

## Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*<sup>1</sup>

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Few plays endorse the social and cultural value of theatre as explicitly as Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*. Like Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*, on which it is based, *Our Country's Good* recounts an historical event, the first production of a play in Australia: *The Recruiting Officer*, performed by convicts in Sydney Cove in 1789. The convicts' participation in the rehearsal and performance of George Farquhar's play reforms their manners, enables them to become a community that cares about and is prepared to make sacrifices for something larger than the individual, allows them to undermine at least in small ways oppressive authority, and gives to each of the actors a sense of self worth and hope for the future. The production of the play also transforms Ralph Clark, the officer who directs it.<sup>2</sup> From a timid, self-serving individual who originally undertakes the task to curry favor with the Governor, he becomes someone willing to make a personal sacrifice for the play and able to appreciate the convicts as individuals with their own points of view. *Our Country's Good* concludes with the beginning of the first scene of *The Recruiting Officer* performed to the music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the laughter and applause of the First Fleet audience, in which the actual theatre audience joins. In accordance with the author's wishes, Wertenbaker's play shows "how theater can be a humanizing force" for victims of brutalization.<sup>3</sup>

Theatre critics in both London and New York have generally praised *Our Country's Good* as a celebration of "the redemptive powers of theatre."<sup>4</sup> Several academic critics, however, have noted some problematic erasures and unresolved tensions underlying the optimistic progress and triumphant conclusion of *Our Country's Good*.<sup>5</sup> For one, Wertenbaker

virtually abandons Keneally's presentation of colonization in favor of her own metatheatrical concerns. For another, the transformation, *via* theatre, of the convicts as individuals and as a community that *Our Country's Good* celebrates can also be taken, as Ann Wilson has argued, as a form of cultural colonialism, whereby the convicts are co-opted into performing a play from the literary tradition of their rulers and oppressors to honor the King's birthday.<sup>6</sup>

Wertenbaker does reduce Keneally's treatment of colonization to four brief choric appearances by a lone bemused and ultimately diseased Aborigine. The metatheatrical focus of her play, however, allows her to foreground other forms of power relations. The critical debate over whether the convicts' experience of theatre produces conformity to or subversion of authority is enacted in *Our Country's Good* itself. Susan Carlson comments that the play's reception (in England, America, and Australia) "suggests that the negotiation over aesthetics and ideology remains a part of its shifting texture" and that the play makes "viable not one voice but many."<sup>7</sup> The multiple voices may, as Jim Davis has suggested, reflect the "workshopping process" among actors and dramatist (often used by director Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court Theatre) by which the play was constructed.<sup>8</sup> The characters' names, though they are mostly historical and derived from Keneally, that Wertenbaker attaches to these multiple voices help to clarify the views on theatre and its language that are placed in contention in *Our Country's Good*, as we shall see. By giving the convicts personalities and opinions appropriate to their names, Wertenbaker adapts Farquhar's dramatic practice (in naming the gallant Plume, the rudely bold Brazen, and so on) for her own purposes. Whatever the origin of the disparate voices in *Our Country's Good*, several of them variously reflect Wertenbaker's own views on theatre expressed elsewhere or in her own theatrical practice. Discussions of theatre and theatrical role-playing among both officers and convicts and the whole process of casting, rehearsing, and finally performing Farquhar's play raise questions about power relations produced by cultural, social, and gender roles. Such questions serve as a critical counterpoint to the main theme of *Our Country's Good*—theatre's power to improve the lives of the oppressed—complicating but by no means negating Wertenbaker's endorsement of theatrical good.

