

# Drama films

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Drama Films are serious presentations or stories with settings or life situations that portray realistic characters in conflict with either themselves, others, or forces of nature. A dramatic film shows us human beings at their best, their worst, and everything in-between. Each of the types of subject-matter themes have various kinds of dramatic plots. Dramatic films are probably the largest film genre because they include a broad spectrum of films.

See also crime films, melodramas, epics (historical dramas), biopics (biographical), or romantic genres - just some of the other genres that have developed from the dramatic genre. Dramatic themes often include current issues, societal ills, and problems, concerns or injustices, such as racial prejudice, religious intolerance (such as anti-Semitism), drug addiction, poverty, political unrest, the corruption of power, alcoholism, class divisions, sexual inequality, mental illness, corrupt societal institutions, violence toward women or other explosive issues of the times.

These films have successfully drawn attention to the issues by taking advantage of the topical interest of the subject. Although dramatic films have often dealt frankly and realistically with social problems, the tendency has been for Hollywood, especially during earlier times of censorship, to exonerate society and institutions and to blame problems on an individual, who more often than not, would be punished for his/her transgressions.

### **Social Problem Dramas:**

Social dramas or "message films" expressed powerful lessons, such as the harsh conditions of Southern prison systems in *Hell's Highway* (1932) and I

Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang (1932), the plight of wandering groups of young boys on freight cars during the Depression in William Wellman's Wild Boys of the Road (1933), or the lawlessness of mob rule in Fritz Lang's Fury (1936), or the resourcefulness of lifer prisoner and bird expert Robert Stroud (Burt Lancaster) in John Frankenheimer's Birdman of Alcatraz (1961), or the tale of a framed, unjustly imprisoned journalist (James Cagney) in Each Dawn I Die (1939).

In Yield to the Night (1956), Diana Dors relived her life and crime as she awaited her execution. A tough, uncompromising look at New York waterfront corruption was found in the classic American film, director Elia Kazan's On the Waterfront (1954) with Marlon Brando as a longshoreman who testified to the Waterfront Crimes Commission. The film drew criticism with the accusation that it appeared to justify Kazan's informant role before the HUAC. Problems of the poor and dispossessed have often been the themes of the great films, including The Good Earth (1937) with Chinese peasants facing famine, storms, and locusts, and John Ford's The Grapes of Wrath (1940) about an indomitable, Depression-Era Okie family - the Joads - who survived a tragic journey from Oklahoma to California.

Martin Scorsese's disturbing and violent Taxi Driver (1976) told of the despairing life of a lone New York taxi cab driver amidst nighttime urban sprawl. Issues and conflicts within a suburban family were showcased in director Sam Mendes' Best Picture-winning American Beauty (1999), as were problems with addiction in Steven Soderbergh's Traffic (2000). Films About Mental Illness:

Two films from different eras that dealt with the problems of the mentally ill and conditions in mental institutions were Anatole Litvak's *The Snake Pit* (1948) with tormented Olivia de Havilland's assistance from a psychiatrist, and Milos Forman's adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) with Jack Nicholson as a rebellious institutional patient who feigned insanity but ultimately was squashed by Nurse Ratched and the repressive system. Bette Davis played a neurotic and domineering woman in John Huston's *In This Our Life* (1942). Sam Wood's *Kings Row* (1942) examined the various fears and phobias in a small-town.

Repressed and prohibited from consummating her love with Warren Beatty, Natalie Wood exhibited signs of insanity in Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). Another teenager (Kathleen Quinlan) felt suicidal tendencies due to schizophrenia in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1977). And 1930s-40s actress Frances Farmer (Jessica Lange) tragically declined due to a mental breakdown and subsequent lobotomy in *Frances* (1982). The repressed emotions and tragic crises in a seemingly perfect family were documented in Robert Redford's directorial debut Best Picture and Best Director-winning *Ordinary People* (1980).

### **Films About Alcoholism:**

A hard look was taken at alcoholism with Ray Milland as a depressed writer in Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and Jack Lemmon (and Lee Remick) in Blake Edwards' *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962). An aging alcoholic singer (Bing Crosby) desperate for a comeback was the theme of *The Country Girl* (1954) - the film that provided Grace Kelly with a Best

Actress Oscar. Susan Hayward acted the decline into alcoholism of 1930s star Lillian Roth in Daniel Mann's biopic *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955).

