



DRAMA

12 Angry Men

1957 · Directed by Sidney Lumet

Classical Hollywood

Courtroom Drama

Suspense

Twelve jurors are locked in a sweltering New York jury room to decide the fate of a teenager accused of killing his father. The case looks simple, but a single question is enough to unsettle a room full of strangers. Almost the entire film takes place at one table.

DIRECTOR	Sidney Lumet
YEAR	1957
RUNTIME	1h 37m (97 min)
COUNTRY	USA
GENRES	Drama
CAST	Martin Balsam, John Fiedler, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Jack Klugman
MUSIC	Kenyon Hopkins
IMDB	9.0 / 10 (981,488 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	100% (critics)
METACRITIC	97 / 100
TMDB SCORE	8.6 / 10 (10,424 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): Hulu, fuboTV, MGM+ Amazon Channel, MGM Plus Roku Premium Channel, MGM Plus Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, Spectrum On Demand Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 **Sidney Lumet's debut and the model jury-room drama**

Sidney Lumet's first feature, adapted from Reginald Rose's live television play, set the template that later jury dramas and stage-to-screen adaptations still follow. It launched one of American cinema's most durable careers.

2 **A masterclass in staging one room**

Lumet and cinematographer Boris Kaufman keep a single set tense and varied for the full running time. Camera height, lens choice and blocking steadily tighten the space around the men.

3 **An ensemble where every voice is a person**

Twelve men, most known only by a number, become distinct through speech, posture and temper. The film turns argument itself into suspense, with no chase or courtroom spectacle.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining American film of the live-television generation's move into cinema, and the most influential example of the jury-room drama, proving that talk in one room could sustain a feature.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a study in how the camera can change a single room without ever leaving it.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- Where the camera sits relative to the men's eyes. It starts high and gradually drops, and the ceiling begins to appear in the frame.
- How the men are seated, who stands, who drifts to the window, and who stays apart. Positions in the room signal alliances before anyone says them.
- The details of the room: the heat, the fan, the weather outside. They create pressure as dialogue builds, with almost no music.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Most of these men are never given a name. What does the film make you know about each of them anyway, and how?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Television's shadow:** By 1957 live TV drama was a prestige form in America and drained cinema audiences. Rose's play first aired in 1954 on CBS, and the film grew directly from it.
- **Hollywood's answer:** The studios fought television with colour, widescreen and spectacle, as in *The Ten Commandments* (1956). This film went the opposite way: black and white, one set, no spectacle.
- **Director's moment:** Lumet came from live television and had never directed a feature. Henry Fonda co-produced with Rose, so the film was an independent project built around its actors and its script.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

TRADITION

Golden Age of live television drama

Rose's play and Lumet's directing skills came from 1950s live anthology television, which trained writers and directors in tight, actor-centred drama.



TRADITION

Chamber drama and the well-made stage play

A single location, a limited cast and a plot driven by argument link the film to stage traditions of confined, dialogue-based drama.



FILMMAKER

Boris Kaufman

The cinematographer, who had shot Jean Vigo's films in France and later worked on *On the Waterfront*, brought a disciplined realist visual style to the project.



THIS FILM

12 Angry Men (1957)

NEW AT THE TIME *It brought the intimate, actor-driven tension of live television drama to the big screen and treated a single room as a complete cinematic world.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in Eisenhower-era America, prosperous yet anxious under Cold War suspicion, by a young director from live television in his first feature.

- **Country and moment:** In 1957 the USA was prosperous but fearful of the Cold War. Public debate dwelt on conformity, mistrust of neighbours and the McCarthy-era habit of judging people by suspicion and association.
- **Justice and prejudice:** The film appeared amid anxiety about juvenile delinquency and urban slums, and about prejudice against poor and immigrant communities. It treats jury duty as a civic responsibility, an idea much discussed in American life.
- **Origins in television:** Reginald Rose wrote the story as a 1954 live CBS television play, inspired by his own jury service. Henry Fonda co-produced the film with Rose, and it was made quickly on a small budget.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Sidney Lumet came from stage and live TV drama, and this was his first feature. Its modest commercial returns contrasted with its later reputation as a classic.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Conversation-driven and steadily escalating. It begins calmly and builds through argument, not action. Nothing happens outside the room.
- **Style:** Stage-like but cinematic: long takes, deep focus, tight close-ups and carefully planned blocking within one set.
- **Performance:** Intense ensemble acting, with raised voices and sharp contrasts of temperament. Some delivery is theatrical, in keeping with its television roots.
- **Format:** Black and white, about 97 minutes, in a boxy near-standard frame. English-language, no subtitles needed.
- **Sound:** Dialogue is everything. Music is sparse, so voices, silence and ambient noise carry the mood.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+ SUGGESTED AGE

German FSK rates it 12, while BBFC (PG/U) and France (TP) allow all ages; because it is talky, tense and in black and white, 12 suits watching together.