Where Keneally dedicates his novel "To Arabanoo and his brethren, still dispossessed," Wertenbaker's epigraph to her play foregrounds her own concern with the educability of those who are oppressed and dispossessed in contemporary England and America as well as in colonial Australia. The epigraph quotes from an American sociological study of education published in 1968, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, a passage describing how children designated especially able performed better than their peers: "The change in the teachers' expectations regarding the intellectual performance of these allegedly 'special' children had led to an actual change in the intellectual performance of these randomly selected children."<sup>9</sup> *Pygmalion in the Classroom* concludes, appropriately enough, with a comment from Eliza Doolittle: "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."<sup>10</sup> In Shaw's *Pygmalion* Eliza becomes a lady in the first instance because Colonel Pickering treats her like a lady. Others treat her like a lady because she learns to speak like one. Professor Higgins' transformation of Eliza into a woman who esteems herself and gains the respect of others by giving her access to a more refined and elegant discourse than that of the cockney flower girl has its counterpart in the transformation of the convict-actors in *Our Country's Good* through their mastery of the language of George Farquhar. In a scene titled "The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre," Governor Phillip advocates the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* as a means of civilizing the convicts: by having them speak a "refined, literate language" and express "sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to" (9), he intends to make the convicts tractable to authority without recourse to the whip.<sup>11</sup> "What is a statesman's responsibility?" he asks Ralph in a later scene. "To ensure the rule of law. But the citizens must be taught to obey the law of their own will. I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannize over a group of animals" (25).

Phillip's opinions accurately reflect the conservative views of the authorities in early Australia. Theatre was encouraged because it was seen as an instrument of reform, social cohesion, and "ritual reaffirmation of British ideals and customs."<sup>12</sup> To some extent Phillip voices as well some of Wertenbaker's own views on theatre, language, education, and the connections among them. When Captain Tench objects that it would be

better for the convicts to learn to farm and build than to watch a play, Phillip emphasises the civic value of theatre: "The Greeks believed that it was a citizen's duty to watch a play" (10). Commenting on the importance of theatre to ancient Greek democracy, Wertenbaker has similarly observed that "theatre is for people who take responsibility." Again like Phillip, she has stressed the importance of "language" in the theatre, "because it is best heard in the theatre and language is a potent manifestation of hope."<sup>13</sup> And Phillip's citation of Plato's *Meno*, in which Socrates demonstrates that a slave boy can learn mathematics if he is treated "as a rational human being" (24), makes the same point about self-fulfilling prophecies in the expectations we have of people that Wertenbaker highlights by her choice of epigraph. But though Wertenbaker presents Phillip as benevolent, unorthodox, and idealistic and allows him to express views that she shares, the conservative and hegemonic implications for the convicts of his theatrical project are obvious and underscored as well by his similar attitude towards the Aborigines: "They can be educated" (8). By contrast, officers who are less generous and more brutal than Phillip regard the convicts as inherently criminal and ineducable. They see the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* as potentially dangerous—allowing convicts to laugh at (stage) officers, for example, and leading to "threatening theory" (11), as Major Ross, the play's chief opponent, puts it. Curiously, the most unsympathetic character in *Our Country's Good*—along with two of the convicts (Dabby and Wisehammer)—most clearly sees the subversive possibilities of theatre. In the event, the convicts' participation in *The Recruiting Officer* proves both Phillip and Ross to be right. Through playing Farquhar's characters the convicts do become more conformable to the standards of civil society and more obedient to that society's rules, but the language of the play also gives them a kind of equality with their jailors and a position from which to criticize the abuse to which they are subjected.

Governor Arthur Phillip, whose name, while historical, evokes perhaps all that is best in conservative English tradition (King Arthur, Sir Philip Sidney) represents benevolent rule, though hardly democracy.<sup>14</sup> His distinction between government by force and government by the willing participation of the governed conforms to Antonio Gramsci's classic

definition of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, explains Bruce A. McConachie in an essay that applies Gramsci's concept to theatre history, "works primarily through legitimation, the half-conscious acceptance of the norms of behavior and the categories of knowledge generated by social institutions, public activities, and popular rituals viewed as 'natural' by the people whose actions they shape." In particular, he notes, language itself, according to Gramsci, "massively shapes a social group's ideology and culture" but at the same time "creates opportunities for political activists (theatre practitioners among them) to motivate people to shape a progressive future."<sup>15</sup> Thus in giving the convicts in his charge access to a more elegant language than any they have known, Phillip provokes in them the desire to contain their own unruly behavior but also creates the possibility for new forms of opposition to the ruling order as the convicts learn to adopt and even adapt Farquhar's language for their own purposes.

