

## ABA Journal's List of the 25 Greatest Legal Movies

1. **To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)**  
Gregory Peck, as Atticus Finch, plays a lawyer that rises above the naked racism of Depression-era Alabama to defend a crippled black man falsely accused of rape by a lonely, young white woman.
2. **12 Angry Men (1957)**  
Produced and starred in by Henry Fonda, this stage play adaptation chronicles the hostile deliberations of a jury in a death penalty case.
3. **My Cousin Vinny (1992)**  
Vinny Gambini, played by Joe Pesci, is a brash Brooklyn lawyer who represents his cousin and a friend who are arrested for capital murder. The movie offers cinema's briefest opening argument, its best-ever introduction to the rules of criminal procedure and a case that hinges on properly introduced expert testimony.
4. **Anatomy of a Murder (1959)**  
Otto Preminger directs this realistic study of an Army lieutenant accused of murdering a bartender who allegedly raped his coquettish wife. The film was inspired by an actual case and adapted from a novel written by a Michigan Supreme Court judge.
5. **Inherit the Wind (1960)**  
Two grand old lions of the screen, Spencer Tracy and Fredric March, play two grand old lions of the law, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, as they grapple in the historic 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" in backwoods Dayton, Tennessee.
6. **Witness for the Prosecution (1957)**  
Charles Laughton stars as a pompous barrister who is supposed to be retired after recovering from an illness but can't resist taking a puzzling murder case. Laughton's real-life wife Elsa Lanchester is his sharp-tongued nurse. The playboy defendant is played by Tyrone Power; Marlene Dietrich is his wife and, surprisingly, the witness in question.
7. **Breaker Morant (1980)**  
Australian director Bruce Beresford adapts the story of three fellow countrymen who fight for the British Empire in the colonial Boer War in South Africa and are tried and convicted of war crimes in this 1980 movie.
8. **Philadelphia (1993)**  
Tom Hanks won an Oscar as an Ivy-educated gay attorney who claims his big-time law firm fired him after discovering he contracted AIDS. Denzel

Washington plays the personal injury lawyer who takes the case when everyone else turns Hanks' character down.

9. Erin Brockovich (2000)

Julia Roberts does an Academy Award-winning turn as the real-life paralegal and sassy single mom whose dogged investigation into a suspicious real estate case turns up a pattern of illegal dumping of highly toxic hexavalent chromium and one of the heftiest class action suits in U.S. history.

10. The Verdict (1982)

Paul Newman is a washed-up, alcoholic lawyer who gets handed a medical malpractice case and sees it as one last chance to get his career right. James Mason is diabolical as his courtroom opponent who cavorts with the judge, played by Milo O'Shea.

11. Presumed Innocent (1990)

Lawyer-novelist Scott Turow's best-seller features Harrison Ford as Rusty Sabich, a top-notch prosecutor who finds himself accused of murdering a colleague with whom he's had an affair.

12. Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)

Stanley Kramer directed this searing portrayal of the Nazi war crimes trials set in 1948. The Abby Mann script focuses, in particular, on charges brought against four German judges who are accused of allowing their courts to become accomplices to Nazi atrocities. An American judge, Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy), finds himself trying to understand how these once-esteemed colleagues allowed themselves to be used.

13. A Man for All Seasons (1966)

Sir Thomas More, played by Paul Scofield, is caught in the political struggle involving Henry VIII's decision to defy the Roman Catholic Church and divorce his wife to wed Anne Boleyn.

14. A Few Good Men (1992)

Tom Cruise plays a reluctant Navy JAG litigator in Rob Reiner's suspenseful film iteration of this military courtroom drama by Aaron Sorkin. In the film, two low-ranking Marines from the Guantanamo Bay naval base are being court-martialed for the death of another, allegedly part of an unofficial punishment known as a "code red."

15. Chicago (2002)

Richard Gere plays the sleazeball attorney Billy Flynn in the film adaptation of the highly successful Bob Fosse musical. Catherine Zeta-Jones and Renee Zellweger play celebrity murderers who cynically parlay their Jazz Age notoriety into a vaudeville act.

16. Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)

Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep play Ted and Joanna Kramer, an estranged couple fighting over custody of their son. Ted deals with real fatherhood for the first time as a single dad when Joanna leaves him. But he must also face his own failures when Joanna resurfaces demanding to gain custody of their son. An all-too-painful reminder of the human toll that is possible when domestic relations litigation takes a nasty turn.

17. The Paper Chase (1973)

Timothy Bottoms plays James T. Hart, a first-year law student desperately seeking the approval of Harvard's sternest professor, Charles W. Kingsfield Jr., played by John Houseman. The drama lies in the demanding milieu of Harvard Law School, where reputations can be made and broken in a single, grueling glass.

18. Reversal of Fortune (1990)

Jeremy Irons won an Oscar for his portrayal of Claus von Bulow, a crassly dependent husband of Newport, R.I., socialite Sunny von Bulow, who lapsed into a coma when she was allegedly injected with an overdose of insulin. Tried and convicted of attempted murder in 1982, largely on privately gathered evidence, von Bulow hires Alan Dershowitz, the now ubiquitous Harvard law professor, whose account of the case is the basis for this movie.

19. Compulsion (1959)

In 1924, Chicago is rocked by a spectacular murder, apparently committed by two brilliant teenagers from wealthy families who have sought to plot and execute the perfect crime. An aging legendary lawyer, Jonathan Wilk (Orson Welles), is hired to defend the young men with the modest hope of sparing them from the gallows.