More recently, Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway played the parts of two fellow alcoholics in Barbet Schroeder's *Barfly* (1987). Films about Disaffected Youth and Generational Conflict: Juvenile delinquency, young punks and gangs, and youth rebellion were the subject matter of *Dead End* (1937), Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953) with biker Marlon Brando disrupting a small town, Richard Brooks' *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) with Glenn Ford as an idealistic teacher in a slum area school, and Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) with James Dean as an iconic disaffected youth.

### **Race Relations and Civil Rights Dramas:**

Films that were concerned with race relations included Hollywood's first major indictment of racism in producer Stanley Kramer's and director Mark Robson's *Home of the Brave* (1949), the story of a black WWII soldier facing bigoted insults from his squad.

Then, there was John Sturges' *Bad Day At Black Rock* (1955) about small-town Japanese-American prejudice uncovered by a one-armed Spencer Tracy, Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958) with Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier as bound-together escaping convicts - and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) about an inter-racial couple (Sidney Poitier as WHO doctor John Prentiss and Katharine Houghton as SF socialite Joanna Drayton) planning on marrying who needed parental approval from Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy (in their ninth and last film together).

Also, *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) featured a bigoted sheriff and a black homicide detective working together to solve a murder, and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) - about racial tensions and eventual violence during a hot Brooklyn summer. Strong indictments toward anti-Semitism were made in Elia Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) with writer Gregory Peck posing as a Jew, and *Crossfire* (1947) about the mysterious murder of a Jew. The Japanese film classic from Akira Kurosawa titled *Rashomon* (1951) examined a violent ambush, murder and rape in 12th century Japan from four different perspectives.

### **Courtroom Dramas:**

Courtroom legal dramas, which include dramatic tension in the courtroom setting, maneuverings between trial opponents (lawyers, prosecutors, and clients), surprise witnesses, and the psychological breakdown of key participants, were exemplified in films such as the following:

- William Dieterle's film noir *The Accused* (1948), with Robert Cummings defending college professor Loretta Young's self-defense murder
- *12 Angry Men* (1957) with Henry Fonda and eleven other jurists in a tense deliberation room
- Billy Wilder's intriguing and plot-twisting *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) based on an Agatha Christie play
- Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) with James Stewart as a defense lawyer for accused murderer Ben Gazzara

- Compulsion (1959) the Navy court-martial trial based on the Herman Wouk play of the same name in The Caine Mutiny (1954) - a film with a memorable performance of Humphrey Bogart as Captain Queeg
- the historic Scopes Trial battle in Inherit the Wind (1960) pitting Spencer Tracy against Fredric March in a case brought against a schoolteacher for teaching Darwinism
- the social drama regarding the Nazi war crimes trials in Judgment at Nuremberg (1961) with Burt Lancaster as a Nazi judge defended by Nazi defense attorney Maximilian Schell in a 1948 court ruled by Chief Allied Judge Spencer Tracy
- the defense case of a black accused of rape in To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), adapted from the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel by Harper Lee about civil rights

In addition, director Robert Benton's Best Picture-winning Kramer vs. Kramer (1979) focused on the subject of a nurturing father (Dustin Hoffman) trying to win a child custody case with divorced Meryl Streep. An Australian film, Breaker Morant (1980) was another tense courtroom drama - the true story of soldiers in the Boer War who were used as scapegoats by the British Army. The award-winning drama, Sidney Lumet's The Verdict (1982) featured Paul Newman as an alcoholic, has-been Boston lawyer fighting a case of medical malpractice against James Mason. Glenn Close defended lover/client Jeff Bridges in Richard Marquand's who-dun-it Jagged Edge (1985).

Assistant DA Kelly McGillis defended the bar-room gang-raped Jodie Foster (an Oscar-winning role) in The Accused (1988). A Soldier's Story (1984)

examined racial hatred in a 1940s Southern military post in a dramatic courtroom murder/mystery. And *A Few Good Men* (1992) portrayed the courtroom conflict (known for its catchphrase: " You can't handle the truth! ") between established Marine Colonel Jessup (Jack Nicholson) and two young Naval attorneys (Tom Cruise and Demi Moore) regarding the circumstances surrounding the hazing (" Code Red") death (by asphyxiation due to acute lactic acidosis) of Private Santiago - a Marine stationed at Guantanamo Naval Air Station in Cuba.

Jonathan Demme's AIDS drama, *Philadelphia* (1993)

examined discrimination against AIDS and the legal defense of an AIDS sufferer (Tom Hanks) who was fired. Political Dramas: Political dramas include Frank Capra's two political tales - *State of the Union* (1948) with Tracy/Hepburn, and his classic story of a naive Senator's fight against political corruption in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Conversely, the award-winning, potent story of a corrupt politician was dramatized in Robert Rossen's *All the King's Men* (1949) with Broderick Crawford as the rising politician. Alexander Knox starred as President Woodrow Wilson in Henry King's epic, big budget bio *Wilson* (1944).

In Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (1962), stars Charles Laughton (in his last film), Franchot Tone, and Lew Ayres portrayed scheming Senators during Henry Fonda's crisis-threatened Presidency. The controversial *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) questioned the Cold War brainwashing of a Korean War hero. Michael Ritchie's *The Candidate* (1972) examined the harsh reality of the campaign trail with political hopeful Robert Redford



starring as an attorney running for the Senate. Oliver Stone's conspiracy-centered drama, *JFK* (1991), attempted to disprove the theory that President Kennedy's killer acted alone.

### **Journalism, the Press and Media-Related Dramas:**

Dramatic films often center around the theme of journalism, the world of reporters and news. Often regarded as the best film ever made, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) was an insightful character study of a newspaper magnate. Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976) was a docu-drama of real-life journalists Bernstein and Woodward investigating the Watergate scandal. Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976) with Peter Finch as a despairing newsman was a critical look at TV news, while Sydney Pollack's *Absence of Malice* (1981) told about an over-earnest journalist (Sally Field) and a wrongly-implicated defendant (Paul Newman). James L. Brooks' *Broadcast News* (1987) focused on the world of network news shows, editors, and reporters.

Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) showed how a down-home country boy (Andy Griffith in his film debut as Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes) could be transformed into a pop television show icon and political megalomaniac. Through the eyes of a cameraman, Haskell Wexler's docu-drama *Medium Cool* (1969) covered the corruption and events surrounding Chicago's 1968 Democratic Convention. In Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1962), Mel Gibson played the role of an Australian journalist working during the time of President Sukarno's coup in mid-60s Indonesia. And in Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1982), James Woods played the role of a photographer in

war-torn El Salvador. WWII Homefront Dramas: Dramatic films which have portrayed the "homefront" during times of war, and the subsequent problems of peacetime adjustment include William Wyler's *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) about a separated middle-class family couple (Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon) during the Blitz, Clarence Brown's *The Human Comedy* (1943) with telegram delivery boy Mickey Rooney bringing news from the front to small-town GI families back home, John Cromwell's *Since You Went Away* (1944) with head of family Claudette Colbert during her husband's absence, and another William Wyler poignant classic *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) with couples awkwardly brought back together forever changed after the war: Dana Andrews and Virginia Mayo, Fredric March and Myrna Loy, and Harold Russell and Cathy O'Donnell.

### **History-Related Dramas:**

Films that have dramatized portions of the American past include W. S. Van Dyke's *San Francisco* (1936) on the eve of the 1906 quake, John Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) with Claudette Colbert and Henry Fonda facing marauding Indian attacks at the time of American independence, Howard Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941) with Gary Cooper as the gentle hick-hero of the WWI trenches, the gothic drama of a turn of the century family in Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), and of course *Gone With The Wind* (1939) during the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras. Exquisite, nostalgic family dramas include John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) - a flashback of Roddy McDowall's childhood in a Welsh mining village, and George Stevens' tribute to a Norwegian immigrant mother (Irene Dunne) raising her family in San Francisco in *I Remember Mama* (1948).

## **Sports Dramas:**

Dramatic sports films or biographies have created memorable portraits of all-American sports heroes, individual athletes, or teams who are faced with tough odds in a championship match, race or large-scale sporting event, soul-searching or physical/psychological injuries, or romantic sub-plot distractions. Fictional sports films normally present a single sport (the most common being baseball, football, basketball, and boxing), and include the training and rise (and/or fall) of the underdog or champion in the world of sports. Typical sports films (with biographical elements) include the sentimental biography of the Notre Dame football coach, Lloyd Bacon's *Knute Rockne: All-American* (1940). One of the best films ever made about pro-football was Ted Kotcheff's *North Dallas Forty* (1979) which examined the brutal fact of labor abuses and drug use in professional football - loosely basing its story on the championship Dallas Cowboys team. The tearjerking made-for-TV sports film *Brian's Song* (1970) used professional football as the backdrop for its sad tale of the death of a Chicago Bears running back (James Caan).

