



Oral Advocacy on Television

The 25 Greatest Legal TV Shows

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TV has always loved lawyers. From Perry Mason to Leland McKenzie, Jack McCoy to Patty Hewes, lawyers have been among the most durable and popular characters on the small screen.

But what law shows do lawyers consider the best of all time?

We put that question to a jury of 12 experts—nine lawyers, two scholars and a TV critic—who write or teach about the nexus of law and pop culture. They were asked to pick their favorites among the scores of legal-minded shows that have come and gone over the years. We stayed away from those daytime judge shows and reality television, sticking to shows with actual scripts—though with some episodes of *Law & Order* it might be hard to tell the difference.

So the verdict is in, and here are the panel's choices for the greatest legal shows in TV history.

1. *L.A. Law* (1986-1994)

This groundbreaking series about a boutique law firm, McKenzie, Brackman, Chaney & Kuzak, did for lawyers what *Hill Street Blues* did for cops. Created by Steven Bochco and Terry Louise Fisher (*Cagney & Lacey*), *L.A. Law* depicted them as smart, driven, fallible, sexy and as varied as the rest of humankind. For lawyers of a certain age, Leland McKenzie is the managing partner they are still looking for. Douglas Brackman Jr. is the manager they seem to end up with.

TRIVIA: Norman Chaney, a firm name partner, is found dead of a heart attack in the very first episode and is never actually seen on camera.

2. *Perry Mason* (1957-1966)

Raymond Burr's *Perry Mason* provided many Americans with their very first glimpse at what being a lawyer might mean. Still very much alive in syndication, the show originally began as a 15-minute radio serial based on Erle

Stanley Gardner's popular mystery novels, but blossomed into one of television's most durable franchises. Week after week, Mason confounded the frustrated prosecutor, Hamilton Burger, by not only walking his client but also unmasking the actual perpetrator, usually in open court.

TRIVIA: During one period of illness, Oscar-winning actress Bette Davis substituted for Burr as the featured defense attorney.

3. The Defenders (1961-1965)

Lawrence Preston (E.G. Marshall) and his son, Kenneth (Robert Reed), took the cases nobody else seemed to want. They usually involved some of the most divisive issues of the time (abortion, un-American activities, censorship, race). The show was based on a two-part drama called *The Defender*, which had featured veteran actor Ralph Bellamy and a young William Shatner. It offered some of the most sophisticated discussions about the nuances of the legal system that television had yet seen.

TRIVIA: Shatner later appeared in *The Defenders* as an assistant district attorney.

4. Law & Order (1990-)

Renewed for a record-tying 20th season, *Law & Order* matches the legendary *Gunsmoke* as the longest-running TV drama series ever. Producer Dick Wolf is said to have conceived the show's format—first half, investigation and arrest; second, trial and verdict—after watching tapes of a British show while working as a writer on the 1980s hit *Miami Vice*. The show is legendary for its twisted takes on real-life legal issues, its popular (and not so popular) spin-offs, and an ensemble cast that is consistently one of the hardest-working in TV.

TRIVIA: S. Epatha Merkerson (Lt. Anita Van Buren) is the show's longest-running cast member, appearing in 368 episodes—three more seasons and 23 more episodes than Sam Waterston (Jack McCoy).

5. The Practice (1997-2004)

Bobby Donnell was a handsome, driven defense attorney who surrounded himself at the self-named firm of Robert Donnell & Associates with talented lawyers who lacked the pedigree necessary to cut it in BigLaw. They made up the difference with street smarts and sheer tenacity. Lawyer David E. Kelley created and produced the show just after he developed *Ally McBeal*. Unlike *AMcB*, *The Practice* appreciated the cognitive dissonance between applications of the law and real life.

TRIVIA: Kelley created the role of Helen Gamble for Lara Flynn Boyle after auditioning her for the role of Ally McBeal.

6. Ally McBeal (1997-2002)

This David Kelley invention had no pretensions to be a vehicle for legal issues. Built around an old romance (Ally's ex-boyfriend, now married, is a partner at Cage Fish, the firm where she worked), the show was a slapstick soap opera whose law office served as a setting for anorexic fashion, sex-driven dialogue and permutating relationships.

