

## Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* as Contributions to a Definition of Culture

CHRISTIANE BIMBERG

Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker belong to Great Britain's most distinguished female contemporary playwrights. Over the years they have helped to shape out of alternative, experimental kinds of theatre new dimensions and directions of development in the mainstream theatre.

*Top Girls* (1982) and *Our Country's Good* (1987) are concerned in different ways with the genesis of culture(s) over long periods of time in the history of human civilisation. They demonstrate in a subtle and at the same time thrilling way how people form their own cultural, social, economic, political and linguistic identities. Remarkably enough this is shown in both plays through directing the spectators' attention to the lives of women whose ability to determine culture in their own terms has been more limited than the men's so far.

**Caryl Churchill** elucidates the issue of the compatibility of profession and family for contemporary women. She confronts the spectators with the workaday routine in an Unemployment Agency in Britain in the 1980s, i.e. with examples of rivalry, jealousy, comradeship and career struggle. At the beginning of the play *Marlene*, the female protagonist, has just been appointed head of the Agency after having worked up her way to that position for years.

The beginning of the play is constructed in a logically consistent way. *Marlene's* appointment offers a unique occasion for celebration. After lots of efforts taken in the past this is a decisive step in her career. As she doesn't have time to go on a holiday she decides in favour of a party:

Well, it's a step. It makes for a party. I haven't time for a holiday. I'd like to go somewhere exotic like you [Isabella] but I can't get away. [...] (1)<sup>1</sup>

At this point of the action the spectator's/reader's curiosity and interest in later developments on the stage is aroused by the fact that Churchill starts right in the middle of the "story": She does not dramaturgically present Marlene's advancement at the end and on top of a long series of efforts leading up to the event, but confronts the recipients with the result on the present-time level of the play. Only later glimpses of Marlene's past are revealed step by step so that the reader/spectator (henceforth only "spectator") is able to see her appointment as the culmination of a longer and by no means easy process.

At first sight the party in celebration of Marlene's career advancement seems to call for a display of triumph on Marlene's part. Yet Caryl Churchill enhances the potential of that scene's impact by inserting alienating and as it were modifying levels of reference that start to manipulate the spectator's responses and gradually change the standards of evaluation of past, present and future events. This is done by way of a dramaturgical time sequence that deviates from the logical chronology, moving from the present-time level of the play to events that happened a year earlier. Along with it goes a dramatic exploration and further revelation of Marlene's personality against a widening social, personal and private background, which has a climactic effect on the spectator: (1) The play starts with a celebration of Marlene's appointment to which five other women from the past are invited (Act One). The recipients see Marlene on top of her career (result). (2) Subsequently the office life of Marlene and her male and above all female colleagues is presented in greater detail (Scenes II.i; II.iii). The audience's awareness of the inherent difficulties of the job(s), including the clash between the working and the personal worlds, is increased (process). (3) Finally the private background of Marlene's life and her split personality are revealed (Scenes II.ii; Act Three) (conclusion).

Once more the dramatic tension is kept up through letting the office scenes and the scenes of private character alternate. A special effect is reached when in II.iii. both worlds meet or rather clash: Angie, Marlene's neglected child that is brought up by her sister Joyce as her own child,

arrives in Marlene's office to ask her "aunt" for support to get away from home. Marlene is thus unexpectedly confronted with the late consequences of her former immaturity. Only Act Three, which contains events that according to the logical chronology had taken place a year earlier, makes it clear to the spectator, too, that Angie is a "lost case," a child with no future anyway. Already a year ago it was clear that she would have few chances in life and in the working world: Joyce could not offer her adequate facilities of education or other appropriate intellectual stimuli and Marlene was too ignorant and selfish to care in time.

