30 Best Legal Movies of All Time

A scene from To Kill a Mockingbird. Photo courtesy of The Hollywood Reporter.

Summary: A list of the best legal movies of all time.

There are tons of legal movies in existence, and often times they are based on a true story and end up winning Oscars. This is great for real life lawyers, because who wouldn’t love to work on a case and one day be played by Matthew McConaughey or Julia Roberts? Plus, these movies glamourize the profession, making the public believe that legal life is all about fighting The Man and exposing The Truth. No one has to know you spend the majority of your time doing paperwork or appeasing your drunk boss.

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The following is a list of the best legal films out there, including dramas and comedies. Do you agree or disagree with the list? Let us know in the comments below.

A Civil Action

This thriller explores a case where a small Boston law firm takes on two conglomerates who they claim caused leukemia-related deaths in eight children. The Oscar-nominated film stars John Travolta as a lawyer obsessed with fighting a better-funded enemy.

A Few Good Men

Even those who haven’t seen the movie know the pivotal scene of A Few Good Men when Jack Nicholson’s character barks at Tom Cruise’s character, “You can’t handle the truth!” The courtroom drama about two Marines accused of killing one of their colleagues was written by A-list scribe, Aaron Sorkin, and it was loosely based off of a military case prosecuted by David Iglesias, who later become the Attorney General of New Mexico.

A Man for All Seasons

Legal movies don’t just have to deal with the modern justice system. In A Man for All Seasons, Sir Thomas More, played by Paul
Scofield, plays a judge who is caught in the trial between Henry VIII and the Roman Catholic Church. Henry VIII wanted to defy the church and divorce his wife so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. The film is famous for lines that tout law over emotion such as, "I know what's legal, not what's right. And I'll stick to what's legal."

**Amistad**

Steven Spielberg directed this 1997 film about a lawyer, played by Matthew McConaughey, who represents slaves involved in a slavery ship uprising. Although it was nominated for four Oscars, critics said that the film took too many liberties with the facts. Despite the controversy, *Amistad* examined our country’s history with slavery and how the law was used for and against it.

**Anatomy of a Murder**

*Anatomy of a Murder* tells the story of an Army lieutenant who was accused of killing a bartender who allegedly raped his wife. The script was an adaption of a novel that was based on true events and written by a Michigan judge. The seven Oscar-nominated film starred the A-List cast of James Stewart as the defense attorney and George C. Scott as the prosecutor.

**And Justice for All**

Al Pacino plays an angry attorney in *And Justice For All*. Photo courtesy of Blue Ray.

**A Time to Kill**

"Yes, they deserve to die, and I hope they burn in hell!" That was a powerful line spoken by Samuel L. Jackson in *A Time to Kill*, a John Grisham novel-turned-feature film. In the movie, Jackson plays a black father in a Southern town who murders the white supremacists who raped his young daughter. Matthew McConaughey, who plays a lawyer oh-so-well, plays a lawyer in this story who puts his life and family in danger in order to do what’s right.

**Breaker Morant**

In *Breaker Morant*, three coun trymen, who fight for the British Empire in the Boer War, are tried of war crimes in South Africa. The 1980 film deals with military themes of which orders to follow and what people are actually the enemy, and the superb writing was awarded with an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.

**Chicago**

Everyone surely remembers the singing and dancing in the Broadway musical-turned-movie, *Chicago*, but plot-wise, let’s not forget it tells the story of a sleazy lawyer (Richard Gere) who is trying to get off two female murderers (Catherine Zeta-Jones and Renee Zellweger.) The Oscar-winning film was a cynical take on how fame can arise from evil acts and how sometimes trials can become as sizzling as a vaudeville act. The film won Zeta-Jones an acting Oscar.
Erin Brockovich

Julia Roberts won her first Oscar for playing the vivacious Erin Brockovich, a real life legal investigator. In the film, Brockovich is a single mother who gets a job at a law firm. Thanks to her everywoman persona and low cut tops, she’s able to get information from witnesses that no one else could for a water contamination case. Her findings helped win a multi-million dollar class action lawsuit, one of the biggest in history.

In the Name of the Father

In In the Name of the Father, Daniel Day-Lewis played Gerry Conlon, who was falsely accused of IRA bombing sprees outside of London. The film chronicles the attempt of him and his father, played by Pete Postlethwaite, to prove their innocence. After fifteen years in jail, the Conlons were able to convince a human rights lawyer (Emma Thompson) to help their overturn their conviction.

Judgment at Nuremberg

This Stanley Kubrick film examined the 1948 Nazi war crimes trials. In particular, the film focuses on four judges who allegedly became Nazi accomplices by using their courts to turn a blind eye to Nazi atrocities. The film won two Oscars and starred Marlene Dietrich, who experienced the Nazi regime first-hand.

Kramer vs. Kramer

Divorce sucks. Just ask Johnny Depp, Mel Gibson, or Brad Pitt. While divorce is seen in modern day movies, no film has been able to capture the pain of it like classic Kramer vs. Kramer. In the film, Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep play estranged spouses fighting for custody of their son. Their explosive performances both won them Oscars, and it is said that Hoffman used his own divorce experience to create his character.

Legally Blonde

In *Legally Blonde*, Reese Witherspoon brought charm and wit to the character of Elle Woods, a bubbly sorority girl turned serious law student. In the beginning of the film, Elle started off as a ditzy blonde who seemed destined to be some rich guy’s trophy wife; but after she was dumped, she decides to follow her ex to Harvard Law School and win him back. While at Harvard Law, the underestimated Elle realizes that she doesn’t need a man and is actually great at law. In fact, she proves that she’s smarter than him and the “serious” girl he left her for.