TRIVIA: Calista Flockhart's character was so popular and so unlike the Type-A women who appeared as lawyers in other shows that she was featured on a *Time* magazine cover in June 1998 with the headline "Is Feminism Dead?"

7. Rumpole of the Bailey (1978-1992)

John Mortimer's London barrister Horace Rumpole had a great but uneven run on public television, with seven seasons filmed over 14 years. Like Perry Mason, the character began in Mortimer's mystery novels, then moved to radio before becoming the incarnation of actor Leo McKern. An "Old Bailey Hack," Rumpole simply delighted in the give and take of trial practice, win or lose.

TRIVIA: Rumpole's moniker for his wife—"She Who Must Be Obeyed"—is a salute to H. Rider Haggard, whose books Mortimer read in his youth.

8. Boston Legal (2004-2008)

James Spader played Alan Shore, an ethically challenged lawyer and more than a bit of a jerk. Fired from the firm of Young, Frutt & Berluti (what was left of Bobby Donnell's firm when *The Practice* was canceled), Shore landed with his friend and mentor Denny Crane (William Shatner), a cranky conservative who seems to have lost any semblance of a social filter. Yet another David Kelley creation, the law-laden plots were twisted, the characters quirky and the dialogue some of the most jerk-your-head interesting on television.

TRIVIA: The show's original title was *Fleet Street*, and it was promoted as such during the last few episodes of *The Practice*.

9. Damages (2007-)

Ellen Parsons is a brilliant law school grad who goes to work for the famous and powerful trial lawyer Patty Hewes (Glenn Close). She's mentored in the reality that power corrupts, even in the hands of women.

TRIVIA: Robert F. Kennedy Jr. played an important, though uncredited, role in shaping the first season's plotline about a case against a large corporation over an environmental issue.

10. Night Court (1984-1992)

Judge Harry Stone (Harry Anderson) presided over the late-night antics of a misdemeanor court in New York City, which featured a lecherous prosecutor, a no-nonsense court clerk, a droll set of bailiffs and a string of cover-girl public defenders. Full of pratfalls and seriously good intentions, the show managed to humanize the one place where most people meet up with the law.

TRIVIA: John Larroquette (prosecutor Dan Fielding) narrated the original version of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

11. Judging Amy (1999-2005)

Those troubled by the notion of judicial empathy would have a real problem with Judge Amy Gray. She struggles as a single mother with the same verve she brings to complicated cases that come her way in family court. Created and produced by its star, Amy Brenneman, the show featured a first-ensemble cast and gritty social problems that were sometimes immune to court-ordered remedy.

TRIVIA: One of the show's technical advisers was Brenneman's mother, Frederica Brenneman, who was among the first women to graduate from Harvard Law School and later served as a superior court judge in Connecticut.

12. Owen Marshall: Counselor at Law (1971-1974)

Arthur Hill played the title character, a defense attorney who is forced to travel outside the tony environs of Santa Barbara to try cases that reflect the issues of the era. He is accompanied at various points in the show's run by David Soul (*Starsky & Hutch*) and Lee Majors (before he became the *Six Million Dollar Man*). The show was almost as smart as it was earnest.

TRIVIA: Uber-filmmaker Steven Spielberg directed one of the show's early episodes.

13. JAG (1995-2005)

One of the few television shows featuring lawyers from the Judge Advocate General's Corps. When night blindness forces Cmdr. Harmon Rabb Jr. to end his career as a fighter pilot, he decides to do the next most exciting thing—enter law school. As a JAG officer, he solves crimes and thwarts terrorist threats, the usual lawyer stuff.

TRIVIA: The show used footage from several military-themed movies, including *Top Gun*, *The Hunt for Red October* and *Crimson Tide*.

14. Shark (2006-2008)

Sebastian Stark (James Woods) was a heavy-duty criminal defense lawyer with a reputation for sleazy tactics and ridiculous success. After he helps free one too many bad guys, he's recruited to take his tactics to the district attorney's office, where he heads a special team that prosecutes hard-to-win cases.

TRIVIA: Woods reported to the FBI that he was a passenger on one of the flights apparently used by several of the 9/11 terrorists to plan their attack.

15. Civil Wars (1991-1993)

A New York City law firm handles the nastiest divorces east of Los Angeles. Featuring Mariel Hemingway and Peter Onorati, this Steven Bochco production boasted the usual array of memorable characters and first-class dialogue.

