

Movies set the bar high for honorable lawyers

A Creighton Law School staff member undertook a three-year task to view how movies have portrayed lawyers — not in just a few dozen films, mind you, but in a few hundred. To be exact, 327.

“It turned into a much more comprehensive and time-consuming project than I had initially envisioned,” said Kelly Lynn Anders, a lawyer and film buff. “But I’ve watched old movies since I was a kid.” She whittled down the movies she watched to 26 that illustrate important skills for lawyers, though the skills are personal and professional characteristics that apply to everyone — balance, compassion, dependability, judgment, loyalty, sincerity, tact and willpower. The result is her A-to-Z book titled “Advocacy to Zealousness: Learning Lawyering Skills from Classic Films.”

Aimed primarily at students and new lawyers, the book also may appeal to screen aficionados. This is Oscar Sunday, and many of the films she cites have won Academy Awards in various categories.

“Some actors — I developed a lot more respect for their choices and their body of work,” Anders said last week. “Even before ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ Gregory Peck did so many wonderful films that were ahead of their time, and he really portrayed a lot of courageous characters.”

Few of us would plow through hundreds of films, but reading Anders’ well-written essays on legal skills and her synopses of her final 26 made me want to rent them and, in many cases, see what I’ve missed. She doesn’t give away endings.

These are classic films, all pre-1968. She intentionally chose that era, partly because they can be shown in a classroom setting.

“In fact,” she writes, “these filmmakers’ ability to convey decidedly sensitive and controversial topics without the creative crutches of nudity, violence or expletives is an impressive and refreshing feat.”

Published last month by Carolina Aca-



Michael Kelly

demie Press (available on its site or on Amazon.com, \$28), her book is listed in law libraries across the country.

Anders is director of communications and diversity at the Creighton University School of Law, and her book pays attention to issues of diversity. The 1949 movie “Pinky,” for example, deals with racism in law enforcement and the courts.

Legal training is hard, but Anders said it needn’t be dry or cumbersome. It should be memorable and enjoyable, and professors do sometimes show film clips, she said. There are few comprehensive resources, though, tying in films to legal skills.

Movies are one way to show the variety and drama of the legal profession. Some of the classic films in her book, Anders said, were cutting-edge.

“Anatomy of a Murder” (1959), which illustrates the skill of legal advocacy, was “one of the first to openly discuss elements of sexual assault.”

“The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” (1956), her model for the skill of balance, “was one of the first times a male character mentions the importance of work-life balance.”

“To Kill a Mockingbird” (1962), depicting the skill of compassion, “always serves as a welcome refresher of the best of what the legal profession can and should stand for.”

Though Anders says most lawyers are truthful and upstanding, she acknowledges that some people view the profession with skepticism.

Her book doesn’t shy away from that. “The Fortune Cookie” (1966) shows a dishonest ambulance-chaser. The skill of willpower is illustrated by a lack of it in “Days of Wine

and Roses” (1962), which addresses the downward spiral of addiction.

“I purposely selected some films that didn’t always show lawyers in a positive light,” Anders said. “I wanted there to be an opportunity to talk about the pros and cons of behavior.”

In selecting her final 26 films, some that she thought would make the final cut got bumped. But she knew from the start that others, such as “Mockingbird,” “Inherit the Wind” and “Judgment at Nuremberg,” would make the book.

By sticking to pre-1968 movies, though, she eliminated such later lawyer-related films as “Philadelphia,” “A Few Good Men,” “Erin Brockovich,” “The Verdict,” “My Cousin Vinny” and “The Accused.”

Anders said other books have covered films of recent decades, but she knows of none that have done what she did — tying in classic movies to legal skills.

An Omaha native, Anders grew up in Pasadena, Calif., and graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on a Warren Buffett Scholarship, as her mother had. She wrote for The World-Herald for two years, including reviewing movies.

She returned to the West Coast and eventually worked as deputy press secretary in the California State Assembly. She earned a law degree from the Pepperdine University Law School and then worked for the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver.

Anders served as associate dean for student affairs at Washburn University School of Law in Topeka, Kan., before joining the Creighton Law School in 2010. She is the author of “The Organized Lawyer.”

She hopes her book on classic films inspires new and future lawyers to emulate the best traditions of the profession — with discipline in their personal and professional lives and “a cool head, a strategic mind, a warm heart and a strong spine.”

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ANDERS’ PICKS

- 1. To Kill a Mockingbird** (1962) – A small-town lawyer offers a timeless example of compassion.
- 2. The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit** (1956) – “Mad Men” fans will see a little Don Draper in this tale of work-life balance.
- 3. Anatomy of a Murder** (1959) – A sophisticated script highlights the intricacies of advocacy.
- 4. Gentleman’s Agreement** (1947) – A writer pretends to be Jewish and learns the skill of empathy.
- 5. The Talk of the Town** (1942) – School is in session when a persnickety law professor learns a lesson in flexibility.
- 6. The Fortune Cookie** (1966) – An ambulance chaser and his reluctant client show the importance of honesty.
- 7. The Wrong Man** (1956) – Alfred Hitchcock’s film about an investigation gone awry.
- 8. 12 Angry Men** (1957) – A lone juror demonstrates the skill of negotiation.
- 9. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance** (1962) – A lawyer in the Old West learns the skill of responsibility.
- 10. Adam’s Rib** (1949) – Zealousness takes center stage when lawyers on opposing sides in the courtroom must work as a team at home.