would become. There have been movies that made more money and received more awards by the establishment but the vast majority of those movies have been lost to time and the winners of this year's Academy Awards will discover the same fate.

This is not to say that because of this reality, the movies being presented at this month's Academy Awards are not well made or important but it is very rare to have a movie like 12 Angry Men, claim such wide recognition and possess such an enduring quality in our disposable American culture. The fact that the movie is in black and white, has actors that contemporary society might not be able to recognize and is shot almost entirely in one room and in real time, might turn off the viewer that likes mindless blockbusters and pointless violence..

But for the true film critic, the teacher or the socially conscious individual, 12 Angry Men is one of those rare works of art that is entertaining and at the same time, makes one think about the world around them. There is a few

short list of art work that can lay claim to that accomplishment. 12 Angry Men should be considered part of that list.

A portion of the success or failure of the film lies with the viewer. Nobody can deny the social message that the film tries to send to the viewer but there are many people in America who sadly, do not think that anything of importance happened before they were born. For them, the movie will fall on blind eyes. (Teichman, 82) Its lack of color and no explosions, sex or violence will immediately turn off a certain portion of today's audience. Those people, sadly, cannot be helped.

There may be some converts found but the vast majority will never be able to appreciate the importance of this amazing work of art and their only exposure to the movie will be when they are required to view it in school. Sadly, many of these people cannot be helped and will never be able to recognize a different work of art while in this permanent adolescent stage.

For those people, the movie was slow, boring and void of any real purpose or meaning. For everyone else, the movie worked on all and more of the levels that were previously mentioned and whether being viewed for the 2nd time or the 10th time, its importance, entertainment value and message, invoke a favorable response from the audience. That is the best that any work of art can hope to accomplish.

12 Angry Men will continue to stand the test of time since it speaks eloquently on many different areas: that prejudices are an impediment to everyone in a democratic society and that standing up for a belief, despite

knowing the dangers of such a stand, is honorable and should be recognized as courageous. But also, people do in groups what they wouldn't do in private. Individuality within a group of strong opinions comes at a price and that price is most often ridicule and misunderstanding. If at the beginning of the movie, the foreman had taken a secret vote, juror #8 may not have been the lone dissenter.

The jurors that did not put a great deal of value in the democratic process of trial by jury and didn't feel that a daily salary of \$3 was not worthy of their methodical analysis of the facts, were content to go with the majority, no matter what that decision said. But for the jurors who made it a point to shift group process away from a guilty verdict based on racist assumptions and in light of strong ridicule and little monetary compensation, this movie will continue to be studied and appreciated for years to come.

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