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Why dunnit?: Pinter's revival of *Twelve Angry Men*

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“Who would have thought that Harold Pinter, the modern master of enigma and menace, would have chosen to direct a trusty old warhorse like this?” asked Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* on 23 April 1996. The warhorse to which he referred in his fairly representative review was Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*, originally presented as a television play in 1954, which had been made into a celebrated film by Sidney Lumet before receiving its first stage performance in 1958. The Bristol Old Vic's production, directed by Pinter, had opened at Bristol's Theatre Royal on 7 March 1996, before transferring to the Comedy Theatre, London, in April.

Twelve Angry Men is set in a jury room in New York in the 1950s. The jurors have been asked to consider the case of a youth accused of murdering his father. Initially Juror 8 alone is unwilling to return a guilty verdict, but one by one the remaining eleven are persuaded of his arguments until at the end of the play they are unanimous in deciding to vote for acquittal. What Juror 8 has exposed in his colleagues are the various forms of prejudice which prevented them from considering the case on its merits.

At first sight there does appear to be an incongruity between the solid realism of Rose's play on the one hand, and on the other hand a director whose own plays tend to be routinely described as menacing, enigmatic, ambiguous. The play was a first venture for new West End producers Michael Edwards and Carole Winter, who had secured the services of both a famous director and several popular British character actors; the selection of a “trusty old warhorse,” lent a likeable sheen by its association with Henry Fonda's performance in Lumet's version, completed a commercially attractive package. In other words, it looked like a ‘safe’ production: hence the surprise at Pinter's participation, and some of the favourable comments upon it. Pinter's political activities had for over a decade invoked the wrath of the British popular press, in whose cartoonish simplifications he is a radical but rich, and therefore hypocritical, demagogue; but in directing Rose's play he escaped the usual opprobrium.

In construction *Twelve Angry Men* is compelling but very much a work of its time. Many reviews of the revival felt the psychological motivations and the means by which Juror 8 exposes them to be rather old-fashioned in their simplicity; more generally, the play adheres closely to many of the conventions of the well-made play, conventions exemplified in the courtroom drama, of which *Twelve Angry Men* represents a variant. Writing within this genre might have been seen as a conservative gesture even in 1954, given its widespread commercial appeal: for example, the screen version of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* appeared in that year, while a collection of five *Famous Plays of 1954*¹ contains two further examples of the genre in Dorothy and Campbell Christie's *Carrington, V. C.* and Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*. The latter was also transformed into a successful film in 1957, the same year as Lumet's version of *Twelve Angry Men* made it to the screen.

For obvious reasons, the principles of empirical verifiability encoded in the courtroom drama are consonant with the conventions of realism, but this also explains why the ‘absurdist’ playwrights of the 1950s were drawn towards parodies of the form, of which N. F. Simpson's *One-Way Pendulum* is probably the best example. Traces of the courtroom drama are evident throughout Pinter's career, from the mock-trial of Stanley in *The Birthday Party* to its bleak transformation into the political interrogation in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, and most obviously in his recent adaptation of *The Trial* for David Jones's film of 1993. In

¹ *Famous Plays of 1954* (London: Gollancz, 1954).

1995 Pinter directed Ronald Harwood's new play *Taking Sides*, which dramatises the moral debate about art and politics surrounding the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, who remained in Berlin during the Nazi period, and considers the question of whether he should come before a denazification tribunal. In these contexts Pinter's active interest in *Twelve Angry Men* is far from surprising, but perhaps the style, and the apparently uncontentious liberalism of the politics, caught reviewers off-guard.

The unusual angle in Rose's piece lies in its being a *jury-room* drama, which focuses on events often marginalised to the point of invisibility in other works and, partly as a result, does not wholly affirm the kind of structural, interpretive or epistemological closure associated with courtroom dramas in general, and those of this period in particular. Rose was writing against convention, revealing the flaws and simplifications on which the ideological assumptions of the genre depend. The structure of the play is conventional in its linearity (and in its adherence to the "unities"), and there is some contiguity with the detective story's double plot, in which the story of the investigation eventually coincides with the reconstructed story of the crime, except that in *Twelve Angry Men* both investigation and verdict are inconclusive: even at the end of the play the jurors "don't know" the defendant is innocent, but they know it is possible; they are "guessing."² Unlike the detective story or the courtroom drama, Rose's variant allows for an open ending; yet it does not really subvert our expectations of the dramatic form, since it seemingly remains convinced of the theoretical possibility of reconstructing a sequence of events free of the distortions of individual perceptions.

