

SIDNEY LUMET: A SOCIALLY-CONSCIOUS FILMMAKER



American filmmaker **Sidney Lumet** (1954-2011) worked in the entertainment industry throughout his life. Born in New York City, he performed on stage before playing in the film *One Third of a Nation* in 1939. After serving in the US army during WWII, he taught drama at the High School of Performing Arts in NYC. He then worked as a TV assistant director for CBS from 1950 to 1957 when he was asked both by scriptwriter Reginald Rose and famous actor Henry Fonda to direct a film adaptation of the CBS teleplay *Twelve Angry Men*. Sidney Lumet's concern with justice and progressive politics shows through each one of his other films which stage characters struggling with moral or emotional conflicts.

12 Angry Men: A Portrait of the 1950s

Because [*12 Angry Men*] was released in the decade when the Civil Rights Movement was born, it becomes all the more important in portraying racial prejudices in white America. This movie was also released after the pandemonium of McCarthyism had reached its height and shows that the true threat to America's democracy is its very own citizens. Therefore, this film is also a warning to American citizens not to evade their responsibilities or it may threaten the very foundation of our democracy.

andthatsthe wayitwasinamericanhistory.blogspot.com, 2013

► Read the film reviews about *12 Angry Men* and pick out elements to fill in the mind map.

“Reginald Rose’s excellent film elaboration of his fine television play of 1954, which arrived at the Capitol Saturday, is a penetrating, sensitive and sometimes shocking dissection of the hearts and minds of men who obviously are something less than gods. It makes for taut, absorbing and compelling drama that reaches far beyond the close confines of its jury room setting.”

A.H. Weiler, “Screen: ‘12 Angry Men’; Jury Room Drama Has Debut at Capitol”, *The New York Times*, 1957

“Fonda’s integrity illuminates the film, which benefits immeasurably from debut director Sidney Lumet’s masterly sense of cinema: the action takes place on a single claustrophobic set (an actual New York jury room), yet Lumet finds an infinite variety of visual set-ups and angles within the confines.”

Tony Sloman, *Radio Times*

“*12 Angry Men* is a powerful, historical film that brings to light the American justice system AND yet also examines deeply the intimate ways we relate to each other in our everyday lives. Nearly 50 years after its creation it remains a vital and critical piece of American cinema.”

Richard Propes, *theindependentcritic.com*

“Henry Fonda gives his most forceful portrayal in years as the open-minded juror whose logical reasoning implants facts and doubts into the minds of his colleagues so that they finally change their vote to “not guilty”. In being strikingly emotional he is both natural and effective.”

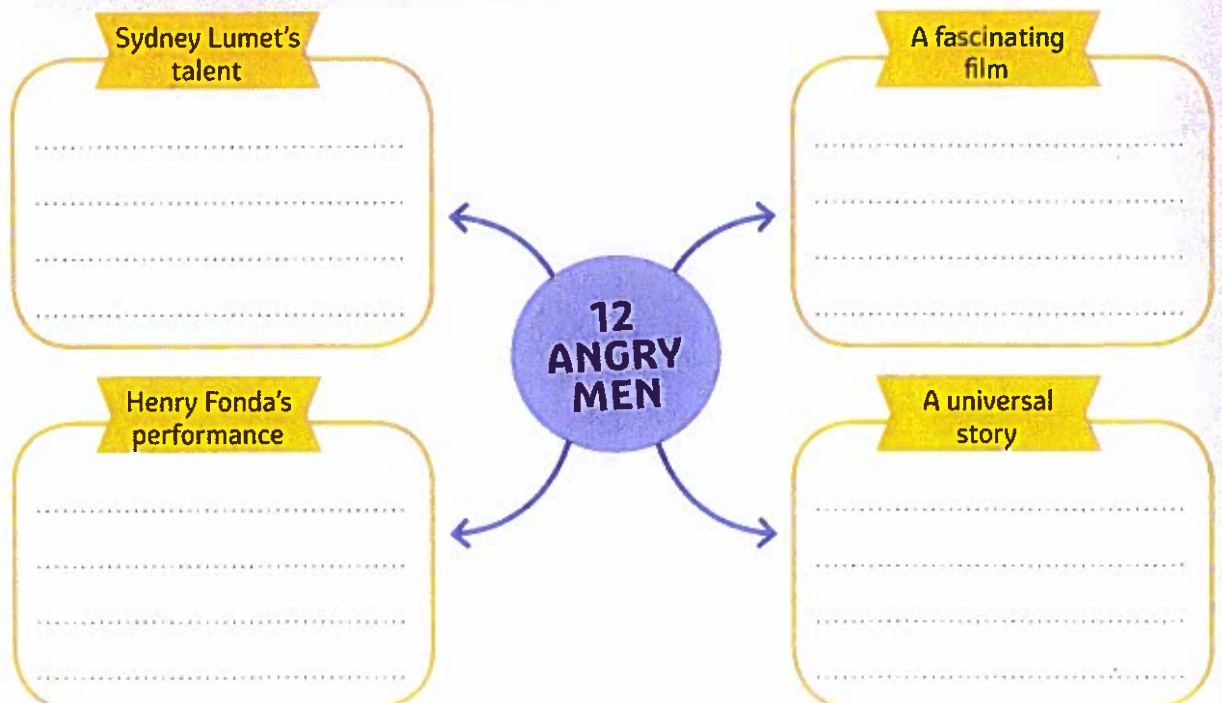
A.H. Weiler, “Screen: ‘12 Angry Men’; Jury Room Drama Has Debut at Capitol”, *The New York Times*, 1957

Lumet’s origins as a director of teledrama may well be obvious here in his first film, but there is no denying the suitability of his style – sweaty close-ups, gritty monochrome ‘realism’, one-set claustrophobia – to his subject.”

