National Film Registry 2007

Directed by Sidney Lumet
Story and screenplay by Reginald Rose
Produced by Henry Fonda and Reginald Rose
Original Music by Kenyon Hopkins
Cinematography by Boris Kaufman
Film Editing by Carl Lerner
Art Direction by Bob Markel

Martin Balsam… Juror #1
John Fiedler… Juror #2
Lee J. Cobb… Juror #3
E.G. Marshall… Juror #4
Jack Klugman… Juror #5
Edward Binns… Juror #6
Jack Warden… Juror #7
Henry Fonda… Juror #8
Joseph Sweeney… Juror #9
Ed Begley… Juror #10
George Voskovec… Juror #11
Robert Webber… Juror #12

Rudy Bond… Judge (uncredited)
James Kelly… Guard (uncredited)
Billy Nelson… Court Clerk (uncredited)
John Savoca… The Accused (uncredited)


12 Angry Men, and1951-1954 “Tom Corbett, Space Cadet.”

1945 “The Trap”, 1949

E.G. MARSHALL… Juror #4

JACK KLUGMAN… Juror #5

EDWARD BINS… Juror #6


American director and producer, born in Philadelphia, one of the two children of Polish-born parents, Baruch Lumet and the former Eugenia Wermus. Both parents were actors who had begun their career in Poland, gone to England, and then emigrated to the United States. In 1926 Baruch Lumet joined Maurice Schwartz’s Company at the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City, subsequently appearing at other theatres on and off Broadway, until in 1939 he devised his own one-man show, “Monotheatre Varieties.” For seven years he toured with this throughout North America, and he has also appeared on television and in films, including several of his son’s. Baruch Lumet was director of the Dallas Institute of Performing Arts in 1953-1960, and in 1975 wrote and starred in a play called Autumn Fever.

The family moved from Philadelphia to New York when Baruch Lumet joined the Yiddish Art Theatre, and Sidney Lumet grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Brooklyn. He had his own acting debut at the Yiddish Art Theatre at the age of five, and other roles followed there and in radio shows. For two years during the Depression (1931-1932) he appeared in a Yiddish radio serial called The Rabbi From Brownsville. “My father wrote and directed the show and acted the leading man and the grandfather,” Lumet says. “My mother was the leading lady, and I played the son. All together, our weekly salary came to $35.”

Sidney Lumet first appeared on Broadway at the age of eleven, in Dead End (1935), by Sidney Kingsley, a family friend.
He was too young and too small to play one of the Dead End Kids, and Kingsley wrote a part especially for him. Dead End was a notable example of 1930s theatrical realism—a style which, as Lumet acknowledges, permanently influenced his own work as a director.

A year or so later, Lumet had his first important role as the young Jesus Christ in Max Reinhardt’s production of The Eternal Road (1937). His performance attracted attention and a string of Broadway parts, including one in a play called One Third of a Nation (1939), an indictment of slum landlords that was filmed the same year. Lumet appeared in a second experiment in “canned theatre” the following year, giving another impersonation of Jesus Christ as a boy in a filmed record of Maxwell Anderson’s stage play Journey to Jerusalem. “I loved being a child actor,” Lumet says. “I had ten rather marvelous years and it kept me off the streets.” Screen acting was a different matter, however; “That glass has a psychic and spiritual thing about it. The third eye. It’s going to see something you don’t want seen. I knew then that I could never be a really good [film] actor.”

Like many New York juvenile actors, Lumet was educated at Professional Children’s School. In 1942 he began a Columbia University extension course on dramatic literature, but dropped out after a term to enlist in the Army Signal Corps. The United States had just entered World War II and Lumet “felt very passionately about the war, very committed.” He saw service as a radio repairman in India and Burma.

After the war Lumet returned to the New York stage. In 1947, irritated by the pretensions of the newly formed Actors Studio, he founded an off-Broadway acting group of his own. The company had no director and Lumet drifted into this role, staging an assortment of noncommercial plays that were generally presented free except for contributions. At the same time Lumet scratched a living as a teacher of acting at the High School for Performing Arts and by taking occasional paid roles (including a well-received one in Arthur Goodman’s experimental play Seeds in the Wind).

In 1950 Lumet’s friend Yul Brynner, then a staff director with CBS-TV, invited him to join the network as an assistant director. He signed up the same day as Robert Mulligan. A year later, promoted to staff director, Lumet went to work on the Danger series, directing about 150 episodes between 1951 and 1953 and contributing to the I Remember Mama and You Are There series as well. He claims that “the split concentration it took was not as brutal as it sounds. It was a great training ground…. It would take twenty films to learn what I learned from on-the-spot television.”

