

A MAN FOR
ALL SEASONS

1997

Ivey makes Bolt's work a play for all seasons

A Man for All Seasons
by Robert Bolt performed
by Teddington Theatre Club,
at Vera Fletcher Hall,
Thames Ditton.

IT HAS become commonplace to present Shakespeare in modern dress, something that The Bard can survive with little difficulty, but the approach does not always work with other playwrights.

The fact that it did with *A Man for All Seasons* is a measure of the talent and the quality of TTC and director, Christopher Ivey.

The achievement was possible because Bolt himself was searching for a means of conveying the need for a sense in the modern world and in going back to Thomas More as the embodiment of 'self-hood' he was

able to universalise his theme.

Jean Goodwin's setting was the perfect area in which this drama of moral dilemmas could be played out.

Ivey was able to cast from considerable strength, most emphatically in the two main roles, those of Thomas More and the Common man – the former the pivot of the action and the argument and the later a Brechtian commentator who takes several minor roles and throws More's steadfastness into relief.

Stephen Bentley was Sir Thomas More, utterly convincing in his flexible adjustment to the society of his time yet preserving an inner integrity that was unassailable. I loved the loving byplay with his wife and daughter and the dryly understated wit of his intercourse with

his house guests. This was a masterly portrayal.

So too, in its way, was that of Mike Waters as The Common Man, essentially modern in his cynicism, yet of his time in his genuine love and respect for the goodness that he sees in More.

Maria Gale made an enormous impression as Margaret, More's daughter, though I was less convinced by Carolyn Williams as Alice, More's wife, who seemed not quite sure whether the woman was bewildered or simply irritated by her husband's stance.

Thomas Cromwell was given a vivid characterisation by Barry Record, though he rushed his lines rather too much, especially in his scenes with Rich. Ben Davies did very well by Rich, initially engaging our sympathy

for someone at odds with his situation.

There were interesting performances in the smaller roles: Jack Smerdon, as the Spanish ambassador, John Roth, as the Duke of Norfolk, and Stephen Hogben, as More's son-in-law.

I was a little surprised that David Wheatley did not convince as the King – where was the animal magnetism of the young Henry or the genuine intellect of the man?

What this production achieved superbly was a delivery of the central theme of the play and its challenge to a modern audience as to the nature of morality and the necessity for individual integrity – Christopher Ivey and his team achieved that magnificently.

George Allan

RICHMOND DRAMA AWARDS

Back-to-basics for a case of conscience

TRAPPINGS of state and period costumes were missing from Christopher Ivey's sombre presentation of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* for Teddington Theatre Club at the Vera Fletcher Hall last week.

This pared-down-essentials production of the play: modern dress, stage furnished by a table and a few chairs and rich red hangings and banners, served to place the emphasis on the text and the undoubted acting skills of a talented cast.

We are shown a case of conscience. Sir Thomas More, circa 1529 (aged 51), about to be appointed Lord Chancellor, subsequently resigning in 1532 when Henry VIII in his urgent desire for divorce, severed his connection with Rome and declared himself head of the church in England. More, refusing to take the Succession Oath, stands between church and state, and holds out till martyrdom.

As Sir Thomas, Stephen Bentley convincingly conveys a man of great integrity, acutely aware of

his danger, with a wry wit, fine legal mind, and an unswerving belief that he is accountable only to God.

Carolyn Williams and Maria Gale gave affecting accounts of his bewildered wife Alice and daughter Margaret.

Mike Waters is the archetypal Common Man, linking the action while portraying steward, juror, boatman etc with palms permanently stretched out ready for remuneration.

There were telling contributions too from John Roth as a bluffly pragmatic Duke of Northumberland, Barry Rocard as a ferret-like Cromwell, and Ben Davies as the self-seeking Richard Rich, always ready to change his allegiance.

Although Bolt's play fails to confront the wider implications of this particular man's resolute adherence to his beliefs, relating them mostly to family, and not to the larger issues affecting Tudor society, it nevertheless made for compelling drama, given full weight in this production by an excellent cast.

Jenny Scott