



# The Culture Buzz

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### **The verdict is in – this show is guilty of being great**

A theatre review by John Busbee

February 7, 2016      *12 Angry Men* brings a captivating edge to the Des Moines Playhouse with its all-male cast of talent delivering Reginald Rose's original *Studio One* teleplay, stage version by Sherman L. Sergel, in full-bodied dramatic tension. The Playhouse excels with this kind of script, and the show's production values match the dramatic journey its audience experiences.

This courtroom drama unfolds in the juror's room as the twelve jurors deliberate the fate of a young boy charged with murder. While this diverse group ultimately is deciding whether the evidence proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused should or should not be charged, the escalating tension of processing their opinions deflects judgement to each other during this show's quick two hours. Based on the original live 1954 CBS stage production, a 60-minute performance that garnered three Emmy Awards, this expanded stage adaptation gives plenty of time for each character to fully display his inner motivations for his position. The anonymity of referencing each other by juror number gives an even greater sense of societal schisms reflected in this microcosmic emotional tinderbox.

Director John Viars assembled an A-list of regional talent, including debut performances by four actors. This show appeared on the Civic Center stage in 2008, and the Playhouse's design concept takes it to another level from that more static design concept. The revolving stage in this production is in the middle of the set with the long juror's room table, and brings a greater sense of shifting tensions and time passages. Add Kimberly Manuel's exceptionally evocative scenic design, with its industrial gloominess, and a sobering, oppressive visual environment is created. Add special lighting areas in the down right and down left areas, and the ubiquitous old school water cooler serving as a watering hole for this primal group, and Viars has an excellent staging area in which the action literally revolves and evolves.

Without giving too much with any character's arc, each has his moment during this show. As Foreman of the Jury, Scott McMaster keeps the tempers from flying too much. As the fastidious Juror No. Two, Mark Morrison provides some fine understated comic relief. As the volatile Juror No. Three, Jason Rainwater keeps his rage almost at full throttle, building it through a climactic moment at the end of the show. Jeff Rohrick, as Juror No. Four, retains his steadfastness until the final revelation. As the tough-talking "New Yohker," Lorenzo Sandoval plays his Juror No. Seven with perhaps a little more over-the-top character study than the general realism with other jurors, but he provides some animated interaction in the process. Jim Kimball's soft-spoken and appealing Juror No. Nine, as well as Michael S. Banks' Juror No. Eleven, add believable facets to this grouping. As the unbudgeable Juror No. Ten, Micheal Davenport brings another source of conflict until the doubt of evidence erodes his stance. Carrying the burden of moving things along is Maxwell Schaeffer as Juror No. Eight reasonably begins the jurors' shift with his "not guilty" stand during the first round of voting. Schaeffer brings a dogged determination to fully re-examining all of the testimony and evidence presented, as his conscience will not allow him to dismissively condemn a young man to death whose guilt may be based on reasonable doubt.

Angela Lampe's usual spot-on period costume design, Virgil Kleinhesselink's lighting design and Mark Toeppen's composition and sound design complete this dramatic palette, although some of the music in the first act didn't seem to work as well as it could have in giving the show audio layering. All in all, however, there will be no hung jury in giving this show a stellar verdict. *12 Angry Men* runs through February 21, and more information and tickets can be found at [www.dmplayhouse.com](http://www.dmplayhouse.com).