Beginning in 1953, Lumet also began to direct original plays for Playhouse 90, Kraft Television Theatre, and Studio One. In all, apart from the series work he continued to do, he filmed about two hundred teleplays during the “golden age” of American television, establishing himself as one of the most productive and respected directors in the business. He also took time out to direct for the theatre, staging productions of Shaw’s The Doctor’s Dilemma (1955) and Arch Oboler’s science-fiction drama Night of the Auk (1956).

By this time, the tremendous success of the motion picture Marty (1955), originally written for television by Paddy Chayefsky, and made by the television director Delbert Mann, had convinced Hollywood that there was a future in films of this sort—small scale (and low-budget) works of social realism, modeled on the television play. A good deal of talent was seduced away from television to the big screen in the second half of the 1950s, and had a powerful influence—for good and bad—on the development of the cinema.

Lumet’s own first feature was Twelve Angry Men (1957), based on a play by Reginald Rose that had already been filmed for television by Franklin Schaffner. The movie studies a jury of twelve men who have to decide on the guilt or innocence of a youth accused of murdering his father. At the outset, all the jurors but one believe that the boy is guilty, but in the course of a long hot day of discussion and argument this stubborn individual (Henry Fonda) brings the others around, one by one, to an acknowledgement of “reasonable doubt.” In the process, we come to know very well the qualities and prejudices of the twelve. An exceptionally talented cast was assembled to play the jurors, among them Jack Warden, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Ed Begley, Martin Balsam, Jack Klugman, and Robert Webber. Lumet made no attempt to “open up” the television play and shot almost the entire film in the jury room, where he made 385 set-ups. He saw in this claustrophobic setting an added source of tension, and he has explained how he and Boris Kaufman (the cinematographer of all his early films) set out to “restrict it more and more from a visual point of view. As the film went on I used longer and longer lenses so that the ceiling became closer to the heads, the walls became closer to the chairs…. This was all achieved between the choices of the lenses and the lighting.” Made in nineteen days at a cost of $343,000 Lumet’s first movie brought him an Oscar nomination and the Directors Guild award and took the Golden Bear (the main prize) at Berlin. In his article on Lumet in Film Quarterly (Winter 1967-1968), Graham Petrie writes that “the ‘message’ of the play, which survives into the film, now seems to many people dated and obvious, though it is worth remembering that the film offers no assumptions either way as to the guilt of the boy on trial….The structure of the film is made up of a series of small encounters, between individuals and groups, where the clash of personalities builds up to a climax, then relapses into lethargy or muted triumph. The rhythm of these encounters is carefully correlated with out increasing awareness of the spatial restrictions of the jury room, from which there is no escape until agreement is reached, and the reminders of the outside world during the pauses of slackened tension. The camera continually underlines the moral tensions of the situation, moving in to close-
up as an individual is forced to come to terms with his own beliefs and prejudices, isolating the various conflicting groups in medium shot, slipping back to long-shot as the men relax in exhaustion after each encounter. It is through a brilliant manipulation of this kind of cinematic rhythm that Lumet obtains his effects, creating an unforgettable atmosphere of tension, hatred, fear, prejudice, and exhaustion.

Discussing his transition from television to the feature film, Lumet has said that for him the adjustment was primarily an aesthetic one: “Technically I was totally prepared by the time I hit my first movie….The biggest adjustment I had to make—and it took me many years to learn this—was the adjustment of scale—the size of the picture. Moving from a seventeen-inch piece of glass to a thirty-five foot screen meant that a story had to be told in an entirely different way….The lenses remained the same, but the frame is so much more dynamic, accomplishes so much more for you so much more quickly.” Not that Lumet had sundered his links with television. In 1958 he directed three notable and much-praised productions for Kraft Television Theatre—a trilogy of short plays by Tennessee Williams, an adaptation of Hemingway’s “Fifty Grand,” and one of Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men.

Lumet’s next feature film (produced, like his first, by Henry Fonda) was Stage Struck (1958), an updating of the 1933 Katharine Hepburn hit Morning Glory about a New England girl pursuing glory on Broadway, herself pursued by Fonda and Christopher Plummer. Most critics found Susan Strasberg an inadequate substitute for Hepburn and the movie was a flop, as was That Kind of Woman (1958), a romance in which Sophia Loren has to choose between handsome Tab Hunter and rich George Sanders. That Kind of Woman was scored and edited in Hollywood but, like most of Lumet’s films, shot in New York. Indeed, Lumet accepted a number of unpromising assignments in his early days as a director simply because they could be filmed in locations outside Hollywood, which he has frequently excoriated as “a company town…not fit for human habitation” and totally divorced from real life, where a director faces both studio interference and inflated production costs. He and Elia Kazan have both gone to considerable lengths to promote New York as an alternative filmmaking center.

