Bored With the Movies? Go To the Courthouse Instead

Contributed by John Browning
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Like many Americans, I had more than my fill of three things this holiday season: turkey, egg nog, and movies. Not just the big, splashy blockbusters, mind you, like “Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol,” but also those smaller art-house films that become critical darlings and Oscar favorites. But now, just as I resign myself to the filmgoer’s malaise that accompanies the string of movies released early in the year that won’t light up the box office or garner golden statuettes, I’ve realized that there is an endless source of almost cinematic entertainment waiting for me down at the courthouse. So forget your local multiplex and come with me to see what’s playing at a courthouse near you (and don’t forget the popcorn),

If you liked films like “The Parent Trap” or any movie with identical twins who get themselves into sticky situations where hilarity ensues, then you’ll love the case of State of Missouri v. Darrel W. White, Jr. in Jackson County, Missouri (not far from Kansas City). Criminal defense attorney Dorothy Savory was representing the defendant at a preliminary hearing on charges of robbery. When the victim was asked to identify the man who snatched her purse, she pointed to “Mr. White,” the gentleman sitting next to Savory at the counsel table, as her assailant. However, in the hall outside the courtroom, the arresting officer noticed a familiar-looking person getting off the elevator—Darrel W. White, Jr. In short order, it was revealed that the man next to defense lawyer Savory was the defendant’ identical twin brother, Darion White. Both prosecutor Jean Baker and Judge Kenneth R. Garrett III were furious at the switcheroo. Although Ms. Savory was reportedly mystified at the fuss and the allegation that her conduct was deceptive, Judge Garrett pulled no punches, calling her actions “disrespectful” and continuing the hearing until contempt charges (and possible disciplinary action) against the defense attorney could be considered. That’s what I call “double trouble.”

If your tastes run more to horror flicks like “Paranormal Activity,” then check out the criminal charges pending against former police officer Joseph Hughes of Mount Gilead, Ohio. Hughes was facing 20 charges, including theft and possession of stolen property, after a slew of stolen air conditioners and other goods (many belonging to the county) was found inside Hughes’ home. The case took a supernatural turn when Hughes attempted to explain why he was unaware that all those stolen goods were in his basement. “We believed that there was some kind of paranormal presence in the basement,” Hughes testified. “It sounds kind of ridiculous but there was evidence to support it.” The “paranormal defense” shocked prosecutors. Tom Elkin of the Morrow County Prosecutor’s Office said “I’ve been practicing since 1983 and I can say that’s the first time I’ve heard of paranormal activity in the course of a trial.” As it turns out, Hughes’ defense didn’t stand a ghost of a chance; he was found guilty of 18 out of 20 charges.

Of course, if your preferences are for more Disney-style family fare, along the lines of “All Dogs Go to Heaven,” then follow the lawsuit recently filed in New York City by dog owner Elena Zakharova against an Upper East Side pet store known as Raising Rover. Zakharova claims that the pet shop sold her Umka, a Brussells Griffon which was represented to her as healthy but which allegedly has bad knees and bad hips. What makes Ms. Zakharova’s lawsuit unusual is that she does not want just compensation for Umka’s vet bills (which exceed $4,000); she also wants compensation for the dog’s pain and suffering and recognition by the court that companion animals are not inanimate property but “living souls.” I’m not sure a court will be able to make such a declaration, but I’m cheering for Ms. Zakharova and little Umka anyway—all dogs do go to heaven, as Disney fans will attest.

Of course, if your movie of choice is a grisly horror flick full of dismemberment and “creative” deaths like the “Saw” or “Final Destination” movies, then a recent Illinois appellate court decision will make lively reading. The bizarre case began with an unusual set of circumstances. In 2008, 18 year-old Hiroyuki Joho was hurrying to catch an inbound Metra train in the Chicago suburb of Edgebrook when he was struck by a southbound Amtrak train traveling at over 70 mph. In a lawsuit that even one of the lawyers involved described as “very peculiar and gory and creepy,” a passenger waiting on the southbound platform, 58 year-old Gayane Zokhrabov, was struck by “a large portion” of Joho’s body. The flying body part knocked her to the ground, injuring her shoulder and breaking her leg and wrist. Zokhrabov sued Joho’s estate, and a Cook County judge dismissed the case. But the Illinois appeals court disagreed, and in an opinion worthy of a law school exam hypothetical reasoned that it was “reasonably foreseeable” to Joho that a high-speed train could kill him, sever his body, and fling body parts down the tracks at a platform full of waiting people. Hollywood special effects people, get your moving trains and flying body parts ready.

Finally, if a romantic comedy where two people “meet cute” under unusual circumstances and eventually fall in love (like “When Harry Met Sally” or virtually any Sandra Bullock or Julia Roberts movie) is your cup of tea, then check out another lawsuit pending in suburban Chicago. Stickney, Illinois police officer Chris Collins is apparently a lonely guy. On October 22, 2011, the 27 year-old officer pulled over Evangelina Paredes for speeding and issued her a $132 ticket. But he couldn’t get the comely motorist off his mind, and he allegedly searched her motor vehicle records for her address before leaving a handwritten note on her car windshield outside her apartment two

days later. The alleged note said “It’s Chris . . . that ugly bald Stickney cop who gave you that ticket. I know this may seem crazy and you’re probably right, but truth is I have not stopped thinking about you since. I don’t expect a girl as attractive as you to . . . even go for a guy like me, but I’m taking a shot anyways.” The alleged note continues saying he’d understand if Ms. Paredes didn’t respond, but that “hey, I did cost you $132—least I can do is buy you dinner.”

Awwh. Unfortunately, one woman’s cute is another woman’s creepy, and Ms. Paredes has filed a federal court lawsuit against Officer Collins, his police chief, and the village of Stickney. The lawsuit alleges invasion of privacy and stalking that has caused Paredes to “suffer great fear and anxiety.” It also accuses Collins of using his “authority and position as a police officer not to protect the public, but to attempt to manipulate the plaintiff into going out on a date with him.” Not exactly a Hollywood ending. Can’t you just see a movie version (with say, Eva Mendes as Ms. Paredes and Ryan Reynolds as Officer Collins) where, after a hilarious chain of events, the two meet up again in a climatic courtroom scene and realize that it’s true love after all? I guess not, but the courthouse can still be as entertaining sometimes as the movies, and admission is free.