

Reginald Rose and the Journey of 12 Angry Men

By HON. HENRY S. COHN

Author Phil Rosenzweig has released a new book, *Reginald Rose and the Journey of 12 Angry Men*. Rosenzweig holds a Ph.D from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and is currently a professor of business administration in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The book is the first complete biography of Reginald Rose (1920-2002), a scriptwriter, who lived for many years in Fairfield County. He was an army veteran, having served in World War II, worked for an advertising firm, and then began to submit scripts to television networks. His freelancing was successful and led to a fulltime position with CBS. Rose wrote during what has been called "the golden age of television," the 1950s and early 1960s. He was the father of four sons from his first marriage and two sons from his second.

Unlike his friends Rod Serling, who made his mark with *The Twilight Zone*, and Paddy Chayefsky, who wrote dramas on the family, such as the Academy Award winning *Marty*, Rose concentrated on civil and union rights. One of the most famous television series that he wrote and also produced was *The Defenders* (1961-1965). The show, winner of two Emmys, concerned tensions at a father-son law firm. It raised issues of legal ethics and controversies over mercy killings, the death penalty, mental illness and abortion. Atypically for the times, Rose was supported by television executives as well as commercial sponsors.

Rosenzweig's biography focuses in great detail on Rose's most famous production,

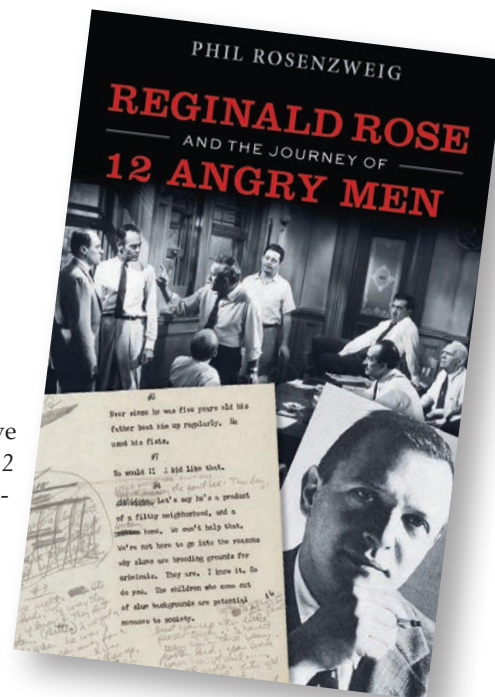
12 Angry Men. A number of people have told me over the years that viewing *12 Angry Men* led to their choosing a career in the law.

Rose wrote his script for the live television show Studio One. It aired in September 1954 and received high critical acclaim. The drama pictured only one portion of a criminal trial: 12 jurors, spending a sweltering afternoon, deliberating over a murder case where juror eight is the sole holdout for acquittal.

The movie's strength was the personal interactions between the jurors as they reach their verdict. Their discussions raise issues of racism, bias against immigrants and fair treatment of juvenile offenders.

While Robert Cummings played juror eight in the television play, Henry Fonda, who had just finished portraying the accused in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*, joined with Rose to bring the script to the screen. In the movie, Fonda plays juror eight. Rosenzweig spends several chapters of his book to explain how the television script was modified for the movie and how the actors were selected.

Rosenzweig provides interesting details about the filming. The movie was not filmed in an actual jury room; rather, a set was created to model a dusty, old jury room, including windows that were difficult to open and a fan that did not function. During deliberations, a rainstorm occurs, and Rosenzweig explains the technology behind what appears to be a violent storm.



When the movie premiered in the spring of 1957, it opened with much publicity at what was then one of New York City's finest theaters, the Capitol. Unfortunately, box office revenues were poor and the Capitol and other theaters only attracted small audiences. It was difficult for people to sit through a black and white movie about twelve men arguing about the outcome of a trial. Moviegoers were attracted to *The Ten Commandments*, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and *Around the World in 80 Days*, issued at the same time.

The American public made a mistake. European audiences and critics applauded the film and it won a best picture honor in Berlin. With permission, movies were produced worldwide based on the plot of *12 Angry Men*. Gradually, it was seen by viewers in this country, as well, as a movie classic about the triumph of the American judicial system. The movie was praised by the late Chief Justice of the New York Court of Appeals, Judith Kaye, and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. After all, as these justices recognized, the jury system is the essence of our democracy. ■

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