The Cinephile

Shirley Hamburg

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A Man For All Seasons may not be a play for all seasons, but it certainly is a godsend in this particularly impoverished one. A good deal has been written elsewhere about this commendable but somewhat less than considerable play.

In adapting his work for the screen, Robert Bolt once again both idealized and oversimplified Thomas More, who was, at times, both more religiously fanatical and broadly facetious than Bolt's protagonist. By giving us such a flawless man, Bolt gives us a flawed play and film. From the film, moreover, some of the play's strongest and wittiest lines have been excised.

Some of these lines may have seemed too epigrammatic or erudite or philosophical for the larger public; other changes I cannot for the life of me comprehend. Thus it is un- fathomable why the immensely moving bit of dialogue when More sees his wife for the last time:

"MORE: That's a nice dress you have on. ALICE: It's my cooking dress. MORE: It's very nice anyway. Nice color…" should have been reduced to: "MORE: That's a nice dress you have on. (Pause.) A nice color, anyway." Most of the lovely, understated pathos is unhappily lost thereby.

On the other hand, it is all too painfully clear why More's answer to the jailer who tries to justify his carrying out of heartless orders by explaining that he is a plain, simple man: "Oh, sweet Jesus! These plain, simple men!"—has been cut. Movie audiences, after all, are plain, simple men (and women), and God forbid that they should take offense!

Not only that, but producers, too, are plain, simple men. Like Samuel Z. Arkoff, for instance, the cigar-smoking executive vice-president of American International Pictures, who had this to say recently about A.I.P.'s *The Wild Angels*: "No one was more surprised than we were when the film was chosen to be shown at Venice. However, it did give the film a sort of art taint, which is important in Europe."

Now why should the Arkoffs of this world, who surely would not have permitted the beheading of a saint, be insulted?

But I digress. *A Man For All Seasons* suffers from the usual ills that plague a play adapted to the screen. Neither Bolt, nor his director, Fred Zinneman, was able to do much about that. The outdoor scenes always have that feel of, "Oh, yes, that was thrown in to make it more a movie!" about them, and Zinneman's direction is decent but plodding.

When in the trial scene, the camera shuttles swiftly across the faces of the spectators, it seems rather as if Zinneman had suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to put the art taint in. One device, though, is effective. A bird in a tree sings against a delicate pale blue sky. Cut to More and the headsman on the scaffold, against the same sky. But one bird does not make a summer, to say nothing of all seasons.

Ted Moore's color photography is consistently appealing, and production and costume design are, on the whole, more graceful and flowing than the sometimes jagged continuity of the script.

The male supporting cast could not be improved on; even Orson Welles as Wolsey is, for a change, controlled and effective (his Swedish consul in *Is Paris Burning?* was an outrageously dishonest performance), and Robert Shaw's Henry VIII is a small masterpiece.

What makes the film required viewing, however, is Paul Scofield's *More*. In the theatre you could not get close enough to that subtly overpowering face.

Now, with close-ups, you can. This countenance seems almost immobile—even as the voice appears never to be raised. But within that deliberately narrowed range, the expressions, like the inflections, are of a perfect, filigree variety, and as scrupulously precise as the illuminations of a precious medieval manuscript.

It is all there: the pity, the pride, the just contempt, the righteous but controlled anger, the infinite compassion. And above all, the sad, wise, ironic patience. When, in the final self-defense, that patience is cast away, it is as if you saw the soul, unbearably luminous, shooting out of the body into heaven.

Charlie Chaplin's *The Countess from Hong Kong* is a major disappointment. It appears that Chaplin, the director, cannot be Chaplin, the master of screen poetry and fantasy. *Countess* suffers because Chaplin in the flesh, Chaplin the tramp is not in it. Oh, he steps on for a moment which is enough to send nostalgic chills through anyone, but it is also a pathetic moment: the mine turned old and arthritic failing in his first outing in ten years because of it. Brando and Loren show his tutelage, his grimaces, his body gestures but they seem out of place, forced.

The script is entirely lacking. The sardonic, imaginative, eloquently sublime Chaplin is no-where to be seen. For me, this movie verifies the notion that Chaplin can only direct himself. When this almost schizophrenic relationship between director and actor is, of necessity, broken, we can expect very little.

A pleasant surprise: John Huston's *The Bible*. Huston thought big, worked on a sprawling canvas and made it!

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