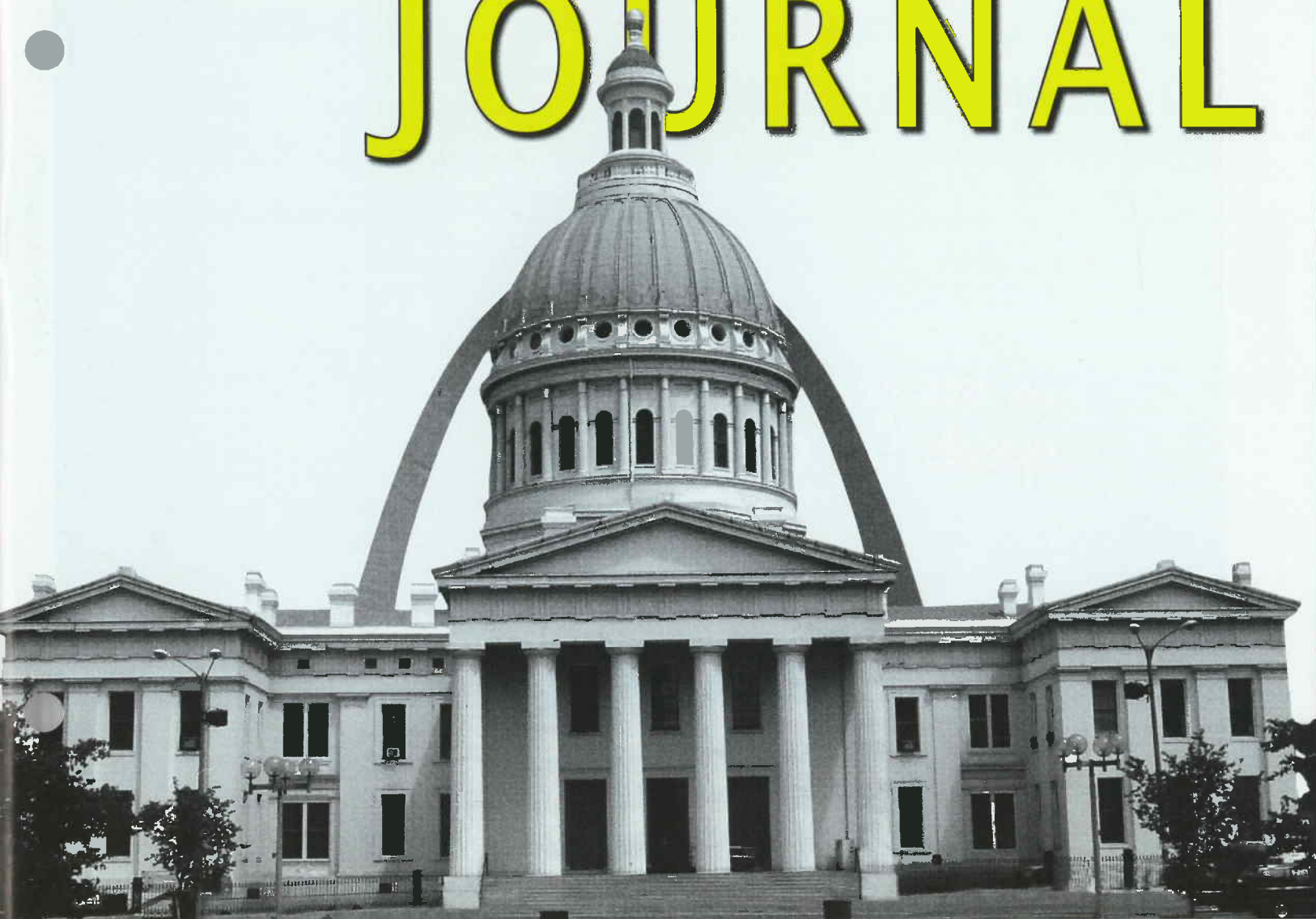


The St. Louis Bar

JOURNAL



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My Favorite Legal Movies

Many lawyers, including myself, are movie buffs. Initially, I thought of this column as a diversion from serious topics, but, upon further consideration, exploration of legal movies is an important topic. Legal movies and television shows are the general public's primary source of knowledge about the justice system. Moreover, the level of drama and polish found in the fantasy courtrooms of Hollywood forms the expectations jurors and our clients have for the presentations and arguments we make in real courtrooms. So with that rationalization, I now feel justified in rambling about my favorite legal movies.

My favorite courtroom movie is *Inherit the Wind* (1960). This film is a fictionalized account of the "Scopes Monkey Trial." The actual story needs little embellishment, as it featured a politically controversial subject, larger-than-life personalities, and media frenzy. The real opponents, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryant, certainly provide substantial star power. Hollywood increases the luminance, however, with the addition of Spencer Tracy and Gene Kelly. Gene Kelly's role draws me to the film because it provides a serious exploration of the relationship between law and media coverage that is often mentioned but seldom thoughtfully.

Hollywood has always produced comedies. However, the list of movies that can make a thinking adult laugh is short. This, combined with the tendency of the law to evoke more drama than laughs, leaves a miniscule list of legal comedies. At the head of that list is *My Cousin Vinny* (1992), whose all-star cast and truly funny script make it required for in-

clusion here and as a centerpiece on the chamber desk of Judge David Lee Vincent, III in St. Louis County.

One reason we enjoy legal movies is because of our ability to identify with the lawyers portrayed in them. So I have a special fondness for a couple of obscure movies that feature probate law, my primary practice area for the first ten years of my career. The first is *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), which I always remember whenever the probate court appoints me as an attorney for an Involuntary Civil Commitment patient. I wonder how a probate commissioner would react to arguing that one of my assigned clients was not delusional, but was in fact Santa Claus.

The second probate law film I enjoy is *Body Heat* (1981), whose plot turns on every attorney's law school nemesis: the rule against perpetuities. *Body Heat* also falls within another sub-genre many attorneys enjoy, movies that feature a lawyer tricked by a client. These movies challenge our belief that we are the ones planning the strategy and calling the shots in litigation. The best of the lawyer-tricked genre has to be *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), which stars Jimmy Stewart as a sole-practitioner everyone can identify with. However, any list of the excellent lawyer-tricked films would be incomplete without some acknowledgement of *The Jagged Edge* (1985), *Presumed Innocent* (1990), and *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957).

Another sub-genre, movies featuring English common law courts, include *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) and *The Crucible* (1957).

Movies that combine the military

and the law have carved out their own particular niche. The best of these include *Breaker Morant* (1980), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), and *The Caine Mutiny* (1954). *A Few Good Men* (1992) may not measure up to the others but it would be hard to overlook Jack Nicholson's exceptional portrayal of the bombastic Colonel Nathan Jessep and for its importance to the game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon as Tom Cruise joins Bacon and Nicholson in the cast.

Two movies are important to many lawyers for their portrayal of life outside the courtroom. *The Paper Chase* (1973) encapsulates the Socratic Method and law school experience. And no one who has ever sought employment as an attorney can avoid thinking about *The Firm* (1993), where the protagonist's dream job at a big firm turns out to be an even bigger moral sellout than expected.

This column will probably generate a more visceral response than if I had expounded on serious subjects. As my year as BAMSLS president draws to a close, I will have more time to answer the indignant emails of fans of the movies I have slighted. I'm certain I'll get letters from at least twelve angry men as well as all the lawyers with sons named "Atticus" and daughters called "Scout".

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