TRIVIA: Two of the characters, Eli Levinson (Alan Rosenberg) and Denise Iannello (Debi Mazar), end up at McKenzie Brackman in the final season of *L.A. Law*.

16. Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law (2000-2007)

In one of the more bizarre and self-referential productions ever, Gary Cole was featured in this animated spin-off of several shows as a former superhero who has retired to practice law. He specialized in settling disputes between Hanna-Barbera cartoon characters, past and present. Talk about a boutique practice.

TRIVIA: Birdman's boss, Phil Ken Sebben, is a reference to Birdman's boss in the original Birdman series, *Birdman and the Galaxy Trio*.

17. Law & Order: Criminal Intent (2001-)

This *L&O* spin-off features more law enforcement than courtroom order, but it still adheres nominally to the Dick Wolf trademark split between cops and lawyers. While it features the highly stylized acting turns of Vincent D'Onofrio, it focuses on the psychological dynamics of its bad guys, rather than the legal issues they represent.

TRIVIA: D'Onofrio's character, Robert Goren, is based on Sherlock Holmes. His style is based on Peter Falk's *Columbo*.

18. Murder One (1995-1997)

This electric legal serial featured Daniel Benzali as Teddy Hoffman, a zealous no-nonsense defense attorney who was never quite sure whether his client was guilty or not. Benzali was replaced in the second season by Anthony LaPaglia, and the show suffered from a lack of continuity.

TRIVIA: The single-case first season motif, which required lengthy explanations of previous action, was dropped in the second season.

19. Matlock (1986-1995)

The irrepressible Andy Griffith played Atlanta defense attorney Ben Matlock as a crafty, high-priced defense genius who didn't merely defend clients—he solved crimes Perry Mason-style. Even after the series ended, *Matlock* lived on in TV movies.

TRIVIA: *Matlock* is purportedly based on the practice of famed Georgia trial lawyer Bobby Lee Cook.

20. Reasonable Doubts (1991-1993)

Mark Harmon played an investigator who, because of his knowledge of sign language, was assigned to work for the DA (Marlee Matlin), who happens to be deaf. The oil-and-water relationship between the two sustained the show for a surprising 45 episodes.

TRIVIA: A poster for *Reasonable Doubts* decorates the office of a TV producer in an episode of *Seinfeld*.

21. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (1999-)

This first spin-off of *L&O* is more police procedural than lawyer-driven drama, but was still a favorite of our judges. The sex-crime plotting is explained in the opening narration, and the serialization is keyed to the show's two principals—Elliot Stabler (Chris Meloni) and Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay).

TRIVIA: Richard Belzer's character (John Munch) is the most prolific crossover character in television history, having appeared in nine different series, including *Sesame Street*.

22. Judd for the Defense (1967-1969)

Carl Betz (Dr. Alex Stone on *The Donna Reed Show*) was a Houston-based lawyer who dealt with high-profile, high-dollar cases all over the country.

TRIVIA: Flashy Houston attorney Percy Foreman was an inspiration for attorney Clinton Judd.

23. Paper Chase (1978-1979, 1983-1986)

John Houseman reprised his Oscar-winning film role as law professor Charles W. Kingsfield Jr., who inspired his students with equal parts of clear thinking and gut-wrenching fear.

TRIVIA: The show, which lasted only one season on CBS, became a much greater success when it was revived by Showtime.

24. Petrocelli (1974-1976)

Barry Newman starred as Tony Petrocelli, a Harvard-educated lawyer who decides to put out his shingle in the desert Southwest town of San Remo. Petrocelli spends his 45 episodes in a trailer, defending murder suspects while he and his wife are waiting for their house to be built.

TRIVIA: Newman portrayed Tony Petrocelli in the 1970 movie *The Lawyer*.

25. Eli Stone (2008-2009)

Jonny Lee Miller starred in this utterly quirky legal melodrama as a lawyer driven by visions that may be the result of a brain aneurysm. He discovers the meaning of his life, and of his profession, as he seeks to do right by the world.

TRIVIA: The show's producers refused to cancel or amend the first episode, which featured a controversial medical assertion that mercury used in childhood vaccinations was a major cause of autism.