Official ratings: US NR · UK PG/U · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and teens who enjoy tense, dialogue-driven drama, and families wanting to discuss fairness, justice, responsibility and how people make serious decisions together.
- **May unsettle, intensity:** Heated, shouting arguments and escalating tempers fill almost the whole film, in a cramped room with a growing sense of pressure.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** A murder trial with the death penalty at stake; the film discusses violence and a young person's life hanging in the balance.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Some characters voice prejudiced views about people from poor neighbourhoods, and the cast is entirely male and white.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Nearly all of it takes place in one room, in black and white, relying on talk rather than action.
- **Explain first:** The story centres on a jury: twelve citizens must reach a unanimous verdict in a criminal trial, and the outcome carries serious consequences.
- **Explain first:** It is a black-and-white film from 1957, set almost entirely in one room, so expect conversation rather than action.
- **Explain first:** Prejudice is part of the story; some characters speak with bias, and the film invites viewers to notice and question it.

Talk about it after: *When a group of people must make an important decision together, what helps them judge fairly, and what can get in the way?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how a verdict depends on the people reaching it. It can be read as a study of reasonable doubt as a moral discipline: the willingness to slow down, question comfortable certainty and look at one's own prejudices.

THEMES

- **Reasonable doubt as duty:** Doubt is presented not as obstruction but as the responsibility the law places on jurors. The film values the patience to question a case that seems finished.
- **Prejudice disguised as judgment:** Several jurors bring class, ethnic and personal bias into the room. The drama is in watching those biases pass as common sense until they are named.
- **Conformity and courage:** The first vote shows how easily a group settles for agreement. Standing alone, and then being joined, is treated as a civic act.
- **Personal wounds in public decisions:** One juror's private history shapes his stance on the case. The film shows how emotion can hide behind a claim to be objective.
- **Democracy in a small room:** Twelve strangers of different backgrounds must reach a unanimous decision by talking. The jury room works as a model of a deliberative society.

Key scenes

The first vote and the lone hand

It sets up the film's engine: eleven votes against one. Lumet lets the camera linger on who raises a hand and who hesitates, so the group's psychology is visible before the argument begins.

The switchblade demonstration

The case becomes a physical, testable puzzle. The scene shows the film's method: evidence is re-examined by looking, doing and questioning, and certainty begins to dissolve.

The walkout on the bigoted speech

Prejudice is exposed and the room visibly turns against it. Blocking does the work, as jurors turn their backs one by one. It is the moral centre of the film.

The final holdout

Argument gives way to something more personal, and the lowered camera and tight framing push the pressure to its peak. It shows how reasoning and emotion cannot be separated.

Filmmaking

- **Camera height and lenses:** Lumet has described shooting the first part above eye level with wider lenses, then lower and with longer lenses, so the room seems to shrink and the ceiling closes in. The effect builds without drawing attention.
- **Blocking:** Movement around the table is choreographed so that the twelve men form shifting groups. Where a man sits or stands often says more than his lines, and the camera follows these changes.
- **Cinematography:** Boris Kaufman's black-and-white photography uses deep focus to keep several jurors in view at once, and tight close-ups to isolate individuals in the most tense moments. The light grows harsher and more oppressive as the afternoon wears on.
- **Script structure:** Rose's screenplay reveals character through argument. Each juror's reasoning exposes who he is, and the case unfolds as a sequence of doubts, each leading to the next.
- **Performance:** The actors range from restrained to explosive. Henry Fonda plays the quiet centre, and Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall and the others provide opposing temperaments, so conflict is also a contrast in acting styles.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Twelve jurors retire to a hot, bare room in a New York courthouse after a murder trial. A teenage boy from a slum is accused of stabbing his father, and the death penalty is mandatory on conviction. The first vote is eleven to one for guilty. The single dissenter, Juror 8, does not claim the boy is innocent. He says only that a life is at stake and the matter deserves discussion.

Over the following hours he picks at the evidence. The knife is shown to be less unusual than the prosecution claimed. The old man who says he heard the killing and saw the boy flee is tested on how long he could have taken to reach his door. The woman across the street who says she saw the stabbing through a passing train is questioned on whether she could have seen it at all. One by one, jurors change their votes, some from conviction, others from irritation with their neighbours.

The room is also a stage for bias. One juror denounces people from the boy's neighbourhood, and the others turn their backs on him. Another is revealed to be reasoning from his own estrangement from his son. As the storm breaks outside, the last holdout collapses in tears and votes not guilty. The verdict is unanimous.