Even The Fugitive Kind (1960) was shot in a Bronx studio and on location in upstate New York, though it is ostensibly set in a small town in Mississippi. This adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play Orpheus Descending stars Marlon Brando as Val Xavier, the nightclub guitarist who drifts into Two Rivers and an ultimately disastrous affair with Lady (Anna Magnani), wife of the local storekeeper. …

The director returned for a while to the theatre and television—a spectacular Broadway production of Albert Camus’ play Caligula; a docu-drama for NBC-TV about Sacco and Vanzetti; and his famous Emmy-winning four-hour television version of Eugene O’Neill’s The Iceman Cometh, with Jason Robards Jr. in the lead. Jack Gould called it “a moment of enrichment and excitement unparalleled in the medium’s thirteen years.”

After four more productions for NBC’s Play of the Week, Lumet made another feature adapted from a stage play, Arthur Miller’s A View From the Bridge, scripted by Norman Rosten….As with The Fugitive Kind, Lumet stressed the

naturalistic aspects of the story, playing down Miller’s allusions to classical tragedy. Again, the film failed to recover its costs, though it had a generally respectful critical reception. Isabel Quigley wrote that “Sidney Lumet, who was one of the white hopes of American outburst of realism in the cinema a few years ago…has done an interesting job….It could, of course, have turned into a very different sort of film, but Lumet, above all an honest and unfrilly director, has the temperament to dampen rather than fan hysteria and frightfulness, to give a feeling of enclosure and concentration to make tragedy domestic.”

Lumet repeats the trick in his screen version of Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night (1962), shot almost entirely in the living room of the Tyrones’ house in Connecticut. Ralph Richardson plays the fading actor James Tyrone, Katherine Hepburn, his drug-addicted wife Mary, Jason Robards Jr. his alcoholic son Edmund. This notable cast worked on a percentage basis, and the film was made for less than $500,000.

All four principals shared acting honors at Cannes. And Lumet received another Directors Guild award. Few of his films have been so hotly debated by the critics. Many of them thought it no more than “canned theater,” and John Simon called it a work of “monumental but pedestrian veneration,” saying that “when, at the very end, Lumet permits himself some fancy, though old-fashioned camera movements, his endlessly receding camera…merely draws attention to unresolved incompatibilities between two art forms.”

Lumet himself, on the other hand, regards this as the best of all his films, and he has defended it vigorously, saying of his critics that “all their eyes were capable of seeing was scenery” they didn’t know cinema technique from a hole in the wall. There was more sheer physical technique in that movie, in its editing and camerawork than anything you are likely to see for twenty years.”

Graham Petrie shares Lumet’s view of the film. And has explained why in some detail in his Film Quarterly article, saying that the director had “found the exact cinematic equivalent for the dramatic world created by O’Neill….The camera moves freely when required, but he is not afraid to film many of the speeches from a purely static set-up, with the result that the camera is never a distraction from… the language….Instead Lumet uses the camera to underline the emotional tone of the dialogue, isolating the characters from one another through close-ups, joining them together for brief moments of harmony and understanding, distancing them and studying them dispassionately during the pauses of drained and exhausted vitality…even without dialogue. One could follow the emotional progress of the film, and catch the emotional tone, simply from the way in which the camera moves among the characters….It is this restrained and intelligent use of cinematic resources which makes Long Day’s Journey Into Night Lumet’s best film, and one of the greatest films of the …decade.”

In the early 1960s, however, Lumet’s reputation was still far from secure, and his next film, Fail Safe (1964), about the threat of accidental nuclear war, was overwhelmed by the success of Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (perhaps unfairly—some thought Fail Safe, in its documentary sobriety, a more telling warning than the audaciously witty Strangelove), Then Lumet’s long run of misfortune and semi-failure ended (to his own astonishment) with his adaptation of a somber novel by Edward Lewis Wallant, The Pawnbroker, which Lumet took over only two weeks before shooting began.
The pawnbroker of the title is Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), a Jewish immigrant who is morally numbed by suffering and the guilt he feels as the only member of his family to escape death in the Nazi camps. His pawnshop in Spanish Harlem is a front for the illegal activities of a black exploiter of the poor, but Nazerman, isolated in his own misery, is beyond compassion for the “scum rejects” around him. Then gradually, long-stifled memories of the past begin to stir in him, and with them a recognition that the suffering of this “scum” is not so different from the suffering of his own wife and children in Auschwitz. The film ends with Nazerman returning painfully to life.

There were critics who greatly disliked The Pawnbroker, seeing it as a collection of liberal platitudes rendered dishonest by the flashiness of the film’s style. Many admired it, however, and it enjoyed great commercial success. Rod Steiger received acting awards in both Britain and Germany, and Lumet the British Film Academy’s award as best director of the year. The Hill (1965) was shot partly in Spain, partly at MGM Studios in England, with an almost entirely British cast. An at least superficially different world is explored in The Group (1966), based on Mary McCarthy’s novel about eight Vassar graduates, set in New York during the Depression. The movie did better commercially than it did critically.

