



Kenneth More at the height of his fame in *Reach for the Sky* (left) and *Genevieve* (right).



# More than dependable

**Typecast as a charming and virtuous English gent, Kenneth More struggled to keep up with changing tastes – until TV came to the rescue, says Steve O'Brien**

There were few names bigger in British cinema than Kenneth More in the Fifties. His first film as lead, 1953's *Genevieve*, was the second most popular movie at the UK box office that year; 1954's *Doctor in the House* won him a Best British Actor BAFTA; and *Reach for the Sky* (1956), in which he starred as flying ace Douglas Bader, was the UK's highest grossing film that year. And in Roy Ward Baker's epic retelling of the Titanic disaster, *A Night to Remember* from 1958, More is top-billed as Second Officer Charles Lightoller, keeping calm and carrying on as chaos erupts.

However, despite his blinding star wattage, by the Sixties, cinema didn't seem to know what to do with More. He had made his name in a parade of amiable British comedies and seemed pigeonholed as the urbane, gentle and unapologetically middle-class do-gooder. As a new type of movie star emerged, the biggest and most cherished actor of the previous decade found himself somehow out of fashion.

When he was cast as a struggling, middle-aged actor in *Alvin*

Rakoff's 1964 kitchen sink drama *The Comedy Man*, it was clear to see why the part chimed with him. "I read the script and was profoundly struck by its relevance to my own life," he wrote years later. That in the film, More's character has an affair with a much younger actress, played by his then girlfriend Angela Douglas, make the parallels even more pronounced.

But even if More struggled in the Sixties, it wasn't a new situation for him. His rise to stardom hadn't happened in a clap of thunder. Where some stars appear to

bypass the years in rep, the tiny, inglorious supporting roles and the rent-paying panto gigs, for others it's a common route to A-list status.

When he secured his big break as Freddie Page in Terence Rattigan's 1952 play *The Deep Blue Sea*, he was an old hand. "Critics hailed me almost as an overnight discovery," he wrote in his autobiography, *More or Less*, in 1978, "conveniently forgetting I was already 38, and that I had been working in the theatre for nearly 20 years."

Critics rhapsodised about More's performance, leading to director

Henry Cornelius approaching him mid-run and offering him £3,500 to play his first big-screen lead, in *Genevieve*. Though More would later admit to sour memories of the film, "the shooting of the picture was hell – everything went wrong, even the weather," he grumbled, the genial vintage-car comedy established him as a movie star in his home country.

Film offers flooded in over the next few years – *The Admirable Crichton* (1957), *Our Girl Friday* (1953), *Raising a Riot* (1955), *Next to No Time* (1958), *The 39 Steps*

(1959), *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw* (1958)... But it was as Group Captain Douglas Bader, who famously lost both legs in the Second World War, that would become his signature role.

Few actors radiated integrity, bravery and decency like More, a quality that papered over some of the rougher edges of the real Bader's character: "[The public] still think [I'm] the dashing chap Kenneth More was," the war veteran later said.

By the late Fifties, More was finding himself fatally typecast. ➔

Kenneth More serves up the comedy in *The Admirable Crichton* with Sally Ann Howes and Cecil Parker.





Kenneth More published two volumes of autobiography, *Happy Go Lucky* (1959) and *More or Less* (1978) and a book of reminiscences, *Kindly Leave the Stage* (1965).

He was never in consideration as a villain or rogue, a cad or a bounder, always as a certain type of dependable, virtuous Englishman. And those parts were dying out.

"I was very fond of Kenny as an actor, although he wasn't particularly versatile," said Lewis Gilbert, who directed More in *The Admirable Crichton*. "What he could do, he did very well. His strengths were his ability to portray charm; basically, he was the officer returning from the war and he was superb in that kind of role. The minute that kind of role went out of existence, he began to go down as a box office star."

While More was happy to be a film star in the UK, he had little ambition to take his career global, so never chased the roles that could have broken him Stateside. He was cast in the war epic *The Longest Day* (1962) alongside superstars including Henry Fonda, Robert Mitchum and John Wayne, but his role as Acting Captain Colin Maud didn't command much screen time at all.

As the Sixties continued, he found meaty film roles harder to come by. In 1967, however, television



Kenneth More as Young Jolyon in popular TV series *The Forsyte Saga*.

would come to his rescue. His role in the BBC's ratings-conquering 1967 adaptation of *The Forsyte Saga* seemed to kickstart the final stage of More's career.

Though big-screen parts were few and far between in the Seventies, he won plaudits as G.K. Chesterton's crime-solving priest in the 1974 ITV

series, *Father Brown*. But if More's fortunes were finally on the rise, something debilitating was on the horizon.

More had got together with the 26-years-younger Angela Douglas in 1962, leaving his wife, Mabel, and causing a long-standing estrangement from his family. He once wrote of his womanising: "Faithfulness in marriage, for a man at least, is like a handmade silk shirt, it can wear thin."

Douglas and More separated in the Seventies, only for her to return to his side when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1978. The last few years of his life, by his own account, were

"bloody awful". "The simplest outing becomes a huge challenge," he said in 1981. "I have to have Angela's arms to support me most days."

More's final role was as Jarvis Lorry in a 1980 American TV adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities*. He died on July 12, 1982, aged 67, with Douglas by his side.

Though it's nearly 70 years since More's commercial heyday, his name lives on. The Kenneth More Theatre in Ilford opened in 1975 and is still going strong, while in 2020, the first biography of Britain's biggest Fifties star was published by writer Nick Pourgourides.

When theorising why he was popular with audiences, More once said: "I am the reassurance that they have not changed. In an upside-down world, with all the rules being rewritten as the game goes on and spectators invading the pitch, it is good to feel that some things and some people seem to stay just as they were."



Kenneth More was best man when his friend Roger Moore married Luisa Mattioli on April 11, 1969.