

Theater Review

The Panel

Reviewed by Andy Magid

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William Rundell

Performed January 7, 2005, Atlanta, GA

Reginald Rose's classic 1954 television play *Twelve Angry Men* (the terrific 1957 movie version directed by Sidney Lumet is available on DVD) enjoyed an unexpectedly successful revival on Broadway recently, its limited engagement extended seven times as of this writing. The play recounts the deliberations of the jury in a murder trial. As Ben Brantley wrote in the *New York Times* in his October 29, 2004, review of the current production: "This 90-minute, intermissionless show, built around the dissection of a murder, is for folks who would usually rather stay home with 'Law & Order' or Agatha Christie than schlep to the theater. It combines the methodical suspense of an old-fashioned murder mystery with the healthy glow of a civics lesson. As the jurors debate the probable guilt of an inner-city adolescent accused of stabbing his father to death, prejudices and preconceptions are aired and exorcised." Brantley also notes that the play is short, with one simple set and a dozen good speaking parts, reasons that contribute to its frequent production by amateur and student theatre groups. The civics lesson, by the way, is that jurors are human beings who bring to their deliberations their personal histories and personalities, as well as the understandings (or misunderstandings) they gained from the presentations in the trial. And despite this, or perhaps because of this, truth emerges and justice is done.

Which brings us to *The Panel*, an immensely entertaining and important one-act play about the deliberations of a National Science Foundation

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(NSF) Division of Mathematical Sciences (DMS) review panel. It was written by William Rundell, director of the DMS, and had its world premier performance at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in Atlanta, January 7, 2005. As with *Twelve Angry Men*, the audience gets to be fly-on-the-wall voyeurs at confidential deliberations, in this case of a panel reviewing NSF proposals. As the panelists discuss and ultimately rate each proposal, we see their mathematical history, personality, and prejudices on display, and we also see justice done. This is the stuff of drama, although Rundell's play is more of a comedy, despite claims to the contrary by the author. (At the Atlanta production he bemoaned the difficulty of humor in the government setting, noting, for example, that "jokes about religion were not kosher.") Much of the humor comes from the fanciful names given the mathematical subjects being discussed—"abstract fantasy theory" is a typical example—and the deadpan delivery with which the panelists read such lines as "the theory of periodic cohomologies that is a hot area in surreal theory these days has some potential for making headway on the Rothko conjecture."

Underneath the lighthearted lines, however, lies a serious purpose: NSF proposals are not read by machines. They are read by mathematicians, who make judgments based on what they know about the mathematics in the proposal and about the proposer as a mathematician. Each of the proposals evaluated in *The Panel*, as with all proposals submitted to the NSF, have been read in advance by the panelists, and in addition one panelist has been designated to present a summary report. Then the rest of the panelists express views, discussion ensues, and ultimately a collective rating is given. An NSF program officer sits with the panel and functions as facilitator. In *The Panel* the program officer is actually standing at a



whiteboard recording results as well as offering guidance.

The play opens in the middle of the panel's deliberations. Proposals are presented that exemplify typical strengths, such as careful exposition, systematic description of the problem and proposed methods, good discussions of prior work, and so forth, and that exemplify typical flaws. These include lack of attention to all the previous, as well as those related to the proposer, such as unrealistically ambitious proposed research or unmentioned potential collaborations, lack of consideration of recent developments, or simple hubris. As one watches and listens to the panel, one begins to sense what makes for a successful proposal. At the very least, one learns what makes a proposal unsuccessful.

The play ends cinematically in a freeze frame in the middle of deliberations on a proposal; a narrator (Rundell in the Atlanta production) takes the stage and declaims, after a quotation from Puck's speech ending *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

...if you've some attention paid
proposals' basis can be laid
Ideas creative and specific
expounded clearly are terrific
NSF will do its duty
and fund the best with all its booty.

The author's note to the script reads: "This one-act play is set in Ballston, Va., at the headquarters of mathematicians' favorite federal agency. It is a historical drama based on, and accurately adhering to, actual events, but typical of the genre it also seeks to entertain while penetrating facets of the human (and of course mathematical) condition." Entertain it does. And while the Reginald Rose drama is of practical educational value to (at most) murder defendants and their prosecutors, defense attorneys, and jury consultants, William Rundell's *The Panel* should be obligatory viewing for any mathematical proposal writer.

The parts of the panelists in the Atlanta production were played by Joanna Kania-Bartoszynska, Tomek Bartoszynski, Tony Chan, Brian Conrey, John Conway, and Deborah Lockhart; Henry Warchall was the program officer. In addition to reciting the envoi, William Rundell introduced the production.