**Liar Liar**

In *Liar Liar*, Jim Carrey plays Fletcher Jones, a scheming weasel of a lawyer who one day magically cannot tell a lie. His honesty is so extreme that it wrecks havoc on his career, as he previously used his gift of manipulation to get ahead. Once forced to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, Fletcher realizes he can actually succeed as a lawyer being honest and can use truth-telling to get closer to his son.

**Losing Isaiah**

Jessica Lange plays a white woman who adopted a black child named Isaiah, and she battles his birth mother, played by Halle Berry, over custody. Questions of race and motherhood are explored in this tearjerkng drama, which was directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal.

**Miracle on 34th Street**

Is Santa Claus real, and who cares if he exists or not? In *Miracle on 34th Street*, a man named Kris Kringle believes that he is truly Santa Claus, and for some reason, he goes on trial to prove his identity to a cynical world. While this type of story is completely implausible, the point of it is to inspire people to believe in joy, even if they know the world is a bitter place. The 1947 version won three Oscars and inspired a remake.

**My Cousin Vinny**

Everyone loves the story of an underdog; and fast-talking, inexperienced lawyer Vinny, played by Joe Pesci, was the ultimate underdog in *My Cousin Vinny*. The brash Brooklyn lawyer headed to a small town in Alabama to defend his nephew from a trumped up murder charge. The film had the ultimate fish-out-of-water story, and even though it was a comedy, the 1992 movie smartly gave a glimpse into criminal trials and the flaws of eyewitness testimony.

In *Philadelphia*, America’s favorite actor, Tom Hanks, played a gay lawyer who was terminated from his BigLaw firm after the partners discovered he had AIDS. Denzel Washington played a small-time personal injury lawyer who took on Hanks’ character’s wrongful termination case. While battling his clients’ bigoted employers, Washington’s character also had to come to terms with his own homophobia. The 1993 film was inspired by the true story of Geoffrey Bowers, who filed a similar lawsuit.

**Quiz Show**

TV game shows will never be the same after the “Twenty One” scandal. In real life, producers of the game show “Twenty One” rigged the program, giving contestants answers to either win or lose at the producers’ desire. After one contestant blew the whistle, a congressional investigator probed those involved to discover a history of fake games. This led to a hearing in front of Congress, which changed the ethics of television forever and gave us the compelling drama, *Quiz Show*.

In 1990, Jeremy Irons played the dependent husband of a rich socialite in *Reversal of Fortune*, and his character was accused of murdering his wife. The film was based on the true story of Claus von Bulow who was tried and convicted of murder in 1982. In real life, von Bulow hired famed attorney Alan Dershowitz, and the film was based on Dershowitz’s account of the trial.

**The Accused**

Jodi Foster starred in *The Accused*, a film that explores what happens to a rape victim who presses charges. In the film, Foster plays a party girl who was gang-raped in public. After she pressed charges against her assailants, it was her reputation that was put on trial.
The Crucible

The Salem witch hunt trials were one of the biggest legal disasters in American history. In Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, he explored how hysteria and mob mentality could lead to normal people murdering their friends and family. The film adaptation starred Daniel Day-Lewis, Joan Allen, and Winona Ryder.

The Firm

Tom Cruise running is one of the most memorable images of *The Firm*, a John Grisham novel adapted into a hit feature. In *The Firm*, Cruise plays a young attorney who joins a prestigious law firm with shady business practices. When he uncovers the truth, he has to decide whether to keep his golden handcuffs or expose his bosses.

The People v. Larry Flynt

Hustler Magazine’s Larry Flynt will go down in history for his unwavering commitment to fighting for First Amendment rights. In the *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, Woody Harrelson plays Flynt as a contentious, inappropriate defendant who fights censorship with his lawyer played by Edward Norton. The film was based on Flynt’s free speech case which was eventually seen before the United States Supreme Court.

The Rainmaker

*The Rainmaker* is another John Grisham novel-turned-movie, and this time, the story centers around a young lawyer who takes on a big insurance company that swindles poor folks in the South. Matt Damon plays the heroic young attorney, and he’s mentored by the weasely but smart legal advisor, Danny Devito.

The Verdict

After a woman dies during surgery, a medical malpractice lawsuit is filed in the movie, *The Verdict*. Paul Newman plays an alcoholic lawyer looking to rebuild his career, and he’s hired by the deceased’ family to represent them against the hospital. Like usual, Newman delivered a superb performance, and the 1980 film went on to be nominated for five Academy Awards.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” has been read by every American who has taken a high school English class. But did you know the story was also adapted into an Oscar-winning film starring Gregory Peck? Like the book, lawyer Atticus Fitch is tasked to defend his African-American neighbor Boo Radley, who was falsely accused of rape. While the movie was set in the Depression era, it’s message about morality, race, and trusting the law are still applicable today.
**Twelve Angry Men**

Legendary actor Henry Fonda brought Reginald Rose’s play to the screen by producing and starring in it. *Twelve Angry Men* tells the story of an opposing voice amongst a jury in what should have been an easy open-and-shut case. The pointed dialogue highlights the tense deliberations that jury members undertake, especially during a death row case. The film was nominated for three Oscars, but lost all awards to *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

**Witness for the Prosecution**

Legendary writer Agatha Christie paired with legendary director Billy Wilder to create the legendary legal drama, *Witness for the Prosecution*. The film tells the story of an affable man who is being tried for the murder of a wealthy woman. The problem with his case is that the defense’s star witness is the defendant’s callous wife, who decides to appear in court against him. The film, which is filled with clever dialogue and twists and turns, was nominated for six Oscars and starred Marlene Dietrich, Charles Laughton, and Tyrone Power.

Do you agree or disagree with this list? Let us know in the comments below!