|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | F.C. DeCoste,  Faculty of Law, University of Alberta     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/articles/Verdict.htm)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0084855)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A52313)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |       Galvin's journey of self-interrogation, discovery, and affirmation, as a lawyer, is complex. It is punctuated throughout by pauses, by silences, some brief, others lengthy, each a gnawing and revelatory insistence that Galvin confront and engage, not just his circumstance, but his very self. | |  | | --- | | ***THE VERDICT*: "WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"**  by F.C. DeCoste  This question is put to the lawyer protagonist, Frank Galvin (Paul Newman), by the bereaved, and now enraged, son of a deceased accident victim, after Galvin, posing as the father's friend, slips his card into his widowed mother's hands in a funeral home, one of several at which Galvin attends to drum up contingency fee arrangements. And it is repeated, later on in the piece, by the no less enraged brother-in-law of the client, the vegetative Deborah Ann Kay, whose case-- Galvin's only case ("there are no other cases, this is the case")-- provides the narrative structure of this wonderfully written (David Mamet) and executed (Sidney Lumet) 1982 film.  Francis P. Galvin: second in his Boston College class of '52, law review editor, twelve years of distinguished criminal law and personal injury practice in a two-man firm, married the beautiful Patricia Harrington (her smiling photo remains still at Frank's bedside) and, with that and without more, found himself a full partner in her daddy's prestigious law firm, Sterns, Harrington & Pierce; after nine years fired from the firm under a cloud of manufactured allegations of jury tampering ("accused, never indicted" as one character puts it, nor notably ever disciplined); now dumped and divorced, he has in the three-and-a- half years since descended into a hellish caricature of the middle-aged, alcoholic, obit-reading, ambulance-chasing, case-starved ("four cases in the last three years, he's lost them all") sole practitioner. It falls to this Frank -- Frankie to his friends and acquaintances, lawyers and fellow boozers alike -- to deliver an answer, his verdict, on just that question: who indeed is he? and does his being a lawyer matter to that determination?  Galvin's journey of self-interrogation, discovery, and affirmation, as a lawyer, is complex. It is punctuated throughout by pauses, by silences, some brief, others lengthy, each a gnawing and revelatory insistence that Galvin confront and engage, not just his circumstance, but his very self; it is framed at beginning and end by the ringing -- a calling surely -- of bells. And it takes shape through the medium of his client's medical negligence case, in the fellowship Galvin undeservedly enjoys with his mentor and original partner, the now semi-retired Mickey Morrissey (Jack Warden) and, centrally, through his relationship with the female presence Laura Fisher (Charlotte Rampling), whose unexpected appearance in his life leads Galvin, until very near the end, to believe his redemption resides in the recuperation of his personal life. But Galvin's destination turns out to be much more interesting and instructive than that, so far at least as it concerns the demands and promises of leading a life at the law.  We know straightaway that something is afoot in Galvin's life. The film opens, the credits still before us, with the ringing of bells. Galvin appears playing a pinball machine in what we know is his favorite bar, his home away from the dingy apartment to which he repairs to sleep it off. Play he does and drink he does: but he also disengages from both, before the film speaks a word, once, then again and again, in a silence and stare at once perplexed and searching. There follows, in the film's first several scenes, the same silence: after he is ushered out of a funeral home; at the bar in early morning, hands shaking so badly he must take his first sip, head bowed, sucking the whisky directly from the shot glass; at the bar one evening after performing his best brogue for the lads, after buying them all a round; the morning after his drunken destruction of his office, of his framed credentials, his call included, after Mickey dresses him down ("Frankie, listen to me because I'm done fucking with you. I can't take this any more. I mean you're not going to change."); during his meeting with his client's sister, Sally Donneghy, after ignoring the file for eighteen months, trial impending, his eyes fixed on the photos of a healthy Deborah Ann.  