Time Out

“There is no question. Every single person who lives and functions in a modern society needs to watch this film. Although made over 50 years ago and in black and white, this film, and its characters, have a striking relevance to the world of today.”

deepfilmanalysis.wordpress.com, 2016



FOCUS ON... Tenement housing in New York City

The different waves of immigration in the United States, throughout the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, caused the population of NYC to double every decade. As a result, landlords converted single-family units into multiple-occupancy buildings where large families lived in crowded rooms of 325 square feet (30 m²) in average.

The living conditions in the city's slums were horrendous due to the lack of toilets, running water, ventilation and space. Despite several Housing Acts, the situation did not really improve until the first public housing project in 1936. Poverty, disease, death and crime plagued these deprived areas and fed environmental determinism theories according to which the inhabitants of tenements were conditioned by their environment.



FOCUS ON... The el train

New York City's subway has not always been an underground transport system. The first railway train to go through the city in 1878 ran on an elevated rail line. The first elevated trains, also called "els", were pulled by large and steaming locomotives. Their noise and smoke filled the streets which were all the darker as the train blocked out the sunlight. Most of these tracks were taken down in the 1940s and replaced with underground lines. Part of them can still be seen in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx.



FOCUS ON... Prejudice in the 1950s

Despite the booming post-war economy, the 1950s were marked by feelings of anxiety fueled by prejudice against certain social or ethnic groups.

Within the context of the Cold War Americans grew more and more alarmed about Communism in the USA and suspicions of national treason increased in the midst of McCarthyism.

Racial issues were at the heart of growing social unrest. The Civil Rights Movement gained momentum as racial inequality and discrimination against African-Americans triggered strong reactions within the American society.

Immigrants were also victims of prejudice - they were considered racially inferior, likely to commit violent crimes and unable to assimilate. In the 1950s several measures contributed to reinforcing discrimination against immigrants. The McCarran Walter Act (1952) tightened quotas for immigrants, and allowed deportation of immigrants for "subversive activities," as part of the Cold War McCarthyism.

FOCUS ON... "A new kind of man"

Materialism, technological progress, suburban life and uniformity are some of the key words that have been used to describe the American society in the 1950s. Once World War II was over, traditional roles were reaffirmed and a sense of conformity was established. Television contributed to reinforcing the importance of peer-group expectations, a behaviour described by sociologist David Riesman as "other-directed" in his book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). A new kind of man was born, an "other-directed" man (as opposed to "inner directed"), defining himself in terms of the opinions and goals of others. In the context of a booming post-war economy, material success came to be the ultimate goal among workers and employees who tended to dress alike and organise their lives in similar ways.

FOCUS ON... Going to the movies in the 1950s

The 1950s were part of Hollywood's "Golden Era" and going to the movie theatre was very popular in the USA. Spectators would watch **double-feature programmes**, that is to say two films for one single admission. **First features** were followed by **second features** (also called B-movies) which were low-budget and less successful films.



FOCUS ON... Courtroom dramas

The American Film Institute (AFI) defines a courtroom drama as "a genre of film in which a **system of justice** plays a critical role in the film's narrative."

The very title of *Falsely Accused* (1908), the film which gave birth to the genre, points to the essence of courtroom stories: a **moral dilemma** involving a **crime and legal procedures**. If the plot is not necessarily set inside a courthouse (hence the use of the broader name "legal drama"), it is focused on law enforcement and tackles issues such as murder, betrayal, deception or injustice.

Most of these films are based on **real facts** and reflect the **political context** of their times. Some of their key components (and the secret of their success) are thrilling one-on-one conflicts, suspenseful scenes, emotional speeches, sharp dialogues and all sorts of plot twists.



FOCUS ON... Evidence

Two types of evidence are produced during a trial:

- **direct evidence**: eyewitnesses' testimonies, confessions or weapons.
- **circumstantial evidence**: elements which refer to a fact indirectly such as a testimony suggesting a link with a crime or physical evidence pointing to criminal activity.

Evidence can be given either in **oral testimonies** or **physical exhibits** (fingerprints, test results, etc.).

FOCUS ON... The burden of proof

The burden of proof is the **obligation to prove or disprove contested facts**. In criminal cases, the **prosecution** "has the burden of proof", which means that it is up to the prosecutor to convince the jury that the accused is guilty.

The burden of proof consists of two distinct requirements: the burden of **production** and the burden of **persuasion**.

The prosecution is required to **provide clear and convincing evidence** and to **establish the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt**.

FOCUS ON... The defense attorney

The defense attorney is above all the **defender of the accused's interests**. The communications between the accused and the defense lawyer are confidential. Contrary to the prosecutor, the defense lawyer may withhold facts about the case. Among other things, his or her role is to **collect information about the case** and assess it thoroughly, **give advice** to the defendant and **elaborate a defense strategy** by analysing carefully the situation and identifying flaws or inconsistencies in the prosecution's case. During the trial, the defense attorney may **question the validity of the evidence** produced by the prosecution and **cross-examine the witnesses**.

At the end of the trial, he is the last one to **present closing arguments** by answering the prosecution's statements, pointing out defects in the case and mentioning facts in favour of the defendant.