To return to the main issue of the play: it is during the First Act that the present-day world of working women in Britain is juxtaposed with the lives of five fictitious, partly historical, partly literary female figures of the past. The modern issue of the compatibility of profession and family for women is expanded into a discussion of various possible forms of female identity. Churchill confronts the characters and the audience with the diverse, at times modest, at times bolder efforts of women from very different cultural backgrounds to gain more physical as well as mental freedom. The characters include Isabella Bird (1831-1904), who was the daughter of a Church of England clergyman, lived in Edinburgh and later travelled abroad as a mature woman; Lady Nijo, a concubine of a Japanese emperor and later a Buddhist nun, who was born in 1258 and travelled the country on foot; Dull Gret, a figure from the Brueghel painting *Dulle Griet*, in which a woman dressed in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils; Pope Joan who is thought to have been Pope between 854 and 856 and Patient Griselda modelled after the type of the obedient wife in Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer.

The cultural geography implied by the play spans the globe and the time narrated covers a period of more than a thousand years. The first act (which takes up 29 pages in print) contains narratives, comments, questions and cross-references of the women. The continuous dialogue mainly consists of retrospective reflections that reveal the parallels as well as differences between the women's lives.<sup>2</sup> Marlene therefore is faced with the difficult task of holding the conversation together. The whole dialogue creates the effect of a floating web of sounds and thoughts, at times acquiring qualities of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

During this intensive process of talking and listening the self-portraits of the characters are checked continuously by the women's comments on each other's stories and lives as well as by Marlene's responses. Due to their different backgrounds, the women voice different opinions: the rites and customs at the Japanese court in the thirteenth century narrated by Lady Nijo with passion and tolerance are termed "rape" by Marlene (3). The taking away of Griselda's children by her husband, which is felt by Griselda to be a legitimate test of loyalty, is characterised by Marlene as the cruel act of a psychopath (22).

All this part of the action focuses on the women's own wishes and anxieties. It leads to finding out how much space for individual action the women were able to eke out for themselves under the conditions of their times and cultures. Parallels as well as differences between now and then are pointed out in a theatrically very striking way, which makes past and present mirror and reflect each other.

Consequently, various emotional effects such as terror, astonishment, disbelief, pity, anger, and joy are evoked in the different spectators, depending on the contrast between past and present cultural conditions, as well as the differences in age, sex and individual attitudes of the spectators. Seen in a more rational way, the merits of the contemporary career woman Marlene and of all her mates on the stage as well as in social reality appear in a modified light after this view at what women who lived under yet more adverse conditions were able to achieve. As a result, culture (religion, monarchy, patriarchy, colonialism etc.) does not merely appear as an instrument of female oppression but as a challenge and finally an impetus for development. It challenges the women's will to shape life in female terms at least to some extent. Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Dull Gret and Pope Joan turn culture into an instrument and a weapon of self-improvement. With the exception of Patient Griselda, whose submission provides the greatest provocation not only for Marlene and today's audiences but also for the other female characters from the past, all those characters question male regulations, conventions, values and organisation of society. They try to circumvent or subvert them to various degrees, passive and trifling as some of their ways of resistance might appear to more rigid positions of twentieth-century feminism. Thus even Patient Griselda's passive perseverance demands some admiration at last.

Abstracting from the colourful details of the play and summarising the contents will lead to a more modified evaluation. In other words: what is Marlene's promotion in comparison with the achievements of those other women who already in much earlier times left the field of domestic activities or religious devotion (Isabella, Gret, Joan), gained knowledge in times of a male hierarchy within the education system by dangerously neglecting the demands of their own sex (Joan), travelled widely under more dangerous and inconvenient conditions than those accompanying twentieth-century business travelling (Isabella, Nijo), entered upon partnerships and sexual relations unsanctioned by church or state (Nijo, Joan), often also had children (Nijo, Gret, Joan, Griselda), brought them up in very adverse circumstances (Gret), even fought battles (Gret), managed to infiltrate the world-wide male power network, even made it to the top of it (Joan) and broke with the traditional gender roles attributed to them?

