

BACK STORY

POST SUMMER ENTERTAINMENT – AFI’S BEST COURTROOM DRAMAS

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The season of summer blockbusters is behind us. So if you are in the mood for a movie, you may be wondering what to add to that Netflix queue. With that in mind, we’ve compiled a list of the American Film Institute’s top 10 courtroom dramas, for those of you who want to fill your downtime with just a little more law.

1. TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (1963)

Based on the novel by Harper Lee, this classic film focuses on a man of honor living in a small Alabama town in 1932. Atticus Finch (played compellingly by Gregory Peck) is a widowed lawyer and the father of two young children. While he tries to teach his children to live lives free of hatred and prejudice, he must live that example, endangering himself and his family when he takes on the case of a wrongly accused black man.

2. 12 ANGRY MEN (1957)

In another classic film, based on a play of the same name, tensions run high as a group of jurors bring their own experiences and prejudices into deliberations in a murder case. Henry Fonda gives a standout performance as the original lone holdout, insisting on the accused’s innocence and bringing the ire of the entire group down on his head.

The film stands as an exemplary drama illustrating that few individuals are able to bring complete objectivity to their roles as jurors.

3. KRAMER VS KRAMER (1979)

This film appeared on the scene as divorce and custody battles were becoming more and more common across the nation. The story follows a workaholic husband (played by Dustin Hoffman) who finally bonds with his young son when his wife surprises him by demanding a divorce and then abandons her family to “find herself.” But just as he has begun to value that father/son bond, his ex-wife (Meryl Streep) returns to demand full custody of their child.

4. THE VERDICT (1982)

Paul Newman is Frank Galvin, an alcoholic lawyer, in this story of redemption. Gavin hopes to regain his reputation and his self-respect by taking on the case of a woman who has been left in a coma as the result of an operation at a large hospital.

5. A FEW GOOD MEN (1992)

Navy JAG officer Lt. Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) is assigned to defend two Marines, accused of the murder of fellow at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo. He soon discovers a cover-up that goes all the way to the top. Now, facing off against a high-powered colonel (Jack Nicholson) and an almost unbreakable code of silence, he is faced with the burden of proof.

6. WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1958)

An almost-retired London barrister (Charles Laughton) takes on a case defending a colleague’s client from a charge of murder and ends up trying to solve a full-blown mystery. Full of plot twists, femme fatales, double-crosses and courtroom revelations, this offering is more fun than factual.

The supporting cast includes such Hollywood icons as Marlene Dietrich and Tyrone Powers.

7. ANATOMY OF A MURDER (1959)

Former Michigan district attorney Paul “Polly” Biegler (James Stewart) spends his time playing jazz piano and fishing. When a murder takes place in a trailer park on the outskirts of town, he is asked to defend a man who admits to having killed Barney Quill, a local bar owner who allegedly raped his wife.

8. IN COLD BLOOD (1967)

When an entire family is murdered execution-style in a home invasion in a Kansas farming town, the police frantically attempt to solve the murders. Meanwhile the cold-blooded killers make their ways to Mexico but never quite reach the border.

9. A CRY IN THE DARK (1988)

An outback exploration turns tragic for an Australian husband and wife when a wild dog carries off their infant child. Soon the couple is crucified in the Australian press, as the police believe the mother is the true murderer. Meryl Streep and Sam Neil turn in riveting performances in this tale based on a true story.

10. JUDGEMENT AT NURENBERG (1961)

In 1948 an American judge (Spencer Tracy), arrives in Nuremberg to preside over the trial of several German judges accused of destroying law and justice to support Hitler’s infamous mandates which took the lives of 6 million innocent people. The prosecuting attorney (Richard Widmark) is determined to obtain the maximum punishment for the judges. The defense lawyer, (Maximilian Schell), claims that if these men are guilty because they upheld the laws of their country, then all of Germany must be tried.

This fact based film also features performances by Burt Lancaster, Marlene Dietrich, Judy Garland, Montgomery Clift and William Shatner.

Do you have a favorite courtroom drama that the AFI overlooked? Let us know what it is and why you think it deserves special mention. Send your picks to [Nevada Lawyer at \[nvlawyer@nvbar.org\]\(mailto:NvLawyer@nvbar.org\)](mailto:NvLawyer@nvbar.org) and it may appear in an upcoming Back Story.