

## Contributors

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## James Willis

### All the world's a stage

My wife and I met during a joint school production of 'Romeo and Juliet'. No, she was the Nurse and I was the second friar. Very few people know there is a second friar in 'Romeo and Juliet' but there is, and he has a line, which I managed to learn reasonably well; my problem lay more in remembering when to say it. This year, at about the time you will be reading this, we will be acting together again, this time in Robert Bolt's 'A Man for All Seasons'. I am playing Sir Thomas More (otherwise known as Saint Paul Scofield) and, yes, my wife is his wife, Lady Alice. We both have quite a lot of lines this time, especially me, some say the part is bigger than Hamlet but I haven't been brave enough to count. But the extraordinary thing is that I find I am soaking up the beautiful lines, many of which were taken verbatim by Robert Bolt, as befits a history master, from contemporary records of More's own words at and before his trial.

So please forgive me for my preoccupation as I set out to write this column. My first thought was to use the experience as a celebration of a particular kind of amateurism, writing as someone who is just as passionate about a particular kind of professionalism, which is also under threat, and which is nowhere better exemplified than by Paul Scofield the actor. Then I thought I might write my piece as an anecdote in support of the thesis that folic acid in the dose of 800 mcg per day is good for the memory,<sup>1</sup> writing as someone who didn't have to wait for the penny to drop at some ponderous committee before trying it. But the thing that has risen to the top of my head as the thing I most want to say in this precious space is the theme of the play itself — the individual conscience pitted against the amorality of the corporate world. In 1535 — in 1990 — in 2007.

I am one of a generation that was changed by this play and by the 1966 film. I had it at the back of my mind when I thought it impossible to continue as a course organiser after refusing to comply with the 1990 contract. It was part of the reason why I thought it important to finish my career without

ever having charged a patient for treatment, like Sir George Godber in his proudest boast, and why I thought at least one GP should retire without having, on a single occasion, allowed officialdom to dictate his clinical priorities.

One of my oldest and most respected colleagues, on hearing that we were about to do this play, said that he had never had any patience with More; he couldn't understand why he hadn't just given in. That's what More's friend, the Duke of Norfolk, (played in our production by a recently retired professor of history, who co-authored the important book, *Disease and History*)<sup>2</sup> thought too, 'Goddammit, man, it's disproportionate! ... you're looking like a crank ...'. That's what Alice thought, until the last moments of what seems all-too-likely to be an overwhelmingly emotional penultimate scene. And that was what his beloved daughter, Margaret Roper — subsequently described as the cleverest woman in England — was persuaded to say to him, so that the family could make that final visit to him in the Tower of London. Why couldn't he just give in and swear to the Act of Succession, annulling King Henry VIII's marriage to Katherine of Aragon, and so save his life?

Of course he doesn't waver: 'When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water [cups hands] and if he opens his fingers then — he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them'.

I know, the issues are different these days and there is less at stake, but it is still inspiring stuff. Perhaps that's why I was able to write the above extract from memory, which is encouraging with 6 weeks still to go.

### REFERENCES

1. Durga J, van Boxtel MP, Schouten EG, *et al*. Effect of 3-year folic acid supplementation on cognitive function in older adults in the FACIT trial: a randomised, double blind, controlled trial. *Lancet* 2007; 20; 369(9557): 208–216.
2. Cartwright, FF, Biddiss, M. *Disease and history*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000.