The dramatic impact on the spectator of all the stories and dialogues is the awareness that women define themselves diversely in different geographical and cultural spaces and at different times. At first female identity is presented as largely if not exclusively defined by authoritarian influences from outside, i.e. male categories of value and self-esteem such as the respect, obedience and duties to gods, monarchs, fathers and husbands, or by the mother role (particularly through giving birth to boys). Along with it go definitions by literacy and education, clothing, ceremony and charity. It is of particular importance that literacy and education are seen and presented in an ambivalent way, on the one hand as being used by women for reasons of status (the case of Lady Nijo) with the effect of affirming patriarchy, on the other hand with the effect of transforming and supplanting patriarchy (the cases of Isabella Bird and Pope Joan). Literacy, academic studies and gaining education per se do not appear as a way out of the "enclosure," though they are shown as providing a source of personal fulfilment for some time for Pope Joan, Lady Nijo and Isabella Bird. Travelling, which often goes along with acquiring education, serves the function of a liberation of one's mind in Isabella Bird's and Lady Nijo's cases. It provides a means of getting physically away and thus distancing oneself at least temporarily from old vistas even if this does not result in an immediate and thorough pulling down of old regulations.

As the succeeding scenes of the daily routine at the office and the private backgrounds of Marlene and her female colleagues demonstrate, it is only since the twentieth century that women start to define themselves by professional activities, but these often go together with frustrations in the private lives of the women and an undisguised cult of the self. Female identity in *Top Girls* is achieved at a high risk, with great efforts only. In Marlene's case the price for such a relative achievement seems to be quite high. She has acquired an excellent, yet very specialised professional qualification without displaying any signs of engaging in that more universal, as it were humanist literacy and education of the women of the past. Marlene is the first woman to have a profession proper but none of her energies is devoted to any other purpose than her own professional getting on. There is no trace left of the certainly doubtful, frequently enforced, but nonetheless to some extent valuable and necessary charity of the women from the past. Marlene does not even care about the other members of her family.

Furthermore, because of adopting a male power behaviour, which shows her to be an emotionally poor human being, she is trapped in a different way than the women from the past were, though she appears to have mastered the men-made system. She is in fact in danger of being caught in the last refuge of men, the working world, and becoming nothing less, but also nothing more than just *another* man, perhaps not even a better one. Finally she sacrifices that potential of female identity completely that used to offer one of the few possibilities of self-definition and self-esteem for the women of the past, the potential of having children.

Critically enough the play seems to imply that the unfortunate decision a lot of women arrive at even today is still the difficult alternative of "no profession" or "no family," and this despite the fact that the twentieth century has opened up to women new possibilities of self-determination through birth control and a more favourable legislation. In the play none of the working women's lives (of Marlene, Win, Nell, Jeanine, Louise or Shona) displays a happy or satisfactory balance between the professional and the private sides, something always being wrong in the one or the other area. Ultimately even Marlene's function as a role model is questioned. The devastating psychological effects of some career women's

selfish ways of life on other people are indicated in the example of the neglected girl Angie. The girl will be forced to sit idly at home or marry early. In spite of her own experiences and insights Marlene was not able to make sure that her daughter would face better or at least equally fine prospects in life.

How much of the potential of a complex female identity is still left unrealised in a number of the female characters is also demonstrated by the behaviour of Mrs. Kidd in II.iii. She is the wife of a male colleague of Marlene's who had hoped to become head of the Unemployment Agency himself. Mrs. Kidd suggests to Marlene to resign in order to avoid the situation of a man having to work for a female boss, which would be unbearable for her husband, and reveals her fear of being maltreated by him. In five minutes Mrs. Kidd undoes everything that those women from the past have achieved in a millennium. They have been indirectly paving the way for Marlene who was to live up to that moral obligation if possible.

At the end of the play there is no firm standard of judgement left because along with the questioning of a male-dominated organisation of society, culture and values goes a considerate rethinking of the extreme consequences of hard-line feminist positions, a questioning of the propriety of adopting male modes of behaviour by working women and the yet quite frequent sacrifice of a family for the sake of a professional career. The play demonstrates the relative importance of technological and medical progress as well as of political or legal declarations of equality between men and women. These ought to be used with discretion. If the efforts of past female lives are to have positive results and if the collective memory has a function, then every woman will have consciously to negotiate the terms of her life and struggle for an individually satisfying balance between profession and family. Equality and emancipation cannot be prescribed, neither for men nor for women. It requires more than outwardly more favourable conditions for women to achieve individual harmony, fulfilment and satisfaction. This explains perhaps why already the title of the play allows various nuances of pronunciation, implying admiration, enthusiasm, doubt or even contempt, depending on the speaker's own views and interpretations.

