

British Theatre Guide

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Thomas More

Anthony Munday, William Shakespeare and others
RSC at the People's Theatre, Newcastle
(2005)

I'm tempted to borrow the football cliché and describe *Thomas More* as a play of two halves, for really there are two plays here: the first half shows us More's rise to prominence by calming down an anti-foreigner riot in London and the second his fall from grace for refusing to sign what is referred to simply as "articles" required by the King. Unlike in *A Man for All Seasons*, which covers much the same ground, we are not told what the "articles" are, nor is there any mention of the King's divorce or the break with Rome. More simply says that he cannot in all conscience sign them and the only real indication of a religious angle is the concurrent refusal of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester.

There are, we are told, five writers and it shows, not only in the two separate stories but also in the varied collection of themes, sub-plots and characters which come and go, and in the variety of writing styles. There is even a "play within the play" - *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* - which, while it might show us a little about More's character, does not really add anything to the play (especially since it is cut short): one is tempted to wonder if it was put in to amuse the groundlings, in much the same way as Shakespeare (more successfully and with more reason) introduces the Porter in *Macbeth*.

This kind of collaboration between writers was not unusual and many examples have come down to us: Beaumont and Fletcher, for example, and Middelton and Rowley whose [A New Way to Please You](#) is part of the RSC's Gunpowder season.

The two halves are thematically linked, in that they treat of More's conscience, compassion, common sense and good judgement, but they don't really hold together terribly well dramatically. The first half seems to me to be particularly "bitty": it opens with the growing anger of the people of London at the arrogance of the "aliens" (Lombards and French in particular); then there's a scene showing us More, in his role as a Sheriff of London, in court, showing up Suresby, a Justice; then it's back to the people of London who begin to riot and More is called in by a *coterie* of noblemen to defuse the situation which, in a scene we know to be written by Shakespeare, he does very effectively. More's speech to the rioters is pure Shakespeare!

But laying aside considerations of the quality of the play, what does director Robert Delamere and his cast make of it?

The ensemble playing is tremendous and Nigel Cooke gives us a most attractive Thomas More, a man of charm and wit as well as his other qualities, a man, indeed, very different to the More of Bolt's play. But More is the only really fully realised character: the others are quite shallow and it is only thanks to the work (and energy!) of an excellent cast that they come alive to the extent they do.

The only scene which really stirs the emotions is the one in which More makes his farewells to his family immediately prior to his execution. This was ensemble playing of the highest order and brought a lump to the throat.

The staging is simple - if one can use that word with a cast of 22 - using just chairs and tables. The latter, in fact, see service in a number of guises, from simple tables to (most effectively) the scaffold at the end.

It is not, it has to be said, a play which will live long in the memory. It doesn't reach the standard of even the less successful of Shakespeare's work, but the quality of the performances and the production values do not disappoint. If for no other reason, it was worth doing because it shows just how far ahead of the majority of his contemporaries Shakespeare was!

Steve Orme [reviewed](#) this production at the Swan Theatre, Stratford

Philip Fisher also [reviewed](#) it on its transfer to London's Trafalgar Studios

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)