

Blu-ray Review: Criterion Edition of James Stewart's 'Anatomy of a Murder'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 5, 2012 - 2:06pm

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CHICAGO – Otto Preminger's "Anatomy of a Murder" is a film that certainly still entertains modern audiences but should best be considered in light of when it came out in theaters. In 1959, courtroom dramas weren't nearly as prevalent as they are in the era of "Law & Order" and discussions of rape and murder were not yet common in film. It may be hard for young audiences to believe but this spectacular film truly pushed the envelope of what could be done in a film like it and creatively succeeded in every way.



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

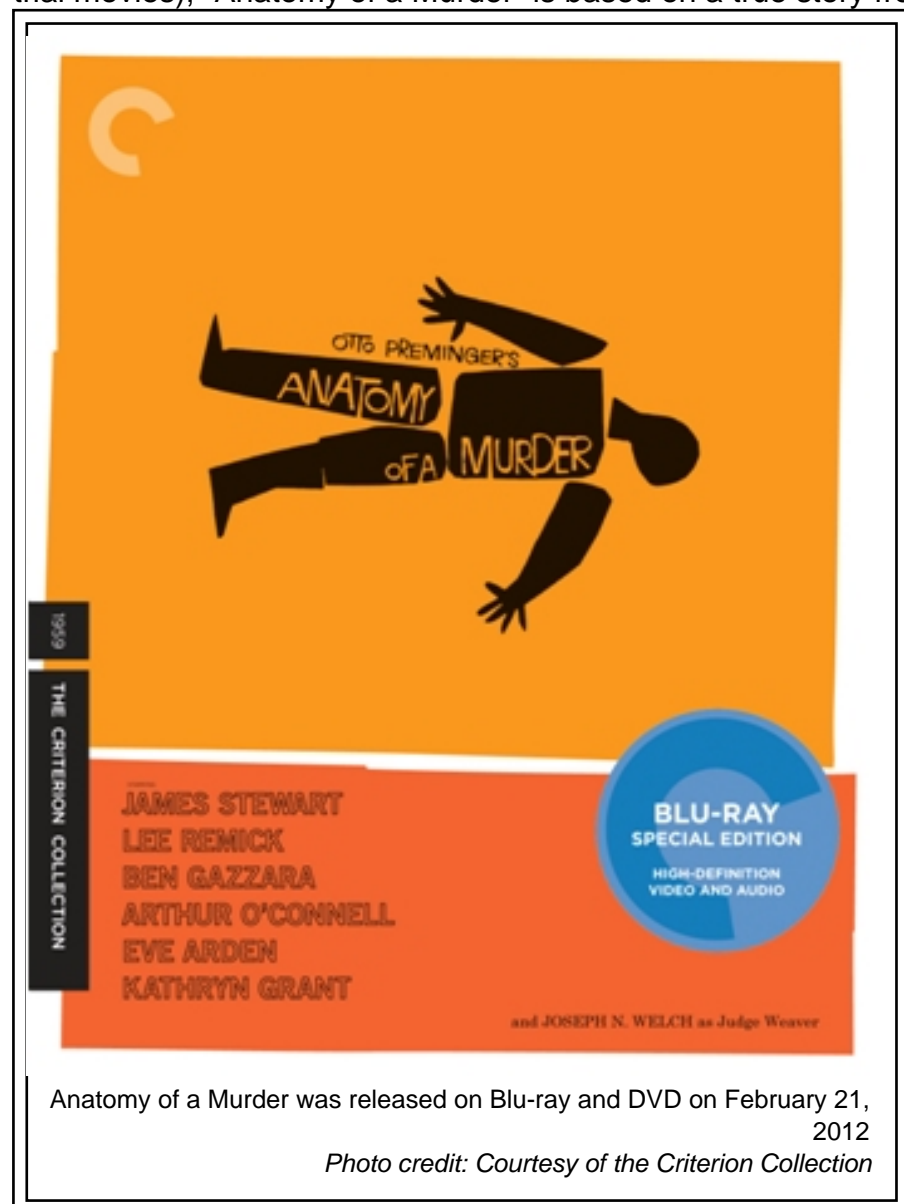
Instead of going with the censorship that faced the movie (it was even banned in Chicago for some time), the country and the industry embraced "Anatomy of a Murder" and the movie was nominated for seven Oscars, including Picture, Adapted Screenplay, and Best Actor for James Stewart and Best Supporting Actor for George C. Scott (losing out to "Ben-Hur" in all of those categories). It's a spectacular film for a number of reasons but almost more for what it's not than what it is. It is 161 minutes long, a movie that truly takes its time getting to know its characters instead of rushing through the trial. The remake would be half as long and have two more twist endings. It also pulls no punches like so many films of its day were forced to do. And just watching Stewart and Scott go at it across the courtroom is a movie lover's dream come true. This is a classic.