Lumet went back to England for the filming of The Deadly Affair (1967), the first picture he produced as well as directed. For this adaptation of John Le Carré’s somberly realistic spy-thriller Call for the Dead Lumet would have liked to shoot in black and white but bowed to the industry’s insistence that color was de rigueur for a major movie. Instead, he and his cinematographer Freddie Young worked out a technique called “pre-flashing”—muting the colors be pre-exposing the negative. The film was generally admired for this and for the performances of a fine cast that included James Mason, Simone Signoret, Maximilian Schell, Harriet Anderson, and Harry Andrews.

Four of the stars of The Deadly Affair were reunited in The Sea Gull—Mason, Signoret, David Warner, and Harry Andrews—but in spite of this impressive cast, most critics found it a lumbering interpretation of Chekov’s play. And again Lumet seemed to be caught in such a rigid pattern of failure that critics began to prophesy the end of his intermittently brilliant career. The Appointment (1969), a “flimsy love story” with Omar Sharif and Anouk Aimée, was received with derision at Cannes, and Last of the Mobile Hot-Shots (adapted by Gore Vidal from a play by Tennessee Williams), was another commercial and critical flop.

The Anderson Tapes (1971) starring Sean Connery…[was] a brief recovery….Lumet’s reputation slumped again with Child’s Play (1972) and The Offense (1973), both adaptations of stage plays. And then came Serpico (1974), in which the director again demonstrated his extraordinary capacity for self-renewal. Serpico was based on Peter Maas’ best-selling biography of an idealistic young New York policeman who found himself a pariah in the NYPD because he refused to take bribes, blew the whistle on corrupt colleagues and superiors, and set in motion the processes that led to the Knapp Commission and a major shake-up of the entire Department. Along the way Serpico sacrificed his career, his girl, and almost his life, ending up as an almost saint-like loner. He is played in the film by Al Pacino, and Lumet had the benefit of an excellent script by Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler.

But Serpico, as Kael said, was “a big, big hit” and, after the unsuccessful Lovin’ Molly (1974), Lumet had another one in Murder on the Orient Express (1974), his star-studded adaptation of Agatha Christie’s 1930s thriller, with Albert Finney as Hercules Poirot. This immensely enjoyable movie, the most ambitious British production in years, was nominated for six Oscars, collected one (Ingrid Bergman as best supporting actress) and made a lot of money.

The vast majority of Lumet’s films have been literary or theatrical adaptations but he had an original script (by Frank Pierson) for Dog Day Afternoon (1975)….

A number of critics preferred Dog Day Afternoon even to Serpico, finding it richer both in its characterization and in its social implications. Vincent Canby thought it “not only the most accurate, most flamboyant of Sidney Lumet’s New York movies…it is the best film he has ever made, with the exception of A Long Day’s Journey Into Night…full of thoughts, feelings, and questions about the quality of a certain kind of urban civilization.”

The Lumet juggernaut rolled on with Network (1976), his greatest commercial success. Scripted by Paddy Chayefsky, it centers on Howard Beale (Peter Finch), a fading TV anchorman who leaps to fame when he threatens public suicide and goes on to become a national institution—“a latter-day denouncing the hypocrisies of our time.” So long as his ratings remain high, he is treasured by the power-hungry network executives (Faye Dunaway, Robert Duvall, Ned Beatty), but as he becomes increasingly deranged and his public ravings take an unpopular turn, he forfeits his value as a pawn in their power plays, and is thrown (almost literally) to the lions.

Network won Oscars for Faye Dunaway and Finch, for Beatrice Straight as best supporting actress, and for Chayefsky, as well as nominations as best film and for Lumet, William Holden (who plays Howard Beale’s decent friend and colleague), Ned Beatty, Owen Roizman (the film’s cinematographer), and Alan Heim (its editor). In spite of these triumphs, however, and its blockbusting success at the box-office, it encountered a good deal of hostility from critics who found Paddy Chayefsky’s script “crazily preposterous” and the film’s vulgarity “more pronounced than the television vulgarity it was supposed to be satirizing.”

A screen version of Peter Shaffer’s play Equus followed….And almost no one had a good word to say for The Wiz (1978), Lumet’s first musical…. 
Lumet’s...film, *Prince of the City* (1981), was considered one of the high points of his career. An ambitious film, two years in the making and running to nearly three hours, it was adapted for the screen by Jay Presson Allen from Robert Daly’s 1978 book about police corruption in New York City....Reviews were extraordinarily favorable. David Denby called it a tremendous movie, the culminating work of Sidney Lumet’s career,” and Andrew Sarris described it as a prodigious achievement.” “Lumet has never made a film as good,” he commented, “and it is possible that *Prince of the City* represents the high point of cinematic realism in the New York School of filmmaking.” Richard Schickel noted that *Prince of the City* is a very long film—close to three hours—but not a frame could be dispensed with.” “The movie torments precisely because it so painfully details its protagonist’s slow, unaware descent into a nightmare of moral ambiguity that is indistinguishable from madness.”...