20. And Justice for All (1979)

An angry Al Pacino plays Arthur Kirkland, the very best lawyer he knows in Baltimore. Arthur Kirkland is trapped into representing a judge accused of rape – a judge who is gleefully ignoring the incarceration of a very innocent and distressed Kirkland client.

21. In the Name of the Father (1993)

Pete Postlethwaite and Daniel Day-Lewis play Giuseppe and Gerry Conlon, a real-life father and son falsely accused of participating in two separate IRA bombing sprees outside London. The film chronicles their struggle to convince British courts of their innocence.

22. A Civil Action (1998)

At the surface, this appears to be a David vs. Goliath story: small-firm Boston plaintiff lawyers up against two conglomerates whose tannery, they've decided is responsible for the leukemia-related deaths of eight children. However, the core

of this film is a grown-up thriller about the perilous practical consequences of demanding moral outcomes from a legal action better suited to risk-and-reward. John Travolta and Robert Duvall both star in the movie.

23. Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)

Henry Fonda makes an engaging, beardless and believable Abraham Lincoln in John Ford's fictionalized account of Lincoln's early adult years from New Salem to Springfield and from the lovely and doomed Ann Rutledge to the ambitious and manipulative Mary Todd. The key plot point revolves around a killing that takes place during a July 4 brawl. As a newly minted lawyer, the young Lincoln manages to quell a lynch mob by telling them he needs the two brothers accused in the murder to be his first real clients.

24. Amistad (1997)

Steven Spielberg directed this historic drama of the famous 1839 slave ship uprising. The all-star cast includes Matthew McConaughey, Morgan Freeman and Anthony Hopkins. The film was criticized for taking liberties with the facts, but it succeeds as a portrayal of antebellum America coming to grips with slavery – and how the law was employed both for and against.

25. Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street (1947)

The holiday classic has one of the most improbably courtroom scenes ever. But then, how would you go about proving that your client is the real Santa Claus? John Payne portrays the eager young attorney whose client, one Kris Kringle, calmly insists he's St. Nick. Maureen O'Hara is the cynically businesswoman who finally believes.

## ABA Journal's List of Honorable Mentions

### The Accused (1998)

Jodie Foster is a woman who is gang-raped in a bar and, when the rapists go free, goads a reluctant prosecutor to pursue the patrons who urged them on.

### Adam's Rib (1949)

George Cukor's mannered comedy, with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn as married lawyers who oppose each other in court.

### Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956)

Dana Andrews is a writer who sets himself up on a murder rap to reveal the shortcoming of circumstantial evidence.

### The Caine Mutiny (1954)

Humphrey Bogart is riveting in this adaptation of Herman Wouk's complex novel about military authority and moral duty.

### Class Action (1991)

A father and daughter clash in and outside the courtroom as they square off in a volatile product liability case.

### The Client (1994)

Susan Sarandon is an underwhelming lawyer who finds herself representing a young boy who has witnessed a Mafia hit.

### Counsellor at Law (1933)

John Barrymore is a workaholic lawyer who is in danger of losing his family in this William Wyler film.

### The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell (1955)

Otto Preminger directs Gary Cooper in this tale of the real-life maverick general who thinks an airplane can sink a ship – and is court-martialed for proving it.

### The Devil's Advocate (1997)

A new attorney introduced into the world's most powerful law firm discovers that its managing partner is morally challenged.

### The Firm (1993)

Tom Cruise is recruited by a prestigious law firm that he gradually learns has a very sinister background.

### The Fortune Cookie (1966)

Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon romp in this Billy Wilder comedy about a sleazy lawyer who talks a relative into feigning injury for the sake of a lawsuit.

Ghosts of Mississippi (1996)

The true story of efforts to bring to justice Byron De La Beckwith for the 30-year-old murder of civil right activist Medgar Evers.

Intolerable Cruelty (2003)

The Coen brothers reveal their take on divorce law. George Clooney is at his toothy best.

Jagged Edge (1985)

Defense attorney Glenn Close gets close to a client, played by Jeff Bridges, who is on trial for the murder of his heiress wife.

JFK (1991)

Oliver Stone takes on New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's efforts to solve the Kennedy assassination. History yields to riveting storytelling.

Legally Blonde (2001)

Reese Witherspoon became one of the most sought-after actresses in Hollywood after ridiculing the elitism of Harvard Law.

Liar, Liar (1997)

A hilarious vehicle for Jim Carrey, who plays a lawyer who finds he is physically incapable of telling a fib.

Michael Clayton (2007)

George Clooney shines in this look at the dark underbelly of big-firm law.

Music Box (1989)

Hungarian immigrant Mike Laszlo, accused of being a war criminal, asks his daughter (Jessica Lange) to defend him in court. She learns more about him than she wants to know.

North Country (2005)

It's one woman against the system: The extraordinary Charlize Theron plays a miner who sues the company.

The Pelican Brief (1993)

A law student discovers a plot to assassinate U.S. Supreme Court justices in this John Grisham adaptation.

The People vs. Larry Flint (1996)

Cameos abound in this portrayal of the trial of the renowned porn publisher.

Primal Fear (1996)

Richard Gere is the attorney and Edward Norton a young altar boy accused of killing a priest in a story whose plot twists and turns.

The Rainmaker (1997)

Another John Grisham lawyer fights the system, this time with Matt Damon starring and Francis Ford Coppola directing.

A Time to Kill (1996)

An earnest retelling of the Grisham novel about a racially charged killing in the Deep South. Matthew McConaughey and Sandra Bullock spark.