

Fifteen Great Historical Films From the 1960s You Simply Must See

Forget Squid Game and watch these instead

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Image: Paramount Pictures

I was scrolling through Amazon Prime last night, hoping against hope to find something new to watch that didn't involve serial killers, when I stumbled upon one of the great films of all time, one I had not even thought of in years: the 1966 classic *A Man for All Seasons*. My son-in-law mentioned that he had never heard of it, which didn't surprise me since the only films prior to 1999 that he has

seen are ones I insisted on. I shrugged it off and settled in to watch Paul Scofield's brilliant performance, but seeing some of the "customers also watched" films listed at the bottom of the screen made me stop and think.

A Man for All Seasons was released the year I was born, and while I don't think of it as that long ago, to anyone under 30 a film from five decades ago might as well have been made by the ancient Greeks. Even worse, some of the great films from that era garnered a "G" rating, which is death to any potential viewer who can't remember a time before the internet when sex, gore, and profanity weren't prerequisites for telling a good story. This needs to be corrected, and because I love correcting things, I have come up with a list of films from the 1960s that everyone must see, whether you're 17 or 70.

This list is a little different from the other ten "must see" lists I've done in that I chose one film from each year of the decade, and I've confined it to historical epics for which the '60s are rightly famous. Well, I actually chose five extras, which will not surprise regular readers; I can never stick to just ten, and these five could not be left off. Many of these will be considered safe or standard picks, and that is by design. Not having seen these is like being a music fan and never having listened to the Beatles or the Stones or Bruce; the films of today would not exist without the greats that came before.

***Spartacus* (1960).** The best of the "sword and sandal"

epics of the 1950s and 1960s, equaled in recent decades only by Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Kirk Douglas shines as the slave turned gladiator who led the most famous revolt in the history of Rome. Peter Ustinov and Charles Laughton are particularly good in supporting roles.

The Magnificent Seven (1960). I was going to stick with just *Spartacus* for 1960, but the ghost of the coolest man to ever walk the planet would not allow me to. My adoration of Steve McQueen is well documented (he'll show up on this list again), and for good reason. The King of Cool is not the only star of this legendary Western though; Yul Brynner was pretty damn cool in the lead role as well, and I liked that the filmmakers stated in the opening credits that it was based on Akira Kurosawa's legendary 1954 film *Seven Samurai*.

The Guns of Navarone (1961). Films about the most devastating war in human history started showing up roughly 20 years after the war, and this one kicked off a plethora of great ones in the 1960s. Starring Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn, David Niven, Stanley Baker, and Anthony Quayle, this tale of a commando unit tasked with destroying a seemingly indestructible Nazi fortress is simply cracking good.

Lawrence of Arabia (1962). Everyone has heard of it, but have you ever seen it? This World War I epic from David Lean is considered by many the greatest film ever made, and if you judge simply by the cinematography it's a hard claim to dispute. Peter O'Toole is outstanding as British

officer T. E. Lawrence, and the story of his attempts to help the myriad Arab tribes of the Middle East forge a nation of their own is, for the most part, true to history.

The Longest Day (1962). Fifty years later, this remains one of the great films about World War II ever made. The first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* are more accurate (and more graphically jarring) historically, but this first post-war film about the D-Day landings more than makes up for it with an all-star cast that includes Henry Fonda, Robert Mitchum, John Wayne, Richard Burton, Sean Connery, Rod Steiger, Curt Jurgens, and Werner Hinz. It's a three-hour film that doesn't feel anywhere near that long.

The Great Escape (1963). Based loosely on an actual event, this is one my favorite World War II movies, with the type of all-star cast World War II films always tend to feature: James Garner, James Coburn, Richard Attenborough, Charles Bronson, and (of course) Steve McQueen, to mention just a few. Not a war film in the classic sense, with no major battle scenes at any point, but compelling throughout nonetheless.

Cleopatra (1963). Elizabeth Taylor shines in this epic about the most famous queen in history. She was not even nominated for an Oscar for the role, yet another example of the Academy being idiots (though Rex Harrison did win Best Actor for his portrayal of Julius Caesar). The film is probably best remembered today as the start of a decades-long relationship, both professional and personal, between

Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, who played Marc Antony in the film.

