

Theatrical Plays with Legal Themes

The plots of both timeless and modern theatrical plays can serve in the study of American legal principles, landmark court decisions and the themes of law and justice. These are only a few of the many such great works on legal themes throughout history and across cultures.

***A Few Good Men* by Aaron Sorkin**

This courtroom drama revolves around two United States Marines accused of murdering a fellow marine, and the challenges faced by the military lawyers defending them.

***All My Sons* by Arthur Miller**

In 1941-43, the Wright Aeronautical Corporation conspired with military inspectors to approve defective aircraft engines. *All My Sons* is premised on this true manufacturing product liability case, and dramatizes the personal, tragic aftermath faced by the individuals involved in the scheme.

***Antigone* by Sophocles**

This tragic Greek drama revolves around Antigone's attempts to bury her brother Polynices in accordance to tradition. Her actions are deemed punishable by death, as he is seen as a traitor to Thebes and the law forbids mourning for him.

***Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* by Eric Bentley**

The dialogue of this play is based on transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings of the 1950's, during which prominent Hollywood figures were subpoenaed to name communists or suspected communists in the motion picture industry.

***Chicago* by Maurine Dallas Watkins**

The musical version is based on the real-life murder trials of Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner as chronicled in 1924 by the playwright in the *Chicago Tribune*. The play depicts women as celebrities being tried, convicted and acquitted in Prohibition-era Chicago.

***Counsellor-at-Law* by Elmer Rice**

This play tells the story of George Simon, a highly successful lawyer who beat the odds to rise from his humble roots on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The conflict revolves around Simon's earlier decision to allow his client to commit perjury or, namely, lie on the witness stand.

***Damn Yankees* by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop**

Set in 1950s Washington D.C., this musical comedy is a modern retelling of the Faustian tale. The play facilitates discussions about law of business contracts through the agreement between Joe Boyd, the main character, and the Devil.

***Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* by Moisés Kauffman**

The play illustrates a rare private prosecution of criminal libel and subsequent trials for gross indecency, as sodomy was considered a crime in 1895.

***Inherit The Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee**

This play raises the ideas of free thought, speech and religion, and interrogates the then contemporary McCarthy Trials, through a fictionalization of the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial.

***Inquest* by Donald Freed**

This play depicts the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were convicted and then executed for espionage and giving information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

***Judgment at Nuremberg* by Abby Mann**

Originally written for television, this play presents a dramatic interpretation of the Nuremberg trials in post-Nazi Germany.

***Lenny: A Play* by Julian Barry**

This play is based on the life of Lenny Bruce, an American comedian and social critic who was repeatedly arrested and tried for his use of obscene language in his performances; this work raises questions surrounding the freedom of speech and indecency laws.

***Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare**

In this Shakespearean play, the judge Angelo sentences Claudio to death for impregnating his betrothed before fulfilling all the formalities for a civil marriage; should the letter of the law be applied strictly, regardless of the consequences?

***Slaughter City* by Naomi Wallace**

After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, recommendations made by the Factory Investigation Commission (1911) resulted in labor-related laws addressing child labor and safety regulations for factory workers, and led to the creation of the United States Labor Department by President Woodrow Wilson.

***The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* by Herman Wouk**

This courtroom drama depicts the fictional court-martial of Willis Keith, who mutinied aboard the USS *Caine*.

***The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman**

This play centers on the theme of slander: when an angry student accuses her two headmistresses of having a lesbian affair in order to avoid being sent back to school, these women's lives quickly unravel and are destroyed.

***The Chicago Conspiracy Trial* by Ron Sossi and Frank Condon**

A theatrical arrangement of original transcripts from the Chicago Eight trial in 1969; in this case, eight defendants were charged with conspiracy and for inciting the 1968 riots in Chicago.

***The Crucible* by Arthur Miller**

Written as an allegory of McCarthyism, this play presents a dramatized and partially fictionalized story of the Salem witch trials during 1692 and 1693.

***The Exonerated* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen**

Real-life stories of six individuals wrongfully convicted to death-row and their subsequent exonerations through DNA evidence.

***The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kauffman**

Laramie, Wyoming was the epicenter of the 1998 murder of university student Mathew Sheppard, who was gay. The play has brought attention to hate crime laws.

***The Man in the Glass Booth* by Robert Shaw**

This play depicts the fictional trial of Arthur Goldman, who is kidnapped and taken to Israel on charges of being a Nazi war criminal.

***The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare**

This Shakespearean work famously centers on the trial between the moneylender Shylock and the merchant Antonio, who contracted to forfeit a pound of flesh should he be unable to repay a loan by a certain date.

***The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* by Daniel Berrigan**

The play is partially based on a transcript of the Catonsville Nine trial, during which nine activists were charged for burning military draft records for the Vietnam War.

***Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose**

In this famous courtroom drama, a single juror sows a seed of reasonable doubt in the minds of his peers during a homicide trial; the work explores ideas surrounding the death penalty, wrongful conviction and jury service.

***Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe**

Multiple theatrical adaptations of Stowe's original book have been made since the 1800s. The original story revolves around the harsh lives of slaves, and can be used for discussions of slavery and civil rights.

***Witness for the Prosecution* by Agatha Christie**

In this gripping fictional drama, Leonard Vole is arrested for the murder of a wealthy widow. His wife agrees to give her testimony – not in his defense – but as a witness for the prosecution.