Lumet’s *Daniel* (1983), adapted by E. L. Doctorow from his novel *The Book of Daniel*, was controversial and drew a number of hostile reviews. The film is loosely based on the lives of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for conspiring to pass atomic secrets to Russia....

By contrast, Lumet’s next film, *The Verdict* (1982), with a script by David Mamet, was widely praised. “it is difficult to remember a courtroom drama of such efficiency as *The Verdict,*” Derek Malcolm noted, “nor better performances..."A Conversation with Sidney Lumet” Michel Ciment, 1982

MC: The theme of informing against someone—the problem of knowing if one can or cannot “talk” and in what context, was this influenced by your own experience, since you were a witness and a contemporary of the McCarthy hearings working in the American entertainment industry?

SL: Emotionally this became the hardest element for me because I didn’t know myself what I thought of the issue. I had no definite opinion about Bob Leusi (Daniel Ciello in the film [Prince of the City]) and what he had done before seeing the first cut. I slowly realized that I had lived through this type of situation myself, and it became painful for me. In fact, at the beginning of the 1950s, when I was working in television, it was by sheer luck that I escaped being blacklisted. While I was working at the editing table, observing the main character, slowly I arrived at some conclusions. First of all, there is a difference between informing against someone in a criminal case versus a political one. For me, having been raised in a working-class environment, my family was poor, my attitude toward a stool pigeon was automatic, going beyond any logical distinction between the criminal and the political. An informer was an informer; it was that simple. I needed to make this film in order for my attitude to change, however. But squeezing on someone for political reasons is a betrayal of democracy. On the other hand, I do think that drugs are responsible for the personal destruction of a whole generation of creative artists in this country, not to mention a large segment of the black population and of young people....

MC: This was the golden age of American television.

SL: Yes, those were marvelous years, when you think about how many screenwriters, directors, and actors emerged then. It proves one thing: that we were not all that exceptional but their talent was always there. You just need to give them the means to express it. The work pace was incredible. I directed two half-hour dramas every week during three years! I needed to have eight shows in my head all the time. While I rehearsed the two dramas of the week, I also had to take care of the casting for the following week, and of the sets and the costumes for two weeks after that....

In my experience television was irreplaceable, because the law of optics is constant, and it gave me a very fine visual training, not to mention everything I learned about editing, rhythm and acting. And also psychologically I learned a very precious lesson. The production you’re working on right now is not everything. There is another waiting for you the following...


It's only a movie. The ephemeral nature of television taught me that in a positive way, because I have seen so many of my colleagues become pretentious. In their conversations I hear the words “grandeur” and “masterpiece.” For me, that is the beginning of the end. Each time you get started on another film, you cannot think in terms of a masterpiece, because at the very least, chance plays a role in every production. I don’t want to sound falsely modest, and it is true that chance, luck I mean, exists for some and not for others. But basically all one can do is set the stage and hope for the best. When this happens, the film takes on a life all its own that one could never have predicted. …The “old school” did not have this pretense of making only masterpieces, to make a movie every four years. You remember thirty films by John Ford, but he made over a hundred! I love fifteen films by Cukor, but he just finished his sixty-fifth one!...

MC: When you went from television to cinema, what was the greatest change for you?
SL: The size of the image. And one of the more depressing things for me is the disappearance of the big screen movie theaters. In the multiplexes, the audience is looking at movie screens that are almost as small as TV screens. It took me a while to get used to the bigger image, which explains why my early films had such a closed sense of staging. My dramatic style had developed on a twelve-inch screen, and suddenly I was hitting the emotions too hard on a thirty-foot screen. Also in the theater I had been trained to exaggerate the feelings in order to touch the audience seated in the second balcony. It took me years before I understood that I didn’t have to do so much. Everything becomes clearer faster on a big screen. Also time flows differently on film than on television.

“The Law According to Lumet” Terry Diggs / 1995

DIGGS: It seems as if you always come back to the subject of law, whether you’re dealing with an outlaw, a lawyer, or a police officer. Why do you find the metaphor of law to be such an expressive one?

LUMET: Let’s start with a very simple statement: if the law doesn’t work, nothing can work in a democracy. It’s the basis of everything. Then you come to that separation between law and justice. As every lawyer knows, sometimes they don’t go together. Lawyers find themselves using literal legalities to, in a sense, evade the justice of the situation. It’s that kind of complexity, where there is a separation between the law and what justice actually is that fascinates me so.

DIGGS: In your films there is sometimes a separation between finding truth and finding justice. A survey of your films suggests that our present legal system works many times to crush truth, and if truth is revealed, it’s at a really terrible kind of price, as in Prince of the City or Serpico. If we do find the truth, it’s a kind of miracle as in The Verdict—which was the answer to a prayer. Is that an accurate statement of your films?