Zulu (1964). Hands down one of the best war films ever made, about an event almost no one remembers: the Defense of Rourke's Drift in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War in South Africa. During this battle, a British force of around 150 withstood a two-day assault by a Zulu force of nearly 4,000 warriors. Stanley Baker and Michael Caine are simply brilliant as Lieutenants John Chard and Gonville Bromhead, respectively. Unlike many films of the time (and since) about European or American forces fighting indigenous tribes, it does not portray the Zulus as mindless savages, but as noble warriors fighting for their homeland. There is also no silly jingoistic "for King and Country" flag waving on the part of the British troops; they are simply trying to survive. In the end, there is a mutual respect between the two sides, a daring message to send in 1964.

Becket (1964). I actually re-watched this one last night as well (it was suggested by Amazon after *A Man for All Seasons*). It had been probably 20 years since I last saw this film about the epic struggle between King Henry II of England and his one-time best friend, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket (Crown vs. Church is a common thread through large parts of English history). Richard Burton (Becket) and Peter O'Toole (Henry) both received best actor nominations, ultimately losing to Rex Harrison for his role in *My Fair Lady*. Both give amazing performances, but for me, it's O'Toole who really stands out;

he should have won the Oscar.

Dr. Zhivago (1965). This David Lean epic about the Russian Revolution made Omar Sharif a star, but he almost didn't even get the part. Lean's first choice for the lead role of Yuri Zhivago was Peter O'Toole, whom he had worked with on *Lawrence of Arabia*. However, O'Toole found the filming of *Lawrence of Arabia* so grueling that he turned down the part. Like all of Lean's films, the cinematography is breathtaking, almost becoming a character itself. As good as Sharif is, it is Julie Christie's performance as Lara that you'll remember.

A Man for All Seasons (1966). This is the film that triggered this article, so you can blame Paul Scofield, not me. The story of Sir Thomas More's conscientious stand against Henry VIII is worth watching for Scofield's performance alone (he won a Tony award for his portrayal of the role on stage and an Oscar for the film), but Orson Welles, Robert Shaw, Susannah York, and a very young John Hurt all give stellar performances as well.

The Sand Pebbles (1966). Did I just sneak in another Steve McQueen film? I did, and the only reason I am not bitter about him not winning the Best Actor Oscar for his role as Machinist's Mate 1st Class Jake Holman is that Paul Scofield clearly deserved it more. The real history covered in this film about a U.S. Navy gunboat patrolling China's Yangtze River in the 1920s may surprise viewers who didn't know we were involved with China long before the present

day.

Bonnie and Clyde (1967). This one is proof that great gangster films aren't all about the Mafia and aren't all made by Martin Scorsese. Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway each received Oscar nominations for their portrayals of the title characters, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. Their crime spree across Texas and the Midwest from 1932 to 1934 is the stuff of legend, and the film captures it in a more gritty and graphic manner than seen before in film; some consider this film the start of the New Hollywood era. And the ending is not one you'll quickly forget.

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968). Considered one of the greatest Westerns of all time (though personally I prefer Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" trilogy). Like that Eastwood trilogy, this Spaghetti Western was directed by Sergio Leone and scored by Ennio Morricone. Henry Fonda, Jason Robards, and Charles Bronson all give fine performances, but it is Fonda's turn as a villain (completely against his usual good-guy parts) that stands out to this day.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969). My love for this part buddy film, part comedy, and all Western is also well known; the chemistry between Paul Newman and Robert Redford alone make this one of the greatest films ever. It's also got some of the best dialogue ever heard onscreen: "I've got vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals," "You just keep thinking, Butch. It's what you're

good at," and my all-time favorite, "Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?" The cinematography is breathtaking, and the final scene is one of the most iconic in movie history.

Given the responses to my earlier "movies you must see" articles, I expect some lively comments. Just make sure that in addition to roasting me you're telling all your kids and younger friends that they need to see these. They'll be glad you did.