Burt Reynolds starred in *The Longest Yard* (1974) as scandalized ex-professional football quarterback Paul Crewe in prison who must organize a team of convicts to challenge a prison-guard team (and then face the additional challenge of throwing the game). Recently, Cameron Crowe's sports romance-drama *Jerry Maguire* (1996), famous for the phrase "Show me the money!" starred Tom Cruise as a hard-driven major sports agent, and Academy Award-winning Cuba Gooding, Jr. as a football player. One of the best sports biopics was Sam Wood's *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942) with

Gary Cooper in a fine performance as New York Yankees great Lou Gehrig. In *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), the famed black player who crossed the major-league 'color-line' and joined the Brooklyn Dodgers portrayed himself.

Director Barry Levinson's mythical and romanticized film about baseball titled *The Natural* (1984) featured Robert Redford as Roy Hobbes - a gifted baseball player who led his New York team to the World Series. Ron Shelton, who was an actual ex-minor leaguer, wrote and directed the intelligent comedy/drama *Bull Durham* (1988) which used as its backdrop minor league baseball to tell the story of a baseball groupie (Susan Sarandon), a veteran catcher (Kevin Costner) and a dim-witted pitcher named Nuke LaLoosh (Tim Robbins). The immensely popular fantasy/drama *Field of Dreams* (1989) concerned the creation of a ball diamond in the middle of an Iowa cornfield by a farmer (Kevin Costner). Writer/director John Sayles' *Eight Men Out* (1988) dramatized the infamous episode in professional baseball of the scandalous 1919 World Series that was fixed - with its final sepia-toned shots of banned ball-player "Shoeless" Joe Jackson (D. B. Sweeney) in the minors. And Tommy Lee Jones starred as the legendary baseball great Ty Cobb in Shelton's *Cobb* (1994). Basketball-related sports dramas are rare: three notable ones were Spike Lee's *He Got Game* (1998) with Denzel Washington as the convict father of a promising basketball athlete, David Anspaugh's *Hoosiers* (1986) about an underdog 50s basketball team (coached by Gene Hackman) that won the state championship, and Ron Shelton's play-filled, trash-talking court action film *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) with its two basketball hustlers/con-artists (Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes) and their scenes of two-on-two tournaments.

Kevin Costner portrayed a talented pro golfer in Ron Shelton's romantic sports film *Tin Cup* (1996). And Paul Newman portrayed swaggering, upstart poolshark gambler Fast Eddie Felson in *The Hustler* (1961) in the world of professional pool, shooting against the great champ Minnesota Fats (Jackie Gleason). *Downhill Racer* (1969) starred Robert Redford as an American downhill skier training to become an Olympic superstar. The Best Picture winner *Chariots of Fire* (1981) told the parallel stories of two English runners (one a devout Protestant, the other Jewish) competing in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Autoracing in the Daytona 500 was featured in the action/drama *Days of Thunder* (1990).

And one of the most memorable ice hockey films was *Slap Shot* (1977), with Paul Newman as inspiring player-coach Reg Dunlop of a minor-league team. Although a comedy, *Caddyshack* (1980) was about an elitist country club for golf, a mischievous green-destroying gopher, and a crazed groundskeeper (Bill Murray). Films about boxing are perhaps the most numerous sub-genre. One of the best boxing films ever made, along with Robert Wise's classic film noirish *The Set-Up* (1949) starring Robert Ryan as aging boxer Stoker Thompson, was the realistically stark *Body and Soul* (1947). It starred John Garfield as boxer Charlie Davis who 'sold his soul' to unethical promoters but then had a change of heart in the last three rounds of a championship fight during which he was supposed to take a dive.

Others included King Vidor's classic *The Champ* (1931), an award-winning story of a prizefighter and his young son, *Champion* (1949) with Kirk Douglas as the young fighter, the brutal boxing drama *The Harder They Fall* (1956)

(Humphrey Bogart's underrated last film in which he portrayed Eddie Willis - an aging, crooked sportswriter), Ralph Nelson's *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962) with Anthony Quinn as punch-drunk, washed-up professional boxer Louis 'Mountain' Rivera, Martin Ritt's *The Great White Hope* (1970) with James Earl Jones as black boxer Jack Jefferson, and Karyn Kusama's independent feminist film *Girlfight* (2000) with a great performance by Michelle Rodriguez as a struggling Brooklynite and teenage Latino boxer. One of the best films of the 80s decade, *Raging Bull* (1980) was Martin Scorsese's tough, visceral and uncompromising biopic film of the rise and fall of prizefighter Jake La Motta with a remarkable performance by actor Robert DeNiro. The stylized scenes in the ring included flying blood and sweat, exaggerated flashbulb camera flashes, slow-motion and violent punching sounds.