LUMET: I think it’s completely accurate, and all of this within the framework of, as far as I know, one of the best legal systems in the world. I’ve served on a jury three times. It was a great experience, by the way. What I found was that it was a miracle that it worked as well as it did.

DIGGS: How did these jury experiences fit on a time continuum between 12 Angry Men and The Verdict?

LUMET: It was all after 12 Angry Men and all before The Verdict. Interestingly enough, I got summoned for jury duty after The Verdict, and I was turned down, because it was something that involved drugs and I said that I would have a very tough time dealing with anybody accused of pushing drugs. Just out of my own moral basis, I would presume guilt.

At that point in the voir dire where the judge says, if any of you have any internal reservations, would you stand up and articulate those now, I raised my hand and stood up and said I would find it very difficult in my own heart and mind to start with a presumption of innocence simply out of my own reaction to what drugs mean in the world.

DIGGS: One of the things that’s overwhelming in terms of watching 12 Angry Men is that jurors in that film were not as forthcoming with their biases as you were in your voir dire experience. Were you so forthcoming about what your role should be because of the extent about which you’d thought about the subject for 12 Angry Men?

LUMET: I don’t know. I just knew it was an immediate, instinctive reaction and, needless to say, I was excused right on the spot.

DIGGS: One of the key points of 12 Angry Men seems to be that the jury doesn’t really exist for the purpose of exposing the truth, what the jury system exists to do is interrogate—and to set up a scheme by which interrogation takes place—so that the biases we have in society don’t block the truth. Does that seem an accurate statement of what 12 Angry Men is about?

LUMET: Yes, it does.

DIGGS: There is a movement now in California to allow juries in criminal cases to convict on less-than-unanimous verdicts. Given the goals that you set out in terms of 12 Angry Men, what do you think are the ramifications of legislation like that?
LUMET: I think it’s very dangerous, and especially in criminal cases where you’re talking about changing a person’s life forever. I’m still for the unanimous verdict. It may spring people. I think the chances are very good that O. J. Simpson is going to get a hung jury, but my own feeling is that it’s one of those safeguards like our other constitutional safeguards of search and seizure and warrants and so on; Fourth, Fifth Amendment.

It may be a help to the criminal element. Undoubtedly people have gotten away with something because of those laws. But it’s still better than innocent people being convicted because of the absence of those laws.

DIGGS: Your work seems to be so explicit about some very very troubling things, about the extent to which we really mask our own psychoses and neuroses, about the extent to which we tolerate racism, about our desire for expediency. You’re so conscious of all those things and how they impact criminal justice. Where does that sensibility come from?

LUMET: There’s your instinct and then there’s your life experience. I grew up very poor in the roughest sections in New York, and you simply become very interested in justice because you see an awful lot of injustice around. I just know it’s there and has been there from the beginning.....

DIGGS: I can’t talk to the director of Network and those fine films exploring the legal process without asking you about O. J. Simpson. You have really dealt with all of the components of this dog-and-pony show in one form or another: the reactionary frenzy that the media is capable of creating, the fallibility of the system when the media works on it in that particular kind of way. What’s your take on the trial of the century?

LUMET: The night of the white Bronco, that ride of the white Bronco, that night filled me with such horror. I don’t know if you’ve ever read a novel of Nathaniel West’s called The Day of the Locust, but it was The Day of the Locust come true. Because what everybody was waiting for was for him to blow his brains out. That’s what the attraction of the night was.

So I have not followed the trial. I don’t read about it because you see an awful lot of injustice around. I just know it’s there and has been there from the beginning.....

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there may never have been an audience for television’s Law & Order or The Practice, or even the novels of John Grisham and Scott Turow. Interestingly, the small screen’s first iconic lawyer, Perry Mason, began pacing courtrooms and breaking down witnesses in 1957 as well, three years after Twelve Angry Men, the teleplay, made its debut during American television’s golden era.

Lumet, who died in 2011 at the age of eighty-six, would, of course, go on to direct many other classics in a career that spanned six decades, around two hundred teleplays, and more than forty feature films. He was nominated for five Oscars before receiving one for lifetime achievement in 2005. And yet in the minds of many, 12 Angry Men is the film that defined his career, one that so memorably, if not obsessively, focused on social justice and moral inquiry. It is not surprising that Lumet, whose lifetime coincided with so many of the injustices of the twentieth century—from the Holocaust to the Hollywood blacklist—would choose as the subject of his first feature a story painted in the gray brushstrokes of prejudice.