Consequently, culture in *Top Girls* is characterised as a divided one, in geography and time, between men and women. The modest and temporary

identity or self-definition that is achieved by the female individuals and wrested from the surrounding cultures is a limited one still, concealing with difficulty contradictions, tensions, gaps, clashes, and struggles. It is by no means a stable, permanent, homogeneous category. On the contrary, it is doubtful and hides latent dangers, requiring and provoking a continuous redefinition. It seems as if the development towards (a particularly female) identity, i.e. something not very clearly defined yet, is still more important than a settled result. Of particular value is Churchill's dialectical way of thinking, of always being aware of the opposite side of an issue. She makes us see the frustrations and moderate successes of women in the past and the victories and triumphs as well as the efforts and sacrifices of women in the present. In other words, Churchill displays a critical attitude towards social progress as far as feminist issues are concerned.

**Timberlake Wertenbaker** considers the issues in question in a play about the origins, methods and results of colonial domination. She shows colonialism in the making and the contradicting forces lying beneath it from the beginning. She goes back to a historical incident of major importance in the history of the British Empire, i.e. the foundation of the English colony of convicts in Australia in 1787. Her presentation of the "colonial story" in her adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* is not a male one of glory, missionary duties and heroic deeds for one's native country. Wertenbaker rather questions that kind of historiography by writing (in a similar though not identical way as Caryl Churchill) an unofficial, "female" history as a personal and subjective form. It is a history written from inside, not so much from the viewpoints of the rulers (though this is not left out), but rather from those of the convicts, i.e. those people who have been let down by society. Particular attention is given to the female convicts who are exploited, abused and oppressed more often and in more poignant ways than the male convicts.

From the outset of the play the central problem connected with setting up a convict colony is evoked. For the more enlightened and educated representatives of the British law and government on the new continent this is the fundamental philosophical issue of educating instead of



punishing people (I.iii).<sup>3</sup> The contrasting attitudes of the colonisers in that scene bear witness to the extreme political, legal, moral and humane difficulties. Wertenbaker confronts the audience with the optimistic and abstract humanist message of educating people even under prison conditions (Governor Arthur Phillip) and the necessity to pass sentence and punish quickly (Judge David Collins); moreover she wants to make her audience aware of the clash between justice and humaneness and the fact that bad habits are difficult to break (Captain Watkin Tench). The controversial discussion results in the governor's project of letting the convicts stage a play for the sake of their spiritual and moral instruction, in preparation for their (at least for some of them) possible return to "civilised" society at home.

Convict *colony* and *colonialism* are interrelated here not just for phonetic or lexical reasons. Not every colony is simultaneously a convict colony, too, or grows out of one as the history of British colonialism in other parts of the world such as Ireland and India demonstrates. But Australia is a special case: for a European 200 years ago Australia almost meant an extraterrestrial territory rather like an uninhabited planet in our own time. At least Wertenbaker's presentation of the conditions of this voyage to Australia which lasts eight months and a week (13) and covers 15 000 miles of ocean (1) seems to imply that association.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless British law, institutions, culture, attitudes and habits are transported very rigidly into that "extraterrestrial" place. The convict colony is meant to be a positive image of British colonialism, a good example to be copied by other nations.

The discussion about the proper treatment of the criminals is linked with a discussion of the general merits and disadvantages or dangers of the theatre that includes the Puritan accusations against plays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the respective answers (I.vi.) and aims at finding out about the usefulness and propriety of a play to change people. The play in question is George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, which is simultaneously to celebrate the King's Birthday on June 4. Once again the officers apply different points of view that fit in with their formerly expressed opinions on the question of education and punishment.

