

## The Oscar goes to . . . courtroom dramas!

*You want answers?  
I want the truth.  
You can't handle the truth!*

Actor Jack Nicholson's witness-stand response to Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* is one of the most quoted lines from one of the most popular genres of film — the courtroom drama. Hollywood loves courtroom dramas because they are often set in one or two rooms and cheap to make — *A Few Good Men* cost \$40 million and earned \$240 million. The public loves them because they offer a front-row seat to a parade of interesting people, incredible stories, and a process that — for all its foibles — aims for justice and sometimes gives us hope.

These movies tell compelling stories about imperfect lawyers, imperfect clients, lives hanging in the balance, and the costs and benefits of truth-telling.

I first entered a courtroom while working as a newspaper reporter fresh out of college. I soon learned that court is where people meet their government every day. Watching the drama of daily life unfold in court inspired me to go to law school. Years later, as a trial judge, appellate judge, and a practicing lawyer, I still feel that reverence every time I'm in court.

I've also always loved films, including those portraying the legal profession. Take *Adam's Rib*. Spencer Tracy is a prosecutor in a case in which a wife is accused of killing her husband. Until they meet in court, he doesn't realize that his own wife, played by Katharine Hepburn, is the lawyer representing the defendant. This movie isn't about criminal procedure and conflicts of interest. It's about a woman's point of view and role in society in 1949.

In *My Cousin Vinny*, a New York lawyer (Joe Pesci) with no criminal experience lands in a small Alabama town to defend his nephew on a murder charge. The case turns on the tire tracks of a car seen fleeing the murder scene. The lawyer's fiancée (Marisa Tomei) knows everything about cars because she grew up in a family of mechanics.

Her answers from the witness stand authoritatively qualify her as an expert, and she applies her knowledge to physical evidence in terms that small-town jurors — and movie audiences — can easily understand. It's a brilliant scene, often used to train lawyers and judges about how to lay a foundation for admission of expert testimony.

The justice system is far from perfect, of course, and the film version of Harper Lee's book *To Kill a Mockingbird* puts the law's deficiencies on painful display. A white lawyer, Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), defends a Black man, Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), on charges of rape in 1930s rural Alabama. The victim and her father testify that Robinson used his right hand to prevent her escape while strangling her with his left hand. Finch calls his client to the stand, asks him to put his left hand behind his back, and tosses something to Robinson's right hand. Robinson can't catch it. We see that his right arm is useless — it was mangled in a cotton gin — and immediately know he is not guilty. But he's convicted anyway. This visual depiction underscores the deep injustices of the era in a way the book couldn't.

Other movies demonstrate justice delivered against all odds. In *The*



*Verdict*, an alcoholic lawyer (Paul Newman) appeals to the conscience of a complicated witness, winning the case and redeeming himself in the process. The story offers lessons for legal professionals and general audiences, including past and future jurors. “When there is no justice, the rich win, the poor are powerless,” Newman’s character says in his closing argument. “We doubt ourselves. We doubt our beliefs. We doubt our institutions. And we doubt the law. But today you are the law. Not the books. Not the lawyers. Not the marble statue or the trappings of the court. Those are just symbols of our desire to be just. They are in fact a prayer. A fervent and a frightened prayer.” It’s one of my favorite courtroom scenes.

The list of great courtroom dramas told on film is far too long to fit in this space. But all the Hollywood courtrooms share a distinct advantage: The case is always resolved in two or three hours. Sigh. Only in Hollywood.

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