The arc of Lumet’s early career, while colorful, did not initially light up the sky. As a television director for CBS, he worked on such shows as Danger and You Are There, and directed original teleplays for Playhouse 90 and Studio One, on which Twelve Angry Men first aired. His celebrated film career had a long rehearsal on television throughout this period in the 1950s, with many of his signature themes and stylistic effects already on full display. And indeed, in his films, Lumet would often show a preference for the cramped spaces and tight shots of kitchen-sink dramas, as opposed to the larger landscapes cinema makes possible. Nowhere was this claustrophobic point of view put to better use than in 12 Angry Men, where the transition from television screen to the big screen was quite seamless.

The ease of adaptation didn’t spell commercial success, however. 12 Angry Men was no blockbuster, despite the fact that it featured Fonda. The film was made on a very modest budget of about $350,000. Arguably, without Fonda starring and producing, it might never have seen life beyond the small screen. One can only imagine the pitch to a Hollywood executive: “Twelve angry, sweaty, impatient men stand in judgment of a teenage boy accused of killing his father. It’s summer, and the men are holed up in a jury room without even a fan. The entire choreography involves the jurors sitting at, or moving around, a long rectangular table, arguing. No gun goes off, and no one gets killed—the murder has already happened. And the movie is shot completely in black and white.”

Movie audiences in 1957 expected to see gunfights in the mourn-tainous Wild West or leading men and women falling in love in exotic places—widescreen and in Technicolor. What’s cinematic about twelve ordinary men, beleaguered by prejudice and moral conflict, nearly suffocating in a drab jury room for the entire length of a movie?

These 12 Angry Men were in no way The Dirty Dozen. Though well received critically—with three Academy Award nominations, for best picture, best director, and best adapted screenplay, for Reginald Rose, from his own teleplay (The Bridge on the River Kwai won in all three categories)—it took years for 12 Angry Men to find its audience and emerge as a classic, one of the treasured films in Hollywood history. In 2007, the Library of Congress selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry. In 2010, associate justice of the Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor, appearing at the Forum on Law, Culture & Society at Fordham Law School, told the audience that 12 Angry Men, which she first saw in college, influenced her decision to pursue a career in law.

All the impassioned turmoil in the film somehow gave it a long life. While the jury’s anger dissipates, the deep emotion kept on humming. A day’s worth of deliberations is illuminated by a pacing that is deceptively quick and, improbably, completely riveting. Nothing much seems to be happening—more sweat dripping, more heads swelling with doubt—and yet everything is happening. The tone of the deliberations changes, the group dynamics realign as the men ready themselves for yet another round of thwarted consensus building.

Initially, Fonda’s juror 8 is the lone holdout against a reflexive vote for guilt. He marshals the facts in support of reasonable doubt, pushing back against the fury of the mob. A mild-mannered architect, he proves himself to be a better lawyer than the court-appointed defense counsel. He recognizes the moral duty to deliberate, and slowly shatters the credibility of the prosecution’s witnesses, one by one. The jury is transformed as opinions shift, factions emerge, and prejudices are revealed.

Meanwhile, the weather outside changes: the sky darkens, and a thunderous summer shower cools off the city, along with some of the hotheads on the jury. Despite the cageylike confinement, the movements of these middle-aged men are oddly balletic as they reenact events surrounding the crime, break off into private conversations, retire to the restroom, drink from the watercooler, stand on a chair to fix the fan, make paper airplanes, and even play tic-tac-toe. All the while, they are in one another’s faces, as if helplessly trying to get to know one another. They are strangers, after all; even their names are withheld. Once the verdict is delivered, they are unlikely to see one another again.

Equally nameless, and far more distant, is the teenager with his appointment with the electric chair. Does he realize that his life is in the hands of a jury composed of men so easily given to prejudgment? Forget reasonable doubt—they won’t even give him the benefit of the doubt. Without fancy stagecraft, 12 Angry Men portrays the American jury system as tragic opera.

The film captured the American legal system in a way that had never been done before. There are no preening, cagy lawyers or craggy, wise judges. The jury is where justice resides—with common men who apply common sense and ultimately do what’s right, in spite of extreme prejudice. The hero, juror 8, doesn’t know if the teenager is innocent or guilty; he simply wants to believe that the system is capable of delivering justice, and he doesn’t want to be complicit in compounding an injustice. The jury becomes the repository of America’s faith that the law can get it right. But, at the same time, the film provides a civics lesson on the frightening implications of the legal system’s getting it all wrong.

Is it possible to watch 12 Angry Men and not wonder whether the blindfold on Lady Justice is on securely enough? The presumption that jurors are impartial is dashed within the first ten minutes of the film. Citizens arrive for jury duty not as blank slates but as a bundle of preconceived notions and preformed opinions.

