

Learning Law Basics From Classic Films

BY ANGELA P. DODSON

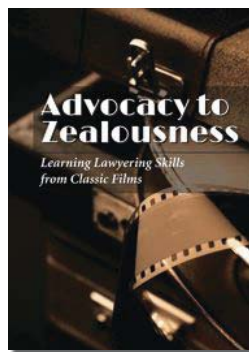
In the 1957 film “12 Angry Men,” almost all of the action takes place in a sparsely furnished room with a simple wooden conference table in the center, a dozen chairs, some windows, lights and a fan. An all-male, all-White jury enters to begin deliberations in a case in which the defendant’s guilt seems to be a foregone conclusion.

When the others rush to vote for conviction of a young Hispanic-American man for his father’s murder with scant consideration of the facts, one man holds out, insisting on a discussion of the case. A guilty verdict would automatically carry a death sentence, and a young life is at stake. The judge had admonished them that they must convict “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

The movie, based on a teleplay by Reginald Rose, is done in black and white with a stellar cast: Henry Fonda, E.G. Marshall, Jack Klugman, Lee J. Cobb, Martin Balsam, John Fiedler, among others. As the plot progresses, the biases, experiences and character of each juror comes into view, and the arguments reach a fever pitch to match the stifling heat of the cramped, un-air-conditioned room in mid-summer. Gradually sifting through the facts, flaws and fallacies in the case, the jurors shed demons, reach consensus and come down on the side of justice.

To Kelly Lynn Anders, director of communications and diversity at Creighton University School of Law in Omaha, Neb., this is not just an example of a good classic movie — though it is that. The feature film debut of director Sidney Lumet, it was so well-regarded that it won 13 movie-industry awards and nominations for three Oscars and for six other prizes. The enduring story was remade for television in 1997, cast with Courtney B. Vance, Ossie Davis, George C. Scott, James Gandolfini, Tony Danza and Jack Lemmon, among others, on the jury.

Anders sees the original film as an excellent teaching aid and uses it as a prime example of the art of negotiation in her book *Advocacy to Zealousness: Learning Lawyering Skills from Classic Films* (\$28, Carolina Academic Press, Jan. 9, 2012, ISBN-10: 1594607982, ISBN-13: 978-1594607981, pp. 236).



The book presents 26 lessons, each based on a classic film, focusing on specific skills, in alphabetical order, including advocacy (“Anatomy of a Murder”), balance (“The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit”), compassion (“To Kill a Mockingbird”), dependability (“Pinky”), empathy (“Gentlemen’s Agreement”) and so forth.

Each chapter begins with a discussion of a skill as it applies to lawyers, followed by an explanation of how the movie illustrates it. Discussion questions and exercises for improvement complete the chapters.

Anders said the book has received “quite a bit of positive interest.”

“People are curious and interested in the topics and interested in seeing the films,” she said. “Already some professors around the country are considering the book for use in their classes, and it’s in law libraries around the country and one in Germany.”

Films were chosen from the era before 1968, when the modern rating system, the G, PG, PG-13, R and NC-17 — codes adopted by the Motion Picture Association of America — took effect. The earlier movies generally adhered to strict production codes that prohibited nudity, profanity and gratuitous violence, making them more suitable for educational uses than later films might be.

“Those films are going to depict stories that are compelling, but they are going to do so without the creative crutches of nudity, (graphic) violence or expletives,” Anders said.

The films that made the cut also had to be available on DVD. Anders said she

screened 327 films, some of them twice, to select those in the book, a process that took three years. The professor said she knew early on that she wanted to include “12 Angry Men,” as well as “To Kill a Mockingbird,” which is about the trial of a Black man accused of raping a young White woman in the South in the 1930s. She also knew that she would choose “Inherit the Wind,” which recalls the “Monkey Trial,” the 1925 case of John Scopes, a teacher accused of breaking the law in Tennessee by teaching evolution.

“There are some fascinating and really sophisticated stories that are depicted in a very clean way,” Anders said. “They are very rich with story lines that are perfect fodder for talking about professionalism and ethical behavior as lawyers.”

Not all the selections star a lawyer or even deal directly with the law, she noted. “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” for instance, deals with a writer posing as a Jewish man to be able to experience and convey what that was like. Conversely, “Pinky” — shockingly radical in its day — deals with the life of a young African-American woman who returns to the South after studying nursing in Boston, where she “passed” for White and became engaged to a White doctor.

Anders has been a fan of classic movies since childhood, when she spent Sunday mornings watching them on “Family Film Festival,” hosted by Tom Hatten, on KTLA-TV in Los Angeles. She credits Hatten in her book’s acknowledgments. That program “really sparked my love of classic films,” she said.

Anders also was a movie reviewer and reporter at the *Omaha World-Herald* before she began her career in law. She has taught at the Art Institute of Colorado, the University of Denver College of Law, Pacific McGeorge School of Law, Washburn University School of Law, and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research focuses on social media ethics, professionalism, and film theory. She also is the author of *The Organized Lawyer* from Carolina Academic Press. ■