

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

UK, 1966, Fred Zinnemann/ UK 1988, Charlton Heston



The reign of Henry VIII. Thomas More becomes chancellor of England and is embroiled in the question of the annulment of the marriage of the King to Catherine of Arragon for failure to produce a male heir and his impending marriage to Anne Boleyn.

The politics of the assertion of the right of England to make its own ecclesiastical decisions involve Cardinal Wolsey as well as the scheming Thomas Cromwell and his protegee, friend of Thomas More, Richard Rich. Also involved is the Duke of Norfolk, a friend and supporter of More.

The dangers to More are seen by his daughter, Meg, in whom More confides. His wife, Alice, is much more concerned with things practical.

However, tested by the king, More declares that he must follow his conscience which compels him to agree with the verdict of Rome rather than to follow the king in his desire to have a wife who will give him a son. More is imprisoned in the Tower of London and executed.

Robert Bolt adapted his very successful play for the 1966 screen version. Bolt, in his published introduction to the play, declares his admiration for More as an authentic human being, true to himself and to what he thought was right, even if it meant his death.

Paul Scofield, who had played More on stage, won an Oscar for his interpretation of More. Leo McKern was the original Common Man but this device has been removed from the movie. Here he plays Cromwell. Wendy Hiller is very good as Alice and Orson Welles appears in a short but significant scene as Cardinal Wolsey. The movie itself, Fred Zinneman's direction and the screenplay also won Oscars.

Robert Bolt went on to write the screenplays for Lawrence of Arabia, Doctor Zhivago, Ryan's Daughter, Lady Caroline Lamb, A Passage to India and The Mission. The movie is not a spectacle although it is very beautiful to look at.

Thomas More was canonised as a saint in 1935,

In 1988, Charlton Heston who had starred in the play, directed it for Turner Network Television, with himself in the lead and Vanessa Redgrave (who had appeared briefly as Anne Boleyn in the original) as Alice. John Gielgud appears as Wolsey. Robert Bolt reverted more to the original text for this version and re-introduced the Common Man as a chorus character assuming many roles. He is played by Roy Kinnear. The film looks sumptuous and was shot in England.