There is no true jury of one’s peers. Despite its Hollywood happy ending, 12 Angry Men is thus an ambivalent feel-good movie. The virtues of the legal system are presented through the prism of its dark side. A jury is
empowered to remedy the mistakes made by the defense (a laughable notion in practice), but will the jurors be able to overcome the imperfections of their own humanity—which is itself, paradoxically, on trial in the jury room? As a tutorial on human nature, *12 Angry Men* sends a warning to be careful in courtrooms. The custodians of the system make mistakes, and the corrective possibilities may be no better than a crapshoot.

As filmmakers for screen and television, Lumet and Rose never lost interest in the legal system as a setting for big ideas and high drama. In 1955, they collaborated on *Crime in the Streets*, a teleplay for *The Elgin Hour* that dealt with juvenile delinquency and starred John Cassavetes, and in 1956, their *Tragedy in a Temporary Town*, yet another story of mob-inflamed prejudice and injustice (with Jack Warden), aired on NBC’s *The Alcoa Hour*. Rose, in fact, was inspired to write *12 Angry Men* by his own experience as a juror in a criminal case. And in 1961, he created one of television’s most original and culturally relevant legal dramas, *The Defenders*, which, coincidentally, starred 12 *Angry Men*’s juror 4, E. G. Marshall.

Lumet went on to direct several other films about the legal system, including *The Verdict* (1982), *Daniel* (1983), *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996), and *Find Me Guilty* (2006). He also created the TV drama *100 Centre Street* (2001–02). And his early television work included directing an episode of *You Are There* involving the Salem witch trials, which aired the same week that Edward R. Murrow exposed Senator Joseph McCarthy as a hatingmongering red-baiter.

Why this creative obsession with the law? Courtrooms are places of human conflict where disputes are settled without resorting to shootouts or vendettas. And with any luck, the law’s resolution provides a moral lesson. This natural source of dramatic tension played to the backgrounds of Lumet and Rose quite well. They were children of the Great Depression. As Jews from the city slums, they were also not unfamiliar with prejudice, needing no reminder that “the other”—the outsider—is always viewed as strange and presumptively guilty. At the same time, they believed in America and knew that the rule of law provided not only sanctuary but also a chance at a level playing field.

Lumet was especially keen on fairness, which derived in part, he said, from his experiences watching cops patrol the Lower East Side of his youth, chasing away kids who were pitching pennies and then picking them up for themselves—crime control converted into a pack of cigarettes. He was also sensitive about the moral conflict between loyalty and doing what’s right; tough neighborhoods demand strict loyalties. His films dealing with police corruption, such as *Serpico* (1973), *Prince of the City* (1981), and *Q&A* (1990), address many of these themes. He himself had been mistakenly named during the 1950s blacklist, which banished some of the leading talents in New York’s nascent television industry, and after his name was cleared, for reasons of both loyalty and craft, he worked clandestinely with some of the banned writers.

For Lumet, the common man is all too easily crushed—made to disappear without anyone’s taking notice. The individual is left with few choices, overwhelmed and outmatched by the powerful few, who know no limits and show no mercy. Lumet always did his best work when his film was focused on a human face. In fact, he made a point of casting actors whose faces reflected a wide range of emotions. Not all of them were pretty to look at, but they were all recognizably human and real. The face best captured in a Sidney Lumet film is anguished, defeated, and fragile—a starkly rendered still life of human vulnerability. Just think of the pained expressions of Howard Beale in *Network* (1976) and Sonny Wortzik in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and the silent scream of Sol Nazerman in *The Pawnbroker* (1964).

Lumet was unfairly criticized for not being visual enough, for preferring the grimy streets of New York to virtually any other location. But he didn’t need a cinematic background—all Lumet needed was a downcast face, and he knew exactly how to film it. It is no accident that Boris Kaufman, an Oscar-sending cinematographer who shared an aesthetic sensibility with Lumet, was the director of photography on seven Lumet movies, including *12 Angry Men* and *The Pawnbroker*.

*12 Angry Men*, in particular, illuminates the richness of what can happen when the interior lives of human beings are projected onto a screen. Shooting in black and white, in a tiny room overrun with emotional complexity, Lumet worked movie magic simply by changing the focal length of his lenses, from wide-angle to telephoto, manipulating the depth of the frame and, in so doing, providing the viewer with a greater depth of feeling as the camera zooms in on the faces of these twelve once angry, but finally subdued, and forever immortalized, men.
Spring 2012 Buffalo Film Seminars XXIV
Mar 13 spring break
Mar 20 Clint Eastwood, The Outlaw Josey Wales 1975
Mar 27 John Woo, The Killer 1989
Apr 3 Krzysztof Kieslowski, Kieslowski, Red 1994
Apr 10 Terrence Malick, Thin Red Line 1998
Apr 17 Fernando Meirelles, City of God, 2003
Apr 24 Christopher Nolan, The Dark Knight 2008

Please turn off cellphones during screenings.

Contacts:
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...for the series schedule, annotations, links, handouts (in color) and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
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