

# On a lighter note!

Mark Pawlowski takes a look at some film comedies with a distinctively legal theme for the festive season



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## *The Fortune Cookie (1966)*

TV cameraman Harry Hinkle (played by Jack Lemmon) gets knocked out accidentally during a football game and his attorney (brother-in-law), Walter Matthau, gets him to feign partial paralysis in order to claim huge damages (\$1m) from the stadium's insurance company. The film is a delight to watch, not least because of Matthau's wonderful portrayal of a scheming, fast-talking American lawyer racing through ever more futile efforts to outmanoeuvre the other side. The sequence in which Matthau attends the law offices of the attorneys acting for the insurance company in order to persuade them to settle, quoting from various precedents, is one of the many gems in the film. Not surprisingly, he won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. The film is included among the American Film Institute's 2000 list of the 500 movies nominated for the top 100 Funniest American Movies.

## *Adam's Rib (1949)*

As a great devotee of Tracy/Hepburn movies, the writer could not resist adding this to his shortlist of comedy movies. The film is a delightful George Cukor romantic comedy in which Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy (pictured) are husband-and-wife lawyers engaged in a battle of sexes as they respectively defend and prosecute a woman (played by the wonderful Judy Holliday) accused of shooting her two-timing husband. The courtroom dramatics spill over into the lawyers' home life with amusing consequences, and an opportunistic neighbour (played by David Wayne) wastes no time in 'putting the moves' on Hepburn when he sees her marriage in turmoil. At one point in the film, he delivers one of the most famous anti-lawyer lines in cinema history: 'Lawyers should never marry other lawyers. This is called inbreeding, from which comes idiot children and more lawyers'. The film was the sixth of Tracy and Hepburn's nine cinematic collaborations. In 1992, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant'.

## *My Cousin Vinny (1992)*

Two young men travelling through rural Alabama are arrested and put on trial for a murder they did not commit. Their cousin, Vinny Gambini (played by Joe Pesci), a Brooklyn personal injury lawyer who has only recently passed the Bar exam after six unsuccessful attempts and with no trial experience, agrees to defend them. He manages, however, to fool the trial judge that he is experienced enough for the case. His ignorance of basic courtroom procedures, dress code, and his abrasive attitude cause the judge to repeatedly hold him in contempt of court. The 'two youts' exchange between the heavily New York-accented Vinny and the Alabama trial judge is probably the most remembered:

Vinny: Is it possible that the two youts...

Judge: Uh, the two what? What was that word?

Vinny: Uh, what word?

Judge: Two what?

Vinny: What?

Judge: Did you say 'yutes'?

Vinny: Yeah, two youts

Judge: What is a yute?

Vinny: Oh excuse me, Your Honour, two *youths*...

The comic interplay between Vinny and his fiancée Mona Lisa (Marisa Tomei) adds to the courtroom comedy. At one point in the film, she says to Vinny: 'You wanna know what I'm nervous about? I'll tell you what I'm nervous about. I am in the dark here with all this legal crap. I have no idea what's going on. All I know is that you're screwing up and I can't help.' Marisa Tomei received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role.

## *Legally Blonde (2001)*

At an early point in the film, Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) is told by her Californian friends not to go to Harvard because law school is for those who are 'ugly, serious and boring'. This cultural

assumption about law school is highlighted in the film when Elle meets several of her fellow law students in a small group discussion in the grounds of the campus on her first day. One is depicted as a 'dork' with numerous doctorates and another as an 'arrogant genius' who enjoys telling people his IQ and that famous writers take their ideas from his own essays. Elle also does not study much and yet is able to achieve almost perfect grades by simply cramming for a few days prior to the exams. She then successfully represents a murder defendant in court and wins a prestigious place in a large lawyer's firm. In terms of its entertainment value, the film is undoubtedly very watchable, but as a representation of the legal world it is, of course, hugely misleading—law students do not fit into narrow stereotypes and there sadly is no 'fast-track' to success in the legal profession.

## *Brothers in Law (1957)*

This is a British comedy, set in the legal profession, directed by Roy Boulting and starring Richard Attenborough, Ian Carmichael and Terry-Thomas. Roger Thursby is a newly qualified barrister, who is apprenticed to an eccentric and absent-minded QC, whose first appearances in court prove to be disastrous as he encounters a succession of cantankerous judges. At one point in the film, his clerk says: 'You start with a blue robing bag, sir. Then if you do good work . . . he'll give you a red one. If at the end of seven years you haven't been given a red bag—use a suitcase'. The film, an adaptation of the 1955 novel of the same title by Henry Cecil, himself a QC in real life, is a warm and witty piece of old England—public school accents, old-fashioned values and good manners prevail. Despite its quaint English attitudes, it is still very funny today. **NLJ**

Mark Pawlowski is a barrister and professor emeritus of property law, School of Law, University of Greenwich.