Two incidents, in particular, illustrate the twin impulses of subversion and conformity generated by the convicts' participation in *The Recruiting Officer*. In act two, scene five, Major Ross, refusing to give the convicts privacy for their rehearsal, orders three of them to make shameful spectacles of themselves. He orders Mary Brenham, for example, to display a tattoo high on her thigh. To put an end to this humiliation, the convicts start acting Farquhar's play, thereby transforming Ross's indecent and oppressive gaze into a spectatorial gaze determined by the actors. Sideway, playing Worthy, chooses to begin with lines that implicitly challenge Ross's behavior: "What pleasures I shall meet abroad are indeed uncertain; but this I am sure of, I shall meet with less cruelty among the most barbarous nations than I have found at home" (27). The actors' triumphant appropriation of Farquhar is brief, however, as Ross orders another convict to be whipped for an earlier crime, and the rehearsal falls to pieces at the sound of his offstage cries.

A more complex effect of the convicts' theatrical activity occurs towards the end of the play, when Liz Morden, the most intransigent of the female convicts, finally admits that she was not involved in a theft of food from the stores. Though initially, in accord with the convict code of honor, she prefers to be hanged rather than beg for her life, Liz obeys the Governor's

demand that she tell the truth so that she may continue in the role of Melinda for the good of the play. Thus Liz chooses to collaborate with her jailors, exchanging the convict code for the rule of society, as Governor Phillip had hoped and predicted. But though Liz does indeed conform, her act of obedience helps to undermine the oppressive social order with which she is cooperating: her word is taken before that of a drunken soldier. Major Ross blames the play for this overturning of authority: "It's that play, it makes fun of officers, it shows an officer lying and cheating" (35). And he warns Phillip that he "will have a revolt" on his hands (35). The Governor remains unperturbed. For the social consequences of the convicts' participation in *The Recruiting Officer*, while mildly subversive, would seem on the whole to support his own goal of benevolent rule.

More far-reaching than the socio-political developments made possible by theatre, though still ambiguous, are the psychological transformations effected in the convict-actors, particularly through their immersion in the language of Farquhar's play. Most obviously, their individual transformations make them happier, better able to cope with the circumstances of their lives, and more hopeful about the future: "Tomorrow" (36), Arscott testifies, "when I speak Kite's lines I don't hate anymore. I'm Kite, I'm in Shrewsbury" (31); and Ketch Freeman, the convict-turned-hangman, who wants a part in the play so that he might be loved, is finally accepted by the other convicts. The most dramatic transformations occur in the women. According to Ralph (who is admittedly becoming romantically interested in her), Mary Brenham in speaking "those well-balanced lines of Mr. Farquhar" has seemed even early in the rehearsal process "to acquire a dignity" that may strengthen her moral character (10); shy Mary gradually adopts the confidence and courage of Silvia Balance. Violent, uncouth Liz Morden, too, gains respect and self-respect by learning to speak in the accents of Farquhar. Her promise to Governor Phillip that she will do her best as Melinda, made in "well-balanced lines" that might have come from *The Recruiting Officer* itself, is one of the emotional highpoints of Wertenbaker's play: "Your Excellency, I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands" (35). Liz has found the ability to use the vocabulary and syntax of Farquhar in accepting her role in his play. Liz's education through

learning to speak a new language is similar to the experience of her almost-namesake, Eliza Doolittle. In fact, Wertenbaker may well be invoking *Pygmalion* deliberately as she does implicitly in her epigraph, for while most of the characters' names and the parts they play are taken directly from Keneally's novel, Wertenbaker chooses an Elizabeth to play Melinda rather than Keneally's Nancy Turner.

It is not only the convicts who are transformed by their involvement with *The Recruiting Officer*. Ralph's concern for the play grants him an eloquence he did not previously possess in speaking up on behalf of its performance, as Major Ross sarcastically notes: "Where did the wee Lieutenant learn to speak?" (10). Ralph's sympathies broaden, too. If the convicts, slowly, internalize the civility of Farquhar by using his language, Ralph's work with the convict-actors enables him finally to understand and respect a code of behavior different from his own: it is Ralph who explains to Governor Phillip that Liz refuses to beg for her life because of "the convict code of honor" (34).