As in many of the best crime stories, the investigators discover that they are really investigating themselves. In this respect the play may disappoint a modern audience, because its assumption that 'character' is knowable is developed through the near-stereotypes many of the jurors represent, and because almost all of the characters possess definable prejudices. This reliance on the rather crude concept of prejudice retains the notion of verifiability and marks *Twelve Angry Men* as a transitional piece between the empirical assurances of realism and the radical doubts about the existence of verifiable fact found in early Pinter. If this sounds like too great a claim for the play, we may recall that much of the effect of Pinter's own plays of the 1950s likewise depended on the manipulation of stereotypes, such as the garrulous housewives and long-suffering husbands of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. In these plays the assurances stereotyping offers to the audience are rapidly undermined by placing the characters within systems and contexts which, by contrast, remain at least partially mysterious. In *Twelve Angry Men* the progressive destabilisation of the sequence of events which the jurors have been asked to reconstruct is still compatible with the demands of realism, yet as we shall see the focus on those at the edge of the action, uncertain about what has happened and even, in some cases, of what is happening to them, anticipates some of the threatening, Kafkaesque ironies of Pinter.

More obviously, the piece could be construed as a work of political protest, and therefore as a natural extension of Pinter's public opposition to the judicial perversions of military dictatorships and to the role of the United States in sustaining such regimes. Since the mid-1980s, Pinter's own work in the theatre has tended to address these concerns, and pieces like *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time* have demonstrated more than hitherto a realistic dimension to the playwright's work: realistic in the sense that these plays are more accepting of certain conventions not only about the nature of theatrical representation, but about the relation between representation and external reality. In retrospect, of course, plays like *The Dumb Waiter* or *The Birthday Party* can be seen to be about political repression, but it is in the representation of events that Pinter has changed direction. Asked about this change

² Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men* (Samuel French, n.d.), p. 69; italics in the original. Subsequent references are to this edition.

in his approach in 1985, Pinter agreed that “Certainly the plays [of 1957–60] use metaphor to a great extent, whereas in *One for the Road* the deed is much more specific and direct. I don’t really see *One for the Road* as a metaphor. For anything. It describes a state of affairs in which there are victims of torture.”³

The programme for the Comedy Theatre’s production of *Twelve Angry Men* likewise framed the play in relation to topical events, albeit events more wide-ranging and less familiar to a British audience than the recent notorious trials routinely mentioned by reviewers. Such comparisons were repudiated by Pinter in a conversation summarised in *The Independent* on 13 February 1996, in which he was reported as being “irritated by people already drawing parallels with either the O. J. Simpson or Rosemary West trials. It is about the bigger, vital issues of civil liberties and social justice, he says. McCarthyism is more in his mind than West or Simpson.” Attempting to establish such a limited and unproblematic referent is symptomatic of that urge towards interpretive closure which Pinter has always tended to resist.

The “bigger issues” Pinter sought to explore revolved around the growing drift towards the authoritarian right in matters of crime and punishment. At the time in which the play is set New York still had the death penalty, but in common with the rest of the United States it maintained a moratorium on capital punishment between 1967 and 1977, which the commentary in the programme links with a sharp decline in levels of violent crime. The death penalty was restored in 1995, although at time of writing no executions had yet been carried out. As with *One for the Road*, then, Pinter was using drama to bring to his British audience a critical perspective on the judicial system of a political ally. The force of Pinter’s rhetoric in his public statements would tend to indicate an entrenched anti-Americanism, yet, as in the case of *Twelve Angry Men*, his stance could be seen as essentially liberal; Penelope Prentice, for instance, argued in a book published in 1994 that “the ethic in Harold Pinter’s work rests on traditional Western virtues as they promote, rather than destroy life.”⁴ *Twelve Angry Men* expresses this ethic quite literally: and perhaps traditional Western virtues do not, for Pinter, include the blind assumption of the infallibility of our systems of justice. The play seems to suggest that the safeguards provided by the judicial system of a liberal democracy have saved the defendant’s life, providing an escape route unavailable in the totalitarian world of Pinter’s 1980s plays. In this sense the production looks like an optimistic affirmation, offering a warning about the dangers of America’s reversion to capital punishment while insisting that something can still be done about it.

A predisposition to this interpretation might have been created by the closing shot of Lumet’s film version. As Lumet wrote recently,

[o]ne of the most important dramatic elements for me was the sense of entrapment those men must have felt in that room. Immediately, a ‘lens plot’ occurred to me. As the picture unfolded, I wanted the room to seem smaller and smaller. That meant that I would slowly shift to longer lenses as the picture continued. Starting with the normal range (28 mm to 40 mm), we progressed to 50 mm, 75 mm, and 100 mm lenses. In addition, I shot the first third of the movie above eye level, and then, by lowering the camera, shot the second third at eye level, and the last third from below eye level. In that way, toward the end, the ceiling began to appear. Not only were the walls closing in, the ceiling was as well. The sense of increasing claustrophobia did a lot to raise the tension of the last part of the movie. On the final shot, an exterior that showed the jurors leaving the courtroom, I used a wide-angle lens, wider than any lens that had been used in the entire picture. I also raised the camera to the highest above-eye-level position. The intention was literally to give us all air, to let us finally breathe, after two increasingly confined hours.⁵

³ Harold Pinter, *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 8.

