

Reply to Verna A. Foster*

CHRISTIANE BIMBERG

I regard it as a particularly happy instance of editorial planning that the editors of *Connotations* have placed two papers on Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* side by side in vol. 7 (1997/98), as this juxtaposition highlights the parallels as well as the differences in the two contributors' views. My study was concerned with exploring the contribution of the theatre to a definition of culture (and identity), putting special emphasis on the female characters and the inherent presentation of female cultural history. This was done in the form of a case study of Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* dealing thematically with the compatibility of profession and family for contemporary women, and of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* discussing the origins, methods and results of colonial domination. Verna A. Foster, as I read her contribution, offered an analysis of two special aspects of the latter play (the positive effects of the theatre and the power relations inherent in this experience) seen against the background of the scholarly debate concerning the correlation of conformity as well as subversion of authority in Wertenbaker's play.

Obviously the two of us, notwithstanding our different approaches and forms of contextualizing, have arrived at similar results. Our common concern is the exploration of theatre as an instrument of culture and we agree in many respects: for example in our evaluation of Wertenbaker's presentation of the cultural and social value of theatre as well as the effects

*Reference: Verna A. Foster, "Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*," *Connotations* 7.3 (1997/98): 417-32; Christiane Bimberg, "Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* as Contributions to a Definition of Culture," *Connotations* 7.3 (1997/98): 399-416.

of theatre experience within the play; we also agree that despite Wertenbaker's metatheatrical concerns cultural colonization is omnipresent thematically, not only in the presentation of the issue of the aborigines, but also in the experience of theatrical representations in itself (cf. Foster 418, Bimberg 409). Furthermore, there is unanimity as to the "multiple voices," i.e. the presentation of diverse views on the theatre in Wertenbaker (Foster 418), and above all, the ambiguous result of the theatre and colonizing experience, the confirmation of the dangers as well as the success of the theatre project (cf. Foster 422; Bimberg 412, 415), or, in more general terms, subversion and conformity. I fully agree with Verna A. Foster's conclusion that the play endorses "the power of theatre to liberate the human spirit" on the one hand and the creation of an awareness "of the political constraints" placed on theatrical activity on the other (Foster 429), and that precisely due to a revelation of "the contradictions in Governor Phillip's idealistic enterprise, *Our Country's Good* protects itself from becoming merely a sentimental endorsement of *theatre as an instrument of culture* and renders more complex Wertenbaker's exploration of theatre's possibilities" (Foster 429/30). This insight was indeed the starting point for my own investigation, as the title of my paper suggests, that focusses on definition instead of instrumentality: "*Top Girls* and *Our Country's Good* [. . .] 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 by showing the complex and contradictory tendencies of culture to constitute identities" (Bimberg 415, emphases all mine). We have come back to the "multiple voices" once more.

The differences in our approaches can be seen in my own emphasis on the double-face of colonialism, in Wertenbaker's concentrating on Australia as a colonial paradigm and associating it with other geographical-historical centres of social and political upheaval (413), and last but not least in my focus on the cultural critique inherent in the play. My colleague enriches the discussion through more extensive references to Australian history, more extended explorations of the intertextuality of the play (Keneally, Plato, Shaw, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* etc.), a different analysis of the aspects of cultural hegemony in the play, and an application of

Stanislawskian and Brechtian approaches to acting as well as references to Wertenbaker's own views on acting and theatre, the Royal Court production of Wertenbaker's play, and the spectators' responses concerning the correlation between theatre, language, and education.

To me, Verna A. Foster's study definitely is a source of inspiration. It caused me (not for the last time) to rethink the issues addressed in our discussions though I do not agree with her as to a number of details: (i) I cannot see, for instance, the "personal sacrifice" of Ralph Clarke for the play (Foster 416). (ii) For me, Wertenbaker highlights the fact that the colonial experience and thus the presentation of the issue of colonialism in its social, political, and cultural aspects, fuses the diverse experiences of convicts, officers *and* aborigines (Bimberg 411, 413-15). The presentation of the issue of colonialism in *Our Country's Good* is not just a phenomenon limited to the experiences of the aborigines exclusively (cf. Foster 418). (iii) Though certainly Wertenbaker's own views about the theatre may be revealed from behind the "multiple voices," the strategy of the play itself emphasizes the multiplicity of approaches and does not offer any preference of one set of views (for example Wertenbaker's) over another. Drama is a perfect medium for the transport of diverse opinions and Wertenbaker exploits this sceptical method, which concerns the essence of drama, for her own purposes.

Our two studies on Wertenbaker (and Churchill) demonstrate, I think, the quality of a complex literary or dramatic text to raise diverse questions and provoke varied approaches concerning its literary, theatrical, and cultural context. My thanks are due once more, to Verna A. Foster for her inspiring contribution, and to the editors of *Connotations*, for promoting critical debate.

Universität Dortmund