The men leave without ceremony. Juror 8 and the elderly Juror 9 exchange names on the courthouse steps and go their separate ways.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **From live television:** Reginald Rose wrote the story after serving on a jury himself. It aired live on CBS's Studio One in 1954, directed by Franklin Schaffner, before Rose adapted it for the cinema.
- **Fonda as producer:** Henry Fonda co-produced with Rose, and put his own money into the project. Fonda took on Juror 8, the part that anchors the whole film.

- **A debut under pressure:** Lumet had directed hundreds of television episodes but no features. He rehearsed the cast for about two weeks, almost like a stage play, before filming began, and the shoot was completed in a few weeks.
- **Narrowing the room:** Lumet planned the lens and camera-height strategy in advance so the room would feel increasingly confined. He described the approach in his book *Making Movies*.
- **Myth:** It was a hit and won the Oscars it was nominated for. **Reality:** It earned Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Director and Adapted Screenplay but won none, and its original theatrical run was commercially modest. Its reputation grew through later television showings and classroom use.
- **Myth:** It plays out in real time, exactly as the jurors experience it. **Reality:** The action is continuous and roughly matches the film's running time, but it is not strictly real time. Time is compressed in places, and the changing light and weather show the afternoon passing.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

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THIS FILM

12 Angry Men (1957)



FILM

12 (2007)

Nikita Mikhalkov's Russian reworking moves the jury room to a school gym and applies the same structure to post-Soviet society.



FILMMAKER

Sidney Lumet

The film opened a career of New York dramas about institutions and conscience, including *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Network* and *The Verdict*.



TRADITION

Single-location dialogue drama

Later films built on one room and a ticking argument, in both courtroom stories and ensemble chamber pieces, follow its example.

Reception and reputation

Critics respected the film at release for its script and acting, but it did not draw large audiences, since it ran against the colour and widescreen spectacles then filling cinemas. It was a modest commercial disappointment despite its Oscar nominations, and its audience grew over later years.

It is now widely regarded as one of the great American films of its decade and a staple of classrooms in film, law and civics. Its confident economy is often held up as proof that a strong script and cast can outweigh scale.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 3 nominations (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay), no wins.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Courtroom shorthand:** The title is a common shorthand for jury deliberation and for the lone holdout who insists on "reasonable doubt". Henry Fonda's Juror 8 is a widely recognised model of the quiet, principled dissenter.
- **Classroom staple:** The film is regularly used in teaching on law, ethics, group decision-making and persuasion. Business and communication courses use it to study conflict, prejudice and how a minority can shift a group's view.
- **Stage afterlife:** Reginald Rose's script began as a 1954 live television play and became a stage perennial for schools and community theatres. Gender-neutral and all-female versions exist, including Twelve Angry Women and Twelve Angry Jurors.
- **Global adaptations and parodies:** The premise has been reworked in other cultures, notably the Hindi film Ek Ruka Hua Faisla (1986) and the Japanese comedy Twelve Gentle Japanese (1991). Its single-room jury setup is also a frequent target of TV parody.

Its lasting influence

It established the jury-room drama as a genre and a model for single-location dialogue films. It has been remade for television by William Friedkin (1997) and reimagined in Nikita Mikhalkov's 12 (2007), and it began Lumet's career of New York-set moral dramas.

WHAT NEXT?

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Rashomon (1950)

Also about the unreliability of testimony and the struggle to establish what really happened, but told through conflicting flashbacks rather than a single room of debate.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

Rear Window (1954)

Hitchcock builds an entire thriller in one apartment and one point of view, another study of how confinement and looking create tension.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Anatomy of a Murder (1959) **COMING SOON**

Otto Preminger's courtroom drama appeared two years later and shows a very different, more ambiguous approach to law, testimony and truth.

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Dog Day Afternoon (1975) **COMING SOON**

Lumet's 1970s New York drama shows how his realism and actor-focused direction developed into a larger, more volatile ensemble piece.

FULL CAST AND CREW

**Sidney Lumet**

DIRECTOR

**Martin Balsam**

ACTOR

as Juror 1

**John Fiedler**

ACTOR

as Juror 2

**Lee J. Cobb**

ACTOR

as Juror 3

**E.G. Marshall**

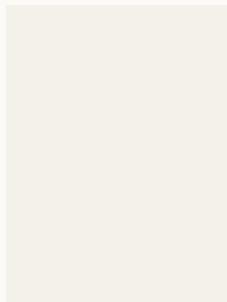
ACTOR

as Juror 4

**Jack Klugman**

ACTOR

as Juror 5

**Kenyon Hopkins**

COMPOSER

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