INHERIT THE WIND
This film was directed by Stanley Kramer and released in 1960, a time when a great many “big” movies were still made in black and white. The film, based on a successful play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, is a semi-fictionalized account of the famous 1925 Scopes “monkey trial” in Dayton, Tennessee. A teacher was put on trial for violating the Tennessee law against teaching evolution in the public schools. The circumstances in which the trial was convened are fudged a bit in the film.

In the film, the setting is called “Hillsborough” and the teacher “Cates” [played by Dick York, one of the male leads in TV’s “Bewitched”]. One reason the trial attracted so much attention was that the opposing chief lawyers were Clarence Darrow [here called “Henry Drummond” and played by the always wonderful Spencer Tracy] and William Jennings Bryan [here “Matthew Harrison Brady” played by the less wonderful Fredric March], a three-time Democratic/Populist presidential candidate. Gene Kelly—usually a dancer in musical comedies—plays E.K. Hornbeck, a character based on the famous journalist and cynic, H.L. Mencken. The romantic element in the film is fiction and the teacher was not actually jailed while awaiting or standing trial.

It is reasonable to assume that, when the play was written in the 1950s, there was concern over various kinds of censorship in that decade. The anti-intellectual climate of the time is related to “Good Night and Good Luck,” the George Clooney film on CBS News in the so-called McCarthyite period of the 1950s. It is clear that controversy over teaching evolution is still around us. Actually, it revived relatively recently after a period of dormancy brought on in part by the ridicule suffered by the anti-evolution people after the 1925 trial dramatized in this film.