*Our Country's Good* certainly allows the audience to rejoice in these changes. But Ralph's appreciation of the convicts' value and values remains limited to the hegemonic benevolence displayed by Governor Phillip from the beginning. And, more importantly, the play dramatizes some potentially adverse political consequences of the convicts' personal engagement with the characters and language of *The Recruiting Officer*. While their theatrical experience energizes some of the convicts, others seem to be lulled into a false sense of well-being. When Arscott becomes Kite in Shrewsbury, he forgets his hatred and thus his justifiable anger against his oppressors. In fact, he becomes an oppressor, one who scavenges for a living by tricking the leavings of society into joining the army, in Farquhar's play. For Ketch achieving community as an actor substitutes for having the courage to throw in his lot with the community of convicts. His name, Ketch (from Jack Ketch, the hangman) Freeman, points to the contradiction between what he does and what he wants to be in playing Justice Balance.<sup>16</sup> Most disturbingly, Mary, recreated as Silvia-Mary, in the name of romantic love enters into a demeaning sexual relationship with her director and jailor, Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who plays Silvia's lover, Captain Plume, in *The Recruiting Officer*.

Much depends on how the convicts take on their respective roles, on what it means to each of them to play a part. For Mary, as for Arscott, acting means that she must "*be*" (13) her character. Liz, by contrast, says that she will try to "*speak*" Farquhar's lines with "elegance and clarity" (35); and Dabby Bryant, the most skeptical of the convicts, though one who is very keen to act in the play, stands sufficiently outside her own character, Rose, as to criticize her: "No way, I'm *being* Rose, she's an idiot" (13). (All emphases mine.) Simply put, a representational or Stanislavskian approach to acting, in which the actor becomes his or her character, tends to silence the convict's own critical voice, while presentational or Brechtian acting, in which the actor distances himself or herself from the character portrayed, encourages the act of social criticism.

Wertenbaker spells out these different theories of acting in a discussion between Mary and Dabby that has no counterpart in Keneally's novel. Mary, whose name evokes purity (though she is not a virgin) and simplicity, is an idealist like Governor Phillip and a Stanislavskian. She worries that she is not sufficiently like Silvia to play her adequately: "She's brave and strong. She couldn't have done what I've done" (13)—that is, Silvia could not have whored for food. Because she identifies with her character, Mary accepts Silvia's standards as correct, or "natural," despite her different circumstances. Dabby, whose name connotes both an expert in roguery and a bawd (a part she played for Mary on board ship), gives the appropriate Brechtian response: "She didn't spend eight months and one week on a convict ship" (13).<sup>17</sup> Dabby then tells Mary that she can "*pretend*" to be Silvia (13). (Emphasis mine.) She implies an acting style that, by ostending the difference between Mary as actor and Silvia as character, would inevitably expose the contradictions in a code of behavior that takes no account of the artificial inequity produced by class distinctions or material circumstances. Later, over Mary's protests, Dabby similarly calls into question socially assigned gender roles by saying that she wants to play Kite and arguing that it is no more of a stretch for her to play a man than it is for Wisehammer, urban and Jewish, to play a country lad (32).

Dabby's presentational approach to acting, particularly her advocacy of cross-casting, receives endorsement from the real-life theatrical event



in which Dabby is a character. In the Royal Court Theatre's original production of *Our Country's Good*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, and, so far as I know, in all subsequent productions, the same actors are required to play both convicts and officers, with several of the officers' parts being played by female actors and the costume-changes taking place on stage. This Brechtian technique underscores the contingency of social and gender roles and, according to Frank Rich of *The New York Times*, helps to liberate the audience from "divisions of sex and class."<sup>18</sup>