The arguments range broadly and contrastingly from particular details to more abstract issues. It seems as if a fight of spirit versus matter, of the

belief in mental change versus the oppressing facts of reality is being waged: the arguments *against* the theatre concentrate on practical requirements and such urgent needs as the lacking supplies, objections against convicts as actresses and actors, the belief in the innate nature of crime in convicts, the lacking belief in changes of behaviour by a play, the attitude that other spare time activities are personally more satisfying to the officers, objections against the contents of the play and the conviction of punishing being the principal purpose in a convict colony, reservations against the foreign playwright Farquhar and the foreign philosopher Rousseau who advocated education instead of punishment and the ensuing dangers of insubordination, disobedience and revolution (the positions of Ross, Campbell, Tench, Dawes).

The arguments *for* the theatre refer to the chance of a preferment in the military career through supporting the governor's scheme of the play, the contents of the play, parallels between that play about officers and the real officers, the necessity to include female convicts because there aren't any other women in the colony, the model set by noble characters, fine speeches and sentiments, some hope that the play might change the nature of society in the convict colony, that people might forget about material needs and punishments, that the play may help sanctioning matrimony and provide an opportunity to display compassion with sinners according to Christian doctrine by allowing (particularly the female) convicts to play and, finally, that the experiment can do no harm (the positions of Clark, Johnson, Collins, Phillip, Johnston). Though Major Robbie Ross vehemently objects to the acceptance of the play for performance, Governor Phillip carries the motion and holds it up later when Lieutenant Ralph Clark becomes frustrated during rehearsal.

Thus a thoughtful discourse concerning *theatre*, *colony* and *colonialism* is established by Wertebaker. Whereas the overall scheme seems to support the pragmatic connection between the three component parts (the use of the *theatre* in a convict *colony* for the sake of upholding the greater scheme of *colonialism* in general), the detailed course of the discussion about using a play at all suggests a different meaning. While *colony* and *theatre* have been discussed already in their positive *and* negative implications, *colonialism* (either in the play or in the historical reality of that time) has

not. In the course of Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, the play of a dramatist from Ireland (who came from England's first colony, was also an officer, made a late theatre career in London and wrote on doubtful but usual military practices of recruiting people for the army) develops into a touchstone for convicts and officers alike, a test of *colony* and *colonialism*. Meant to be a competition with the convicts' favourite entertainment, hanging, the theatre project signals that the play is a stage for the colony as the colony is a stage for colonialism in the world. Phillip's remark in II.ii. encourages such a reading:

A Play is a world in itself, a tiny colony we could almost say. (25)

In other words, *play* and *colony* are used as synecdoches, they imply the whole world.

Consequently, not only theatre and colony but also colonialism in general is put to the test. The play, "the diagram in the sand" (25) for the Governor, which reminds the slave boy of his intelligence, serves as a bulwark of education versus the punishment model of reality (the reality of the play and that of society). This is also indicated by the double functions of characters on the different levels of reality and the theatre: Midshipman Harry Brewer, who suggested playing to his convict mistress and loves to hear her say her lines, has to find a hangman in between. The women convicts do not want to act with Ketch the hangman, who ironically is to be Justice Balance in the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* (18). Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who would never be in a play in England (37), is to organise the rehearsals of the play. This has been ordained for the convicts by their gaolers and rulers.

The absurdity of transferring English law, an instrument of colonisation, and English theatre alike into the "extraterrestrial" territory of a remote convict colony, is presented as a doubtful enterprise from the beginning. Wertenbaker shows that the export of English culture has consoling as well as problematical effects on officers *and* convicts. Gaolers and prisoners are exposed to heavy physical and mental pressures and show precarious and even destructive and self-destructive modes of behaviour.

