

Revisiting the Classic



12
ANGRY
MEN



■ by Erica Phillips

Danny Harvey has always wanted to direct the classic play *12 Angry Men* by Reginald Rose.

Presented in the intimate Rose Theatre Studio Two, the theatre-in-the-round style puts the audience in the jury room setting of the play. "The way we're doing this, people will feel like a fly on the wall. Where you sit will determine the kind of show you see," Harvey says.

Written in 1954, the play was made into a feature film in 1957, directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Henry Fonda. The drama takes place in the U.S. in the 1950s with a teenager on trial for the murder of his father. If convicted, he faces the death penalty. The jurors are known only by their numbers. Juror No. 8, played by Fonda in the movie, is initially the lone voice of dissent among the 12 jurors; the rest believe it to be an open-and-shut case. Scott Carmichael of Brampton portrays Juror No. 8.

"To be the chief antagonistic force of the story is a great honour and challenge. I think the biases and prejudices that Juror No. 8 challenges are still evident today, and hopefully we hold up a mirror to audiences so they can possibly examine how quick they are to judge others," Carmichael says.

This is a timeless story that still resonates today, says Harvey.

"The burden of holding someone's life in your hands, the stress of that, hasn't changed much," he adds.

Through *12 Angry Men*, the importance of how life experiences and social conditioning contribute to people's biases is revealed; the accused is from a lower

economic stratum and a different ethnic background, though the ethnic background is never referenced in the text.

Presenting such an iconic play that has had other stage and film versions has its challenges, as does staying true to the original in terms of look and feel. It is set in the 1950s, so many details have to be managed to maintain that authenticity, such as lights, what a big city jury room might look like in 1954, and avoiding anachronisms.

Since the jurors are only called by their numbers and look very similar in terms of dress, one of the challenges is to draw out the individuality of the characters.

"Our production will have 13 actors who will bring 13 wonderfully different personalities, energies and interpretations of the characters they will play," Carmichael says.

Harvey and Carmichael also face the challenge of living up to the film version.

"I am not Henry Fonda. If I concentrate on trying to act like Henry Fonda, then I am doing the story an injustice by not simply playing the truth of the character," Carmichael says.

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— Scott Carmichael, Juror No. 8

Carmichael and Harvey have worked together on other plays including *A Christmas Carol* and *You'll Get Used To It! The War Show*. For *12 Angry Men*, they borrow from Carmichael's personality for Juror No. 8's character. Harvey calls Carmichael "a brilliant actor, who as a human being can debate fairly and without bias," whereas the stubborn, short-tempered Juror No. 3 is the "exact opposite" of his portrayer, Dan Karpenchuk. "I want the characters to be human, relatable and interesting," Harvey adds.

Costume designer Alex Jmini has been a great resource, Harvey says, in terms of creating a look for the play. There are sartorial details that help distinguish the jurors and reveal elements of their personality, while still looking authentic and staying within the fashions of the day: suit, hat, sports coat and basic dress shirt.

When he first saw the film version of *12 Angry Men* in high school, Harvey was more concerned about the guilt or innocence of the accused. However, when he saw the play later and as a parent, he noticed the social conditioning and how life experience governs one's reasoning. Harvey, who has always done mostly music theatre, loves a good challenge and directing *12 Angry Men* provides that. "This is a direct opposite of what I normally do."

12 Angry Men is set to deliver an emotional journey and create quite the conversation. ■

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