⁴ Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic* (New York, Garland, 1994), pp. xxii–xxiii.

⁵ Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 81.

This shot also emphasises the symbolic power of the law, perhaps validating it as a presiding instrument of democracy and reason; and yet there is an irony in the reduction of the characters, on whom the camera has focused in progressively more intense close-up, to tiny figures dwarfed by the towering presence of the courthouse. That sense of fresh air is literally a sense of relief; in retrospect, one recognises that had the Henry Fonda character not been there the outcome would have been different. This recognition highlights the manner in which the social and political questions raised by this classic ensemble performance are nonetheless mediated by the conventions of Western theatre and cinema, which especially in cinema tend to foreground the heroism of the individual. This form of heroism is doubly problematic: on the one hand, it can lead by extension to the kind of vigilante justice meted out in films such as *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*, in which the lone hero can be in open conflict with the very principle of collective decision-making in matters of the law; on the other hand, in Rose's work at least, the corollary of Juror 8's successful fight for the rights of the defendant is that the assumption of democracy in the jury system is nevertheless open to manipulation both by those with the strongest will to power (masked in *Twelve Angry Men* by the quiet and reasonable open-mindedness of the protagonist), and by the authoritarian power of the law itself. Seen in this light, the courthouse assumes a more threatening aspect.

Of course, the ambiguity of that closing shot is unavailable within the theatre, yet the effect of the ending is similar: an initial impression of stable, optimistic closure gradually gives way as retrospective doubts accumulate. The never-resolved uncertainties about the judicial system which the structure subtly raises are reinforced by the cumulative weight of a number of seemingly minor incidents, as apparently innocuous intrusions upon the jury room take on a darker tone. It is a curious irony that despite the play's title the moments of most obvious structural significance — the beginning, the middle and the end — are occupied by voices other than those of the jurors. The play begins with the voice of the Judge, heard through loudspeakers, delivering his final address to the jurors prior to their entry onto the stage. The ominous display of judicial power created by the amplification of this detached and unnervingly disembodied voice was reinforced in the 1996 production by having the part read by E. G. Marshall, who had appeared in Lumet's film as Juror 4, the most logical and weighty advocate of a guilty verdict (played by Timothy West at the Comedy Theatre). Next to speak is the Guard, part of whose function is to protect and assist the jurors. Whenever he enters or speaks, however, he tends to emphasise instead his role of warder; indeed, aside from the repeated and formal use of the word "gentlemen," he addresses the jurors almost as if they were criminals. His words at the beginning of the play are: "All right, let's move along, gentlemen," and then, to the Foreman, "Be sure to let them know that they're not allowed to make or receive phone calls from now on" (2). His lines at the end of the second act, the last words of the play, echo his first line: "All right, gentlemen. Bring your coats and come along" (71). In the middle of the play, at the beginning of the second act, the Guard enters in response to the commotion caused by an argument between Jurors 8 and 3. "Is there anything wrong, gentlemen? I thought I heard some noise" (46) are apparently innocuous lines, but once again they are the first words of the act and so contribute to the structural device whereby the jury's deliberations are framed by representatives of the institutional authority of the courthouse.

There is, moreover, an unmissable structural parallel to Pinter's *The Caretaker*. In both plays the second act follows on immediately from the first, without a break in the action, and the act division comes during a crucial

confrontation between two characters, one of whom is about to be humiliated. Martin Esslin, in what is probably the best-known study of the English dramatist, calls this "a typically

Pinteresque *coup de théâtre*,”⁶ yet the stage version of *Twelve Angry Men* predates *The Caretaker* by two years, and Pinter can hardly fail to have been struck by the similarities when he came to direct Rose’s play. Again, the intertextual recognition adds to a sense of unease and to the subliminal suggestion that Rose’s jurors, like Davies in *The Caretaker*, are either victims or criminals under the surveillance of a possibly hostile force. Although *Twelve Angry Men* remains firmly realistic, then, there is nevertheless something of Pinter’s own plays in the use of the stage, and in the troubling representation of the law.

These suggestions are accentuated by two further intertextual connections available to the audience watching Pinter’s revival: the director’s recent adaptation of *The Trial*, and Rose’s remarks in the programme concerning his own experience of jury service in 1954:

The facts of the case were clear and the jury was given a choice of three verdicts by the judge: Guilty of Manslaughter; Guilty of First Degree Assault; or Not Guilty. In the jury room we agreed immediately that the defendant was guilty. And the battle began. Was he guilty of manslaughter or assault? Should he serve 20 years in prison or only three to five years? We argued bitterly for eight high-decibel hours before we brought in a unanimous verdict of First Degree Assault, whereupon the judge told us what we were not allowed to know during the trial, that any conviction, since it would be the defendant’s fourth felony conviction, would automatically carry a sentence of life imprisonment. The violent arguments in the jury room hadn’t mattered at all.

