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Regional Reviews: Minneapolis/St. Paul

Twelve Angry Men

Theater Latté Da; Review by [Arthur Dorman](#)

Everyone had the same question: "How in blazes can you make a musical out of *Twelve Angry Men*? It's a dozen grumpy men sitting around a table arguing the outcome of a murder case—that's it." I admit, I had the same question. It turns out, that's not "it," and Theatre Latté Da's world premiere of this musicalized rendition of the play is, in a word, **phenomenal**.

Bookwriter David Simpatico and composer-lyricist Michael Holland have discovered all the places in which song allows the characters, each a juror in the case at hand, to express thought processes and feelings triggered by the jury deliberations. Some are solo turns, in other cases jurors sing in unison, or overlap, or confronting each other, back and forth in rapid-fire succession. In every instance the turn from spoken speech to song deepens the characters and furthers the narrative. Never does a song arrive gratuitously or bring the show to a halt; always the songs expand our understanding of the complexity of issues raised within the play.

This occurs right from the start, with the riveting opening. The twelve men of the jury—all these jurors remain men, as in the original—file in one by one, remove their mid-1950s styled men's hats, and take a seat on one of the dozen well-worn wooden chairs placed facing the audience at the edge of the stage. As lights dim, they begin, one at a time, answering questions used to screen prospective jurors. We don't hear the questions being asked, but easily enough know what they are by the men's responses. A series of statements about occupations, followed by statements about their education, then their experiences with the law, their relationships with their fathers, and so on, delivered in a jazzy staccato manner that gives the impression of each juror as a set of glass shards we are left to piece together. In this efficient and artful manner we feel like we have a handle on each of them, strangers to us a few minutes ago, and a grasp of their individual characteristics that may influence the judgement they make on this weighty verdict. By the end of this opening my fears were allayed and I knew this was going to be something very special. Nothing in the ninety minutes that followed altered that verdict.

Holland's score takes its cues from the jazz one might hear in louche supper clubs back in the 1950s, rife with scat vocalizing and twisty melodies. I thought of the theme a young Henry Mancini wrote for the 1950s TV series "Peter Gunn" and vocals by the likes of Peggy Lee, Anita O'Day, and Louis Prima. Would it be too much to ask Theater Latté Da to issue an original cast recording? More likely, I will need to wait for the show to be acclaimed on a New York stage, as it surely deserves to be.

Twelve Angry Men came to life as a forty-five minute television drama in 1954, written by Reginald Rose, one of the bright lights of the so-called "Golden Age of Television". Rose expanded it into a full-length stage play the following year, and a feature film version starring Henry Fonda was released in 1957. The film, while highly regarded and nominated for that year's Best Picture Oscar, was not a money maker at the time. Still, over the years it came to be considered a classic and is the basis of most people's familiarity with *Twelve Angry Men*.

Set in the mid-1950s, the case of a Mexican-American teenager accused of stabbing his father to death was heard by an all-white jury in the original play and movie. The only juror who was not a born and bred American was a middle European immigrant. A 1997 made-for-television remake cast notable actors of color into several roles—the middle-European immigrant became an Hispanic immigrant, played by James Edward Olmos—but the plotting was unchanged. In the new musical, several African American men are on the jury, as well as a Latino and an Asian American, with the immigrant once again middle European and a holocaust survivor. There are now elements that reflect on how the perspective of each of these individuals shapes their notion of a system of justice alleged to be based on being innocent until proven guilty, and to be tried by a jury of peers, often in the form of interior monologues expressed in song, an avenue that is one of the advantages a musical has over straight drama.

At the start, the case at hand appears to be open and shut, and the jurors are eager to quickly agree on a guilty verdict—all but one, Juror #8 (the twelve men are identified only by their egalitarian juror numbers), who is not sure the defendant is innocent. He merely is not certain of his guilt, in violation of the directions that a guilty verdict must be beyond any reasonable doubt. His doubts are initially dismissed by the other eleven, but gradually #8 makes his case and the other jurors begin to reconsider. Among them are a couple of men whose bigoted outlook makes it near impossible for them to believe this Mexican kid could be anything but guilty. When one of the jurors, #6, reveals that he is Mexican American, a chill is cast on the room. Now that Juror #8 is African American, his concern that is not as much on establishing guilt as it is on the possibility that they can save the life of a man who is innocent, definitely resonates with contemporary concerns, adding to the currency of the piece, and the line tension that build throughout the show.