Thus does Frankie confront, interrogate, himself -- in silence, within, not a word spoken to any other. Perhaps for this reason, he at first misrecognizes himself and misappraises what his redemption requires of him. Even after what he experiences as an epiphany in the life-deserted presence of his client -- again in silent stare, he experiences her for the first time as a site of responsibility and no longer as a source of contingency fee income, after he painfully, finally, declares to a passing nurse, "I am her attorney" -- he thinks his fate a matter of his deciding simply to change, to lead a renewed life. And so he acts and declares. He declines, without client authorization, from the Bishop of Boston no less, in whose "renowned" St. Catherine's Hospital the alleged negligence occurred, an offer to settle that would have netted him a cool seventy thousand: "If I take the money," he tells the Bishop, "I am lost." Later, he rejects Mickey's counsel to settle ("When they give you the money that means you've won") by declaring, with somber conviction, "I'm going to stand up for that girl." And he tells Laura, on her second appearance at the bar, after his failed ham-handed attempt to pick her up at their first meeting, "I changed my life today."  But his conviction is false, as false and hollow as his long-sought victory, the very next morning, first drink at hand, over the pinball machine. Witness his dinner conversation with Laura ("The weak have got to have someone to fight for them. Ain't that the truth. Want another drink") and his provocative, silly, self-serving behavior at the first chambers conference with the trial judge (Milo O'Shea) and defendant's counsel Ed Concannon (James Mason) (the judge: "It seems to me a fellow's trying to come back, he'd take the settlement. I myself would take it and run like a thief"; Galvin: "I'm sure you would"). His off-the-rack conversion deforms straightaway into bravado, perhaps indeed into hubris.  Frank is soon to learn that painless, voluntaristic change provides neither self-recognition nor life affirmation. When his star witness Dr. Gruber (who, with his own cigar-munching bravado, promised to testify against St. Catherine's and the "most respected" Drs. Marx and Towler that "her doctors killed her ... the doctors murdered her ... I don't want those bozos in the same profession as me") turns prudent coward and disappears to the Caribbean, when Judge Hoyle pays back his bravado by denying his on-knees-begging request for a continuance ("This case should never have come to trial. But you know better. You're mister independent. You want to be independent? Be independent now. I have no sympathy for you"), when Concannon's firm rejects his hyperventilating, late-night offer to accept a revived offer: when confronted with hard reality, Frank dissolves into a puddle of boozy self-pity, panic, anxiety -- and cowardice. "We're going to lose," he whines child-like to Laura, "it's over ... Do you think that it's my fault? That I could have ... oh God, I never should have taken it, there's no way I could win."  Galvin's salvation, if it is to be, lies in his mustering the courage to affirm the tragic dimensions of his lawyerly world and to recognize the possibilities, real and not imagined, of his place in it. Galvin must come to terms, not only with all-too-human limitations of law and justice, but also with the costs, the real costs and not those he has conveniently chosen, to his life of his authentically serving both. It is Laura who sets him on his way and who, at the end, secures his redemption.  Unlike all the others who populate his world, the lads at the bar, the denizens of the court, colleagues and attendants alike, and Mickey especially ("Do you like that story, Laura? What else do you want to know about Frankie?"), all of whom finally defer to Frank's carefully constructed self-regarding victimhood, Laura refuses him the comfy security of his boozy irresponsibility. She refuses to play the enabling mommy to his child. She shreds his dress of hurt and leaves him naked: "You want me to tell you it's your fault. Okay, it probably is. But what are you going to do about it?" "I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe...." Laura will have none of it: "Maybe you could get some sympathy. You come to the wrong place." "What makes you so tough? Maybe I'll tell you that later. Is there going to be a later?" Then crucially: "Not if you don't grow up. You're like a kid. You're coming in here like it is Sunday night, you want me to say you have a fever so you don't have to go back to school. ... You want to be a failure, then do it some place else." Thus, after a final collapse -- "Please don't. Please don't pressure me. Please don't." -- is forged Frank's authentic epiphany: sitting at the sleeping Laura's bedside, he acknowledges, first with silent stare, then with forehead kiss, these truths of his past and present and the possibility of another, different future truth.  