

Hear it From the Judge

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Classical Law Movies

Movies about lawyers, Judges, the legal system and law enforcement continue to intrigue the TV and movie watching public. My goal is to provide a summary of five movies which, in my research, seem to be the most often listed classical lawyer movies.

The order I list the movies is of no purpose. For lack of better reason, I have listed these classical lawyer movies chronologically, starting with the oldest movie.

Miracle on 34th Street (1947).

This movie is best known as a holiday classic rather than a lawyer movie. However, it is a good sample of lawyers portrayed as the “good guys”. Kris Kringle (Edmund Gwenn), hired by the Macy’s Department store to serve as its Santa Clause, is placed on trial to determine whether he is the real Santa Clause, as he self proclaims. Kris Kringle was hired by the “no-nonsense” director, Doris Walker (Maureen O’Hara) who, it happens, does not believe in Santa Clause.

Fred Gaily (John Payne) is the lawyer who successfully convinces Judge Henry Harper (Gene Lockhart) that Kris is the real Santa Clause. Natalie Wood is the 8 year old actress playing Natalie Walker, the daughter of Doris.

If you desire to hear a Judge rule on an objection with panache, listen for Judge Harper’s “Objection overruled”!

12 Angry Men (1957).

This is a dramatic display of how the prejudices, personalities, and character, of 12 men who comprise the jury evolve from a 11 to 1 guilty verdict to a complete reconsideration of their decision. The initial lone dissenting jury is Juror #8 (Henry Fonda). Among those acting in this star cast include Martin Balsam (Juror #1), Lee Cobb (Juror #3), E.G. Marshall (Juror #4) and Jack Klugman (Juror #5).

Anatomy of a Murder (1959).

The story is based upon a book written by a Michigan Supreme Court Justice, John D.

Voelker. Fredrick Manion (Ben Gazzara) is accused of the murder of a bartender. His defense is that the victim had beaten and raped his wife, Laura (Lee Remick). Paul Biegler (James Stewart) is the small town lawyer who must convince the jury of his client's temporary insanity despite the admission of his client to the crime.

This film, some have argued, contains some of the best courtroom drama portrayed on screen. Also of note, George C. Scott plays the part of Assistant State's Attorney Claude Dancer.

Inherit the Wind (1960). This Stanley Kramer directed movie is a fictional rendition of the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" which pitted two of the greatest legal orators of the day –Clarence Darrow and former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. This plot involves the arrest of teacher B.T. Cates who is arrested for teaching Darwin's theories. Cates is represented by famous lawyer, Henry Drummond (Spencer Tracy) and he is prosecuted by the fundamentalist Matthew Brady (Fredrick March)

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962).

No list of classical lawyer movies is complete without the wonderful story of attorney Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck). Atticus defends a black man, Tom Robinson (Brock Peters) who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. Of interesting note, a young Robert Duval plays the part of Arthur "Boo" Radley, the mysterious neighbor to the young Jem and Scott Finch, the children of Atticus.

Enjoy the movies!