As Juror # 8, Curtis Bannister, new to Twin Cities stages, has some of the heaviest lifting, and never falters, imbedding his character with strength, dignity, and a stunning voice. That said, each of the other eleven do sublime work. James Detmar is terrific as an old crank who doesn't get all the sensitivity over his crass, racially demeaning jokes. T. Mychael Rambo achingly expresses the disappointment of having his voice matter less as his age advances. Bradley Greenwald is the soul of fortitude as the holocaust survivor, expressing his cherished dignity the moment he utters the words "Watchmaker, please" when asked to state his occupation. Charlie Clark, as the toughest nut to crack among the jurors, shows his resistance inflating in direct proportion to the pain harbored deeply within. The other cast members—Sasha Andreev, Reese Britts, Brian Kim McCormick, Riley McNutt, Matt Riehle, Wariboko Semenitari and Adán Varela—all do lovely and important work, each contributing to the effectiveness of the whole in the best sense of an ensemble.

Director Peter Rothstein stages the show so that all twelve men have our attention, even when one or another has a galvanizing solo turn. Benjamin Olsen's terrific set is nothing more than a long wooden conference table, together with those twelve chairs, set in a wainscoted deliberation room, but at carefully chosen intervals the table revolves so that we see the faces of each of the men, and the angles at which we observe them change, an altogether effective mechanism abetted by Paul Whitaker's atmospheric lighting. Matthew LeFebvre's pitch perfect costumes catch the way in which clothing distinguished social class in the 1950s—and, perhaps, still does.

Twelve Angry Men has nothing I would construe as dance, although Kelli Foster Warder is credited as its choreographer, and none of its musical numbers could be called rousing or comical. Yet it absolutely works as a musical, a serious story given more depth and made more compelling by the infusion of song, with lyrics, melody and harmony all contributing to that result. It is a breathtaking work, bringing a brand new patina to a time-tested classic. Beyond any reasonable doubt, this is one not to be missed.

Twelve Angry Men runs through July 17, 2022, at Theater Latté Da, Ritz Theater, 345 13th Avenue NE, Minneapolis MN. Tickets: \$52.00 - \$61.00. Student and educator rush tickets, \$15.00, subject to availability, one hour before curtain, two tickets per ID. 20% discount for military personnel and veterans (up to four tickets). Members of Actor's Equity Association (AEA), the Union of Professional Actors; the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC); and the Twin Cities Musicians Union - \$20 with union member ID card, two tickets per member. For tickets call 612-339-3303 or go to theaterlatteda.com.

Book: David Simpatico, adapted from the play by Reginald Rose; Music and Lyrics: Michael Holland; Director: Peter Rothstein; Choreographer: Kelli Foster Warder; Music Director: Denise Prosek; Set Design: Benjamin Olsen; Costume Design: Matthew LeFebvre; Lighting Design: Paul Whitaker; Sound Design: Nicholas Tranby; Properties Design: Abbee Warmboe; Dramaturg: Elissa Adams; Associate Music Director: Russ Kaplan; Technical Director: Bethany Reinfeld; Production Stage Manager: Z Makila; Assistant Stage Managers: Kyla Maloney.

Cast: Sasha Andreev (Juror #4), Curtis Bannister (Juror # 8), Reese Britts (Juror #12), Charlie Clark (Juror #3), James Detmar (Juror #10), Bradley Greenwald (Juror # 11), Brian Kim McCormick (Juror # 5), Riley McNutt (Juror # 2), T. Mychael Rambo (Juror #9), Wariboko Semenitari (Juror #7), Adán Varela (Juror #6), Ryan London Levin (understudy), C. Ryan Shipley (understudy).