The convicts have been sentenced to absurdly high penalties for comparatively insignificant crimes without mitigating circumstances being

allowed for. The female convicts were often sold to men at the age of ten in London. On the journey, too, and in the colony they have always been badly used by the men. For some of the women it is difficult to come to terms with their situation and bad reputation. Among the officers the question how to treat them is discussed and answered differently. Their responses range from compassion and growing respect to contempt and agree with their general views about education and punishment and the role a play can fulfil in it. Furthermore, the education and punishment issue is aggravated in relation to the female convicts: the governor tries by all means to avoid the example of the first execution of a woman in the colony.

Moreover, even among the female convicts there is no unanimous solidarity. Nor are the biographical and social boundaries drawn in England between convicts and officers due to special merits but seem to have come about in an arbitrary way, by "fate" and circumstance. Midshipman Harry Brewer for instance thinks that he might be one of the convicts if he had not joined the navy.<sup>5</sup> The officers are plagued by physical hardships and spiritual anxieties, too. They also seek comfort and are in need of mutual reassurance. Some of them are on the verge of losing the ability to differentiate between dream and reality.

The colony dilemma (heavy physical and mental pressures on gaolers and prisoners alike; cultural, social and ethnic dislocation) in fact intersects the *whole* colony and crosses the boundaries made so far by social and gender determinations. Under the conditions given and for a limited span of time the cultural and social differences usually separating officers and convicts in England are diminished in that "extraterrestrial" territory because both groups are far from being homogeneous in themselves and because the members of both groups are uprooted and dislocated alike. They have become culturally, socially and ethnically distanced from England, their families and usual spare time activities.

All of them have taken along their dreams, hopes, frustrations, fears, anxieties and obsessions to Australia. All are exposed to the disconcerting conditions of a foreign continent that frequently appears hostile to them. Major Robbie Ross clearly describes the character of their stay as a sort of punitive expedition:

This is a profligate prison for us all, it's a hellish hole we soldiers have been hauled to because they blame us for losing the war in America. This is a hateful hary-scary, topsy-turvy outpost, this is not a civilisation. I hate this possumy place. (34)

Wertenbaker shows the double face of colonialism. The inside point of view of the colonisers who comprise officers *and* convicts displays the humanely touching side of it. The colonisers' efforts to adjust and accommodate themselves to the new continent are shown as efforts to come to terms with it. The rather absurd efforts to transfer English architecture, the theatre and observatory, plants, gardening and various other English spare time activities to those exotic regions can be seen as satisfying the need for consolation, to mitigate the foreignness of present conditions with some familiarity. Yet this view from inside is contrasted with the outside point of view of the cruel impact on the native population (the genocide). The colony and the theatre thus become a test place for human behaviour and take on a symbolical meaning.

The collaboration of officers and convicts in the rehearsals of Farquhar's play becomes in fact a catalyst, triggering off examples of the best and worst kinds of behaviour in a spiritual crisis. During rehearsal some of the rulers of the colony and some of the prisoners are united in a process of theatrical creation none of them would have had the chance to participate in England. The convicts take on roles of socially far superior characters who behave in morally doubtful ways in the play, however. The acting of the convicts reverses their real roles and supplants the social reality of England as well as of the colony to which part of the social reality of England has been exported in an artificial way and where it can only be maintained with difficulty. The convicts bring facets of their old social roles into the play. They cling to their old social reality, their former experiences with the theatre and former assumptions in different ways and to various degrees. Yet as the theatre and the colony are shown to be just two different ways of illusion, they finally succeed in the transfer because their fluid identities imply the mental adjustment to diverse expectations and demands of the day. At last the boundaries between the female convicts and the officers are crossed, already before the rehearsals

by Duckling and Brewer, and during the rehearsals in a more conscious and deliberate way by Mary and Clark.

All scenes focussing on theatricality are logically constructed and psychologically convincing. Wertebaker exploits the comic and the tragic potential implied in such an unusual situation, showing fun, amazement, crisis, despair and new hope in the theatrical process that refers back to reality. The levels of reality and theatre are permanently crossed, which leads to some confusion among the players, but in the long run to deeper insights and an awareness of the convicts' situation on the foreign continent. The officers' attitudes towards education and punishment and the usefulness of a play are thus tested in practice: for a time reality (punishment) seems to gain advantage over the theatre (education) but the latter triumphs at last.