Startlingly, the author problematises the play’s realism by framing it within a story which is to be taken as both social documentary and Kafkaesque nightmare. Particularly unexpected in the context of *Twelve Angry Men*, which at least appears to affirm the freedom of the jury to assert its democratic right to bring in the verdict on which it has agreed, is the notion that the fate not only of the defendant but of the jury has been determined in advance.

In the 1996 programme, Rose details the experience of jury service in ways which figure the jurors still more decisively as humiliated victims of a system which seems bent on stripping them of human dignity:

When your two weeks’ service began, you reported to an enormous Central Jury Room where you sat and waited with hundreds of others. It was possible to spend the entire two weeks simply sitting and waiting in that room [...]. Every so often the Chief Clerk would call for silence. A huge lottery wheel was spun and some 30 or 40 names were picked from it. These people, 98% of them white males, were taken to a court room. There another lottery wheel was spun and twelve of these men were selected to sit in the jury box. The first name picked became the Foreman [...]. Once you were called for jury service the first time, you were called every two years thereafter. I found, and could never understand why, that at least four or five members of every jury I was on in the ’50s and ’60s were men who worked for public utility companies, the ’phone company, gas and electricity companies, civil servants of all kinds, including New York firemen, but not policemen.

None of this is apparent to the audience watching *Twelve Angry Men*. The experiences Rose describes are events which frame the action without overtly intruding upon it. But once we have read his remarks it becomes harder to see the jury as representatives of an enlightened democratic process, and easier to see them as victims manipulated by a system which nevertheless remains barely perceptible within everyday experience. And this sense of a threatening outer world which may suddenly break in upon and redraw the boundaries of a world previously thought to be circumscribed and knowable recapitulates the world of *The Trial* and anticipates (or, in 1996, recalls) the world of Pinter’s early plays.

With Rose’s comments in mind the proximity between *Twelve Angry Men*, *The Trial*, and Pinter’s own plays becomes much more extensive than might be supposed. In adapting *The Trial* for the screen, Pinter was fulfilling an ambition he had held since he was seventeen

⁶ Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 104.

years old.⁷ The uncertain relationship between onstage and offstage worlds characteristic of Pinter's dramas owes much to Kafka: the apparently amorphous and labyrinthine house of *The Room*, for example, is reminiscent of the surreal physical interconnections between houses, rooms and court which confound Josef K. In *Twelve Angry Men*, the framing of the action by the voices of the institution, and the suggestion in Rose's comments that the jurors' deliberations could be confounded by the actions of the judge in the courtroom, bears traces of a similar unease about the connections between the room and whatever lies beyond its boundaries. The sense of endless waiting Rose describes in the Central Jury Room recalls Beckett as much as Pinter, but the crowds of people slavishly attendant upon the consideration of the court is pure Kafka; and while the play offers a form of qualified closure, this is now further undermined by the thought that the jurors will have to return every two years, recalling the plight of the defendant which the painter Titorelli outlines to Josef K. in *The Trial*. The defendant has three possibilities open to him: actual acquittal, ostensible acquittal and indefinite postponement, all of which in practice tie the victim to the court in perpetuity. Finally, Rose's image of the lottery wheel accentuates the feeling that his jurors are the unwitting victims of a game of chance, just as K. at times feels that he has been the victim of a mistake.

The difference, of course, is that the twelve angry men are ostensibly the instruments of the law and not its victims. Whereas *The Trial* has often been interpreted as an exploration of the nature of guilt, even in quite literal ways (Orson Welles, for instance, described K. as "a little bureaucrat. I consider him guilty"),⁸ guilt should by definition not be attached to the jurors. The rather rudimentary cathartic technique whereby their prejudices are brought to the surface stages both the exposure and the expulsion of guilt, leaving them in a state of grace in which they can deliver their verdict in innocence; indeed, this is the most secure form of closure in the play. Removing the psychological dimension, which remains prominent in *The Trial*, foregrounds the political dimension of guilt, suggesting a gap between the jurors' perception of their function and the manner in which they are perceived by the court. That Rose's own comments on the play take this move from the psychological to the political much further reveals the play's consonances with Pinter's own development as a dramatist, and the appropriateness of his decision to revive it.

⁷ Francis Gillen, "From Novel to Film: Harold Pinter's adaptation of *The Trial*," in *Pinter at Sixty*, ed. by Katherine H. Burkman and John L. Kundert-Gibbs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 137. This essay provides a detailed account of similarities between interpretations of Kafka's novel and interpretations of Pinter's early plays.

⁸ Quoted in Gillen, p. 138.