Anatomy of a Murder was released on Blu-ray and DVD on February 21, 2012

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

Lieutenant Frederick Manion (the great Ben Gazzara in one of his best roles) shot a man. There's no mystery there. He did it. People saw him do it. But he says that the man he shot had just raped his wife Laura (Lee Remick). The law of the courtroom says that it doesn't matter but what about old-fashioned justice. Paul Biegler (James Stewart) takes the high-profile case and realizes that the best way to get Manion off is to argue temporary insanity. He was crazy with rage over what happened to his wife. Or was he? Incredibly loyal to the law (unlike so many trial movies), "Anatomy of a Murder" is based on a true story from the upper peninsula of Michigan.



"Anatomy of a Murder" could have been just another trial movie. Other writers and directors would have talked around the issues of the film — even the word rape wasn't said on the silver screen in 1959 much less any of the evidentiary details of such a crime — but Otto Preminger and screenwriter Wendell Mayes took risk after risk. Most notably to this viewer, they took their TIME. I love the early scenes in "Murder" as we get to know Biegler and the wife of his controversial new client. The banter between him and Eve Arden or Arthur O'Connell is the kind of material that a modern screenwriter would have cut in the first test screening process but it adds depth and realism to what comes later.

Many people have seen "Anatomy" over the years in full-frame presentation in many of its TV airings through the '70s and '80s. The film looks notably different in its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio and I think it's never looked better. Criterion remasters films like no one else and the film looks stunningly good. The monaural track seems to fit the film better than the new alternate 5.1 soundtrack but the new track is arguably a better way to appreciate Duke Ellington's stellar score.

Synopsis:

A virtuoso James Stewart plays a small-town Michigan lawyer who takes on a difficult case: that of a young Army lieutenant accused of murdering the local tavern owner who he believes raped his wife. This gripping, envelope-pushing courtroom potboiler, the most popular film from Hollywood provocateur Otto Preminger, was groundbreaking for the frankness of its discussion of sex-more than anything else, it is a striking depiction of the power of words. With its outstanding supporting cast-including a young George C. Scott as a fiery prosecuting attorney and legendary real-life attorney Joseph N. Welch as the judge-and influential jazz score by Duke Ellington, Anatomy of a Murder is a Hollywood landmark; it was nominated for seven Oscars, including best picture.

Special Features:

- o New interview with Otto Preminger biographer Foster Hirsch
- o Critic Gary Giddins explores Duke Ellington's score in a new interview
- o A look at the relationship between graphic designer Saul Bass and Otto Preminger with Bass biographer Pat Kirkham
- o Newsreel footage from the set
- o Excerpts from a 1967 episode of Firing Line, featuring Preminger in discussion with William F. Buckley Jr.
- o Excerpts from the work in progress Anatomy Of Anatomy
- o Behind-the-scenes photographs by Life magazine's Gjon Mili
- o Trailer, featuring on-set footage
- o Booklet featuring an essay by critic Nick Pinkerton and a 1959 Life magazine article on real-life lawyer Joseph N. Welch, who plays Judge Weaver in the film

"Anatomy of a Murder" stars James Stewart, Lee Remick, Ben Gazzara, Arthur O'Connell, Eve Arden, Kathryn Grant, and George C. Scott. It was written by Wendell Mayes and directed by Otto Preminger. The Criterion edition was released on Blu-ray and DVD on February 21, 2012.



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