The result of these various processes of crossing boundaries and making shifts is "disorder," on the one hand affirming some of the officers' suspicions (cf. above), on the other hand providing the insight that the old social gender, moral, professional and ethnic identities have been overcome and that redefinitions of identity are emerging in Australia. When Churchill's play ends the convict-actors have become aware of their creative potential and their professional chances on the new continent. Here all people transferred from Britain are foreigners and it is difficult to treat Jews, Irishmen or Madagascans in the way they have been treated as outsiders in England.<sup>6</sup> One of the results is also a new self-confidence and the recognition of the power of a play to contribute to survival. The capacity of the theatre to change reality is proved in the sense that the actors and actresses have gained a new awareness of their changed reality and their potential roles in it. In the case of Mary and Clark the risk of a partnership between female convicts and officers is now accepted with full responsibility and a consciousness of the internal and external dangers implied in it (as for instance in the former relationship between Duckling and Brewer), particularly the necessity to conceal true feelings before other people and to come to terms with emotions of doubt and jealousy.

Consequently, in Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* culture and identity are shown to be precarious, unstable categories. There is a growing

awareness of the fault, the effort and the absurdity to transport Englishness, to export, imitate and copy British culture or, to be more precise, British upper middle-class culture, for the good of mankind.<sup>7</sup> The theatre experiment as a symbolical embodiment of colony and colonialism has revealed the potential and the limits of both of them. There is in fact only a slight change to be seen during the course of *Our Country's Good* as to the colonisers' transgressing the borders between adjustment to foreignness and setting oneself off from foreignness: There are, for example, some initial efforts of the officers to naturalise plants as well as habits taken over from England.<sup>8</sup> Only some of the officers, however, notice positive differences and derive some pleasure from the exotic side of the new continent such as the colourful birds, the kangaroo or the unusual sight of the reverse star constellation.<sup>9</sup> By most of the British inhabitants the differences are felt more keenly. Even at the end of the play hardly any honest efforts are made to look at the different culture of the new continent in a non-superior way. The officers rather view the scene with suspicion from a distance. Their attitudes range from looking at the natives as if they were insects to feeling endangered by the savages (23).

For these reasons the governor is not only a "Governor-in-Chief of a paradise of birds" (1), but simultaneously one of a "colony of wretched souls" (25), to which the convicts and the officers belong and (not noticed fully by the colonisers yet who are busy with fulfilling the immediate tasks of the day) to which the aborigines will soon have to be counted, too. Through references to the American Revolution (34), the French Revolution, the British colony of Ireland, Germany at the time of Farquhar's writing *The Recruiting Officer* (20) etc. Timberlake Wertenbaker indicates that Australia is becoming just another historical and geographical battlefield for contrasting social and ethnic interests.

The colonial enterprise is no good either for the convicts, the officers or the aborigines: a rigid copy of the home culture does not work, nor is it without danger for the native population. Wertenbaker shows diverse processes of levelling: on the one hand she presents (as Shakespeare did in *The Tempest*) the threat of colonialism to level *cultural* differences. On the other hand she also shows the levelling of *social* differences within

the colonisers' culture, that is to say between officers and convicts during the theatre experiment. Whereas the theatre experiment turns out to be a partial success for the colonisers (officers and convicts), the experiment of colonialism has to be regarded as a failure with regard to the extinction of the native culture and its representatives.