Frank's resurrection from self-absorption permits him, perhaps for the first time in his life, to experience the world in a way that does not center his own situation, that avoids privileging his own disappointment. Gone is the easy cynicism bred of brute knowledge of human frailty of the sort he displayed in the first chambers conference (compare his speech at the second: "Don't give me that shit about you being a lawyer too. I know about you. You couldn't hack it as a lawyer. You were a bagman for the boys downtown and you still are. I know about you."). Gone too is the romantic perfectionist reverie of the sort he offered to Laura over dinner on their second meeting, in his scheme, as he put it to Mickey, "to get laid." In their place, and in his place, he puts acknowledgment of others and of the sorry, and wonderful, possibilities of frail, imperfect creatures, he like them. These other voices -- class (Kevin Donneghy, obstetrics nurse Maureen Rooney), gendered (admitting nurse Kaitlin Costello Price -- "who were these men" -- and Laura herself) and racial (Dr. Thompson -- the frail seventy-four-year-old African-American M.D. who alone will replace the absconding Gruber -- and all, the court, Concannon, Mickey, who react to his being black) -- disclose to Frank, not all at once, but progressively over the piece, and culminating in his closing address to the jury, the reality of a world that resists correspondence with his own circumstance, his feelings, his experiences, that is grander, in its frailty and possibility, than his life alone.  When Kevin Donneghy, a self-described "working man," accosts Frank at the courthouse for failing to seek his and his wife's instructions on the offer to settle, Frank is bewildered. To Donneghy's words--"You guys, you guys are all the same. The doctors at the hospital, you, it's always what I'm going to do for you. And then you screw up and it's ah, we did the best that we could, I'm dreadfully sorry, and people like us live with your mistakes the rest of our lives"-- Frank can only muster a shrug, and a sheepish, "They took back the offer." He reacts differently when Maureen Rooney responds with class anger and contempt to his attempt to strong-arm information. Rooney: "You guys are the same. You don't care who you hurt. All you care about is the dollar. You're a bunch of whores." Galvin says nothing; but, in the camera close-up, tight on his face, he communicates shocked awareness of this other truth; he hears and confronts it. So, too, when he reacts to Dr. Thompson's departing counsel, his case then in shambles: "You know Mr. Galvin sometimes people can surprise you, sometimes they have a great capacity to hear the truth"; Galvin, distractively, "yeah", then hopefully "yes." And finally the closing address, in which he rejects victimhood as a way of experiencing life and expresses, to himself as much as to the jury, his matured belief in law as human aspiration, "a fervent and frightened prayer", to be freed from power's insistent claims, which finally depends upon faith, faith by its practitioner stewards and faith by the people to whom and for whom they are responsible.  Galvin's faith is immediately put to the test and in a manner which reveals to him, and to us, the tragic burden of authentically serving the law. In the beautifully executed scene between Concannon and Laura, we learn, from his speech and from her silence, both the conceit of feckless lawyerly performance and of her betrayal, as a lawyer, of Frank and of her profession. Once an associate in Concannon's New York partner's office, now returning to the law after a failed marriage, Laura has been acting as Concannon's paid informant. Profession devolves from confession of the sort made by Frank in his closing address; and the test of authentic confession, and consequently the cost of authentic professionalism, is the subordination of personal life and morality to public life and its specifically communal values and demands. Despite the ripening of love between them -- "I feel the same way Frank" -- Frank's verdict, his refusal to answer Laura's call to private life, to love and reconciliation, with which the film ends, is his acknowledgment of those values and his satisfaction of those demands. Who is Frank Galvin? With this, he answers: he is a lawyer to his very roots.  Posted July 5, 2002 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |