

Grand Jury

By BOB MONDELLO

Twelve Angry Men

By Reginald Rose

Directed by Jack Marshall

Produced by American Century

Theater

At the Lanier Theater to April 22

Even before *Twelve Angry Men* played the three sold-out performances that constituted its entire run at Gunston's Theater II last month, word began filtering out that the strange alchemy that keeps occurring at Arlington's most adventuresome black-box theater was in the process of producing another explosive compound. According to observers, upstart theater troupe would again meet classic drama with startling results. Where Signature Theater first wowed audiences with its environmental *Sweeney Todd* and Washington Shakespeare Company came into its own with a freakishly uproarious *No Exit*, American Century Theater (ACT) was said to be poised to establish itself with a naturalistic jury drama from the '50s, mounted claustrophobically on a tiny stage and surrounded by patrons stacked on steeply banked risers. With a run so short, reviews wouldn't be forthcoming, but audiences certainly were. So much so that before the show even opened, its producers were searching for another, less-crowded venue that would allow them to extend the run.

They've found it at Fairfax City's Lanier Theater, where I caught up with the production this weekend. While the new site is hardly ideal, there's no question the advance word was accurate. Sharply staged by ACT's artistic director Jack Marshall and engagingly performed by actors whose faces will be fresh even to inveterate D.C. theatergoers, Reginald Rose's 40-year-old script for *Twelve Angry Men* remains a gripping cautionary tale about the vagaries of American justice. This production isn't going to erase anyone's memories of the 1957



Rose's Dozen: *Twelve Angry Men's* jury

film version starring Henry Fonda, but its take on the story is so much more shaded and ambiguous than the movie's that it does offer fans something fresh to chew on. In the '50s, the drama was widely construed as a paean to democracy and the fairness of the jury system. Witnessed in the shadow of the O.J. Simpson trial, it's considerably more troubling.

That's especially true given the plot parallels. In Rose's story, a sequestered jury considers a murder case that involves a history of domestic abuse, a weapon purchased hours before the crime, and a brutal stabbing. The testimony of neighbors who live downstairs and across the street is called into question because they so clearly relish their moment in the spotlight. Racial prejudice, though only glancingly alluded to, clouds the

jury's deliberations. Fortunately, ACT's creative personnel elected to leave the milking of such coincidences to the company's PR department.

What the production milks instead is an intimacy audiences rarely encounter in theatergoing these days—an eyeball-to-eyeball closeness that has lately become the province of television and film rather than the stage. In a way, this means the director is hearkening back to the piece's roots. *Twelve Angry Men* was originally written as a teleplay for "Studio One," a live-performance '50s anthology series for which its claustrophobic one-room setting and heavy reliance on long speeches that practically beg for close-ups made excellent sense. In the theater, close-ups are harder to manage, so Marshall has crammed the audience right up on

the Lanier's proscenium stage with the actors. Roughly 100 people huddle around action that takes place in an area scarcely large enough for a table and 12 juror chairs. Nobody sits in the auditorium but the folks managing the lighting.

All of which means that voices and gestures are pitched at a natural level, and that the evening plays remarkably realistically in its early stages. Patrons will barely see the faces of the jurors sitting on their own side of the table for the first 20 minutes or so—the period when it becomes clear that there are 11 votes to convict, and one very shaky vote, Juror 7, for deliberating further. Fonda's stardom made that independent voice seem central in the movie, but in the script the character is more catalyst than crusader. Perhaps because he had

his back to me, Steve Ferry's abrasively polite Juror 7 didn't seem to be making as much of an impression initially as any of the jurors I could see better—especially John Tweel's deceptively vacillating Juror 5, Bud Pezet's understated, businesslike Juror 4, and Richard Pelzman's blustering Juror 3. This turned out to be a temporary issue: As the deliberations heated up, the director began to match the jury's ideological movement with physical movement, and each of the others came to the fore.

When tempers finally flare and various members of the jury resort to threatening postures and general carousing, the tight quarters markedly increase the tension level. Picture being trapped on a subway car as a minor disagreement develops into a fistfight, and you've about got the picture.

Marshall's staging is naturalistic enough to be all but unnoticeable for most of the intermissionless evening. This is apparently the third time he's directed the play, and his familiarity makes itself felt most clearly in the subtlety he brings to questions of class and background. *Twelve Angry Men* is as much about group dynamics as it is about justice, and Marshall makes sure that the distinctions between these angry men don't evaporate when they start to agree about the legal concept of "reasonable doubt."

Technical aspects of the production are as firm as the acting and directing, with Scott Hartsock's delicate lighting, Linda High's character-establishing costumes, and the nifty rainstorm conjured by Mims Mattair all buttressing the proceedings nicely. Nearly all these folks, both onstage and behind the scenes, hail from the area's nonprofessional stages, which suggests there's a wealth of talent out there the pros haven't been tapping. Coupled with ACT's plan to concentrate on a dramatic niche that is underproduced hereabouts—"classic American plays, teleplays, and scenplays written prior to 1970"—the promise of new faces is a heady one. Few troupes have sprung on the scene lately with so much going for them. **CP**