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Robert Bolt

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ROBERT BOLT

Robert Bolt, a British dramatist and screenwriter, is best known for his "dramas of selfhood" which revolve around self-determining individuals who find their integrity challenged by overpowering social and political forces. In a series of beautifully-written, well-crafted dramatic portraits Bolt treats the pages of history and the ordinary events of daily life as a stage upon which epic contests of will and conscience are played out. Drawing upon his background in history and education, Bolt vividly depicts the moral struggles of strong-willed characters who are led by conscience or driven by circumstance to resist the opposing tide of historical events. Often seen as modern morality plays, several of his works for stage and screen have been popular and critical successes, most notably A Man for All Seasons, Lawrence of Arabia, Dr. Zhivago, and The Mission.

The youngest of two sons, Bolt was born in the small Lancashire town of Sale, near Manchester. His father was a shopkeeper; his mother taught at a primary school. Rooted in Northern nonconformity, his family's background of temperance and Sunday school attendance, coupled with progressive political views, imbued him with a sense of social responsibility. During the Second World War, Bolt studied history at Manchester University, and served with the Royal African Frontier Force in Ghana as a lieutenant. He returned to the University after the war, graduated with honors in 1949, earned a teaching diploma, and taught school for eight years before leaving to pursue a full-time literary career. In 1949 Bolt married Celia Ann Roberts, a painter, who bore him three children before their

divorce in 1967. Another son was born to Sarah Miles, an actress, whom he married in 1967, divorced in 1975, and subsequently remarried after a marriage to Ann Queensberry, also an actress, ended in 1980.

While teaching English at a village school in 1950, Bolt was asked to write a nativity play which he subsequently regarded as "an astonishing turning point." From 1953-1958 he wrote a series of radio plays, seven for children and eight for adults, that were broadcast by the BBC. Turning to the stage in 1955, he achieved his first critical and popular success in 1957 with Flowering Cherry, which depicts the self-deceiving dreams and death of a salesman.

Bolt's most memorable work and greatest success, A Man for All Seasons, was first produced as a radio play and broadcast in 1954. He reworked it first for a television production in 1957, then for the stage in 1960, where it enjoyed long runs in London and New York. In 1966 he reworked it once again, this time as a screenplay. Combining naturalism with symbolism, innovative techniques with traditional form, A Man for All Seasons dramatizes the physical and moral peril faced by Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor under Henry VIII, when the demands of his office and his conscience as a Christian come into conflict. The personal and political struggle he embodies assumes heroic proportions as he discovers he must stand, naked to his enemies and virtually alone, against the armed majesty and power of the State.

Bolt excelled at creating larger-than-life characters within a repertory that is richly varied in time and circumstance. He turned to a contemporary setting in The

Tiger and the Horse (1960). Here the troubled conscience is that of an ordinary man, Jack Dean, who risks losing a chance to become vice chancellor of the university by signing a ban-the-bomb petition. Soon afterward, life imitated art when Bolt was imprisoned in 1961, along with other members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, for refusing to stop holding anti-nuclear demonstrations. Bolt's subsequent work for the stage includes Vivat! Vivat Regina! (1970) on the conflict between Mary, Queen of Scots, and Queen Elizabeth; and State of Revolution (1977) on the Russian Revolution.

It is as a screenwriter, however, that Bolt found his widest audience. His screenplay for Lawrence of Arabia (1962), which he developed from the diaries of T. E. Lawrence, was followed by six other major films, including an adaptation of Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago (1965), his own A Man for All Seasons (1966), Ryan's Daughter (1970), and The Mission (1986). Bolt's output declined sharply during the last decade of his life, following a disabling heart attack and stroke while working on The Bounty. Even so he completed a teleplay, The James Brady Story, as recently as 1991. He died at his home near Petersfield on February 20, 1995.

Stage and screen audiences generally have been more responsive to Bolt's work than critics, who respect his meticulous craftsmanship and realism but regard his work as old-fashioned. A Man for All Seasons won awards for best play and best foreign play in 1962. Later, the film version won an Academy Award for best screenplay. By that time his screenplay for Dr. Zhivago had also been awarded an