At the end of *Our Country's Good* at least part of the British home culture still functions as a humanising potential that the colonisers may develop and modify under the new conditions. The identity arrived at is a kind of transnational and transethnic synthesis that demands a self-willed discipline from the convicts and calls for more self-determination. The doubtful political message of an unconvincing patriotism in Wisehammer's rewritten prologue and his turning the deportation of English convicts into a deliberate mission for the country's good is in fact rather a revelation of a maturing process brought about through the challenge by the home culture as well as the foreign. Paradoxically enough, the convict Wisehammer can generously claim an identification with British colonialism (the imperialism of the future) because he has made the experience that the old identification categories (geography, history, culture, language, gender etc.) do not work any more:

From distant climes o'er wide-spread seas we come,  
 Though not with much éclat or beat of drum,  
 True patriots all; for be it understood,  
 We left our country for our country's good;  
 No private views disgraced our generous zeal,  
 What urged our travels was our country's weal,  
 And none will doubt but that our emigration  
 Has prov'd most useful to the British nation. (38)

Seeing the convicts' prospects as future playwrights, theatre managers, actors and actresses on the new continent as well as their ensuing *denationalised* identity, against the background of the Shakespearean stage at the time of nationalism replacing feudalism<sup>10</sup>, Wertebaker focuses on the shift of identities along with cultural transfers in general.

The aborigines have not yet taken up their role as historical agents instead of objects at the end of the play. Colonialism as seen from the native



population's view point demonstrates the inhumane impact of a thoughtless cultural export and the attitude of Eurocentrism. A lone Aboriginal Australian comments on the arrival of the First Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788 and thus on colonial enterprise in general as a dream that has lost its way and should better be left alone (1). Later in the play the Aborigine describes that lost dream as an unwanted one that has stayed nevertheless. To the same measure as the theatrical experiment displays its partly positive effects and the social differences between the officers and the convicts are getting blurred, the contrast between the colonisers and the aborigines is increasing. Before Farquhar's play is about to be performed, the native inhabitants are shown as stricken with European diseases fatal for them (another way of pointing to the doubtful cultural export and the genocide following it) and in danger of disappearing from the historical agenda. Another imbalance is left for the colonisers to cure . . . .

*Top Girls* and *Our Country's Good*, which question cultural progress and criticise cultural Eurocentrism, can be read and seen as contributions of the contemporary British theatre to a definition of culture. This is not done by establishing one-sided hierarchies, canons, priorities or preferences, but through showing the complex and contradictory tendencies of culture to constitute identities. What the authors want to point out is: *identity* can only be achieved through contrast and *diversity* within one culture, or between several kinds of culture in one society, or through fighting a dominant culture.

Universität Dortmund

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>References are to the Student Edition of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (with commentary and notes). London: Methuen, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>See for example the talk between Marlene, Isabella and Nijo about drinks, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>References are to the edition of The Royal Court Writers Series published by Methuen in association with The Royal Court Theatre London 1989. The issue is a

thoughtful evocation by Wertebaker of the respective debates in eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophy and literature. The question has been answered in different ways at different times without having been solved in a fully satisfactory way by now. Wertebaker frames her treatment with a quotation preceding the play from R. Rosenthal's and L. Jacobsen's *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. It refers to the promotion of supposedly particularly intelligent (but randomly selected) children. Their intellectual performances turned out to be fine indeed due to the teachers' paying special attention to them and expecting more from them. This can be regarded as a case of how wishful thinking influences reality positively. The passage forms a link with an incident later in the play, however. When the Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark gets frustrated during the rehearsing process, he is persuaded to go on by governor Arthur Phillip who reminds him of the intelligence inherent in people born in poor circumstances and encouraged to rely on their abilities. The governor wants Clark to see his convict-actors in that light (24). Cf. also the reference to the play as "the diagram in the sand," which reminds the slave boy of his intelligence (25). Last but not least a connecting link can be seen between this reference to the positive impact on individual development through mentally challenging and promoting people and Churchill's Angie: from her nothing is actually expected and she is not encouraged intellectually. Therefore she has no chance of making it in her later life.

<sup>4</sup>See for example I.i.

<sup>5</sup>p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. p. 22 (the end of I.xi), 36, 37.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. p. 9, particularly the discussion about the staging of a play by Farquhar, some "London Ass" from Ireland.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Harry Brewer notices that the trees look more friendly from here and that the eucalyptus tree is unique (11).

<sup>10</sup>See for instance Sideway's declamation of lines from Shakespeare, p. 19.