

The New York Times

Review: June 20, 1958

Rod Serling's "A Town Has Turned to Dust" Offered on Playhouse 90

Written by Jack Gould

The combination of Rod Serling and Playhouse 90 made for another night of powerful drama last night over Channel 2.

Mr. Serling's original work, "A Town Has Turned to Dust," was a raw, tough and at the same time deeply moving outcry against prejudice. There were two of the season's superlative performances by Rod Steiger and William Shatner. And John Frankenheimer's mounting of the outspoken drama was simply superb.

Mr. Serling laid the scene of his play in a Southwestern town racked by unremitting drought and worn by an ever-present sun. In their own poverty, the stricken townspeople turn to bigotry and prejudice against their Mexican colony as a release for their own frustrations.

An innocent Mexican boy is sacrificed to a lynching mob by an ineffectual sheriff. The slaughter leads to a brooding darkness involving the remorseful relatives of the Mexican youngster and the sullen townspeople.

Almost by a chain reaction there is established a second set of circumstances inviting a lynching of the Mexican's brother. Only this time the sheriff recaptures a shred of human dignity and saves the brother, if not the town.

Mr. Serling incorporated his protest against prejudice in vivid dialogue and sound situations. He made his point that hate for a fellow being leads only to the ultimate self-destruction of the bigoted. It was a theme that hardly can be restated amply enough and last night Mr. Serling expressed it with inspiration and fine determination.

The author created two characterizations of genuine dimension and they were realized to the full. Mr. Steiger played the sheriff. He had the absorbing and gripping closing scene as the educated man who traced his own empty life to a participation in a lynching in his youth. His study of the sheriff was done with searching insight and sensitivity.

Mr. Shatner gave one of the best TV performances of his career. As the town bully and ringleader of the lynching party, he was the embodiment of hate and blind physical passion. Mr. Shatner's attention to detail in putting together the picture of an ignorant and evil social force was remarkable.

Mr. Frankenheimer's staging was the directorial art at its most effective. His handling of the crowd scenes, his superb use of sequences of total silence and his uncannily judicious employment of close-ups truly strengthened Mr. Serling's intent.

Others in the uniformly excellent company were Fay Spain, as the wife of the leader of the lynching mob; James Gregory, as a reporter from a St. Louis newspaper; and Mario Alcalde, as Ramon, the Mexican brother.

Playhouse 90 and Mr. Serling had to fight executive interference, reportedly requiring some changes in the story line, before getting their play on the air last night. The theatre people of Hollywood have reason to be proud of their stand in the viewer's behalf.