The *Verfremdungseffekte* created by Wertenbaker and Stafford-Clark (for example, the use of placards or oral announcements to indicate scene titles) frame and mirror similar critical distancing effects that occur, sometimes by accident, in the scenes from *The Recruiting Officer* that we see rehearsed in *Our Country's Good*. The inexperience of the convict-actors and the inadequacy of their costumes and props—filthy rags instead of fine clothes, a piece of wood for a fan—repeatedly result in a provocative split between actor and character. In fact, the more rudimentary the staging of *Our Country's Good* and the dirtier the actors as both convicts and officers, the more radical Wertenbaker's play seems to be in displaying both social injustice and the transforming power of theatre.<sup>19</sup> The huge disparity between Liz and Melinda is a case in point. In act one, scene eleven, "The First Rehearsal," Ralph, attempting to get some realistic, Stanislavskian acting out of Liz, urges her to "imagine" *being* a rich lady for whom it is "normal" to live in a big house. Liz responds by masticating, explaining, "If I was rich I'd eat myself sick" (21). In other words, Liz, whether naively or knowingly, transforms her portrayal of Melinda into a Brechtian *gest* that denaturalizes the social and, as Wisehammer insists, *abnormal* distinction between a rich lady and a starving felon. During a later rehearsal Dabby similarly fails, or rather refuses, to identify with her character, Rose. When Ralph instructs her to blush in an enticing way, she replies, "I don't blush" (32). By ostending the difference between herself (in this case, a real country girl) and her character, Dabby's response emphasises how Rose is an icon of female sexuality constructed by men (playwright George Farquhar, who named her, and director Ralph Clark, who asks Dabby to *be* "Rose" by blushing).

Dabby's insistence that "I want to play myself" (31) enables her to take a critical stance throughout the play. Mary, by contrast, of all the actors is the one who most becomes her part, to the extent that she takes on Silvia's identity offstage, falls in love with her own officer, and is loved by him, in turn, not for the Mary she was but for the Silvia-Mary she has become. Ralph woos Mary in Plume's lines to Silvia: "'Will you lodge at my quarters in the meantime? You shall have part of my bed.' Silvia. Mary" (33). Believing, as Mary does, that actors have to *be like* the characters they portray, Ralph worried initially that female convicts would not be able to play ladies: "But how could a whore play Lady Jane?" (4) in Nicholas Rowe's *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Grey*, which he has been reading aboard ship. Since obviously a whore could most appropriately play "Lady Jane" (slang for female genitalia), Wertenbaker's ironic pun serves to conflate ladies and whores and make fun of Ralph's prudishness.<sup>20</sup> That Mary *can* play a lady in Farquhar's play—that she becomes Silvia for him—enables Ralph to take her as his mistress.<sup>21</sup> Wertenbaker presents the wooing scene as a romantic encounter on the beach at night. She does not, however, allow the audience to see the lovers' relationship solely in romantic terms. In giving herself to Ralph, Mary is fulfilling not only her own romantic fantasies but also Lieutenant Faddy's coarse prediction that she would sell herself to Ralph (10). And her second-best status is underscored both by Wisehammer's warning that Ralph will have to put her "in a hut at the bottom of his garden" and call her "his servant in public, that is, his whore" (30) and again in the final scene when Ralph says that if they have a daughter, she will be called Betsey Alicia, the name of the wife back in England whom he idealizes (37). Mary apparently acquiesces. Her identification with Silvia transforms her into a woman whom Ralph can love but at the same time precludes her from using her performance in *The Recruiting Officer* to comprehend in full the injustice of her real-life situation.

Several of the other convicts, however, better able than Mary to stand outside their parts, do politicize their involvement with Farquhar's play. Sideway, as I have already noted, chooses lines from *The Recruiting Officer* to rebuke Ross's brutality. Sideway's unnatural acting style—comically imitated from "grandiose eighteenth-century theatrical pose[s]" (19) and thus

displaying, as his name suggests, an oblique approach to acting or perhaps "side" (pretentiousness)—creates the necessary distance for him to adopt Farquhar's lines for his own purposes when the need arises.<sup>22</sup> Liz goes further; she does not simply *adopt* Farquhar's lines. Instead she tells Governor Phillip that she will do her best as Melinda in deliberately chosen language *adapted from* Farquhar's, not because she has become (or become like) her character, but to establish both her ability as an actor and her dignity as a human being. Liz's appropriation of Farquhar's language, it can be argued, marks the fulfillment of Governor Phillip's pet project, the redemption of the most hardened of the convicts.<sup>23</sup> But Liz's eloquence is nothing new. In an earlier scene, in the monologue beginning "Luck? Don't know the word. Shifts its bob when I comes near" (23), Liz, imprisoned on suspicion of theft, displays her mastery of thieves' cant. Her subsequent deployment of the elegant language of Farquhar demonstrates, not only her conformity to civil society, but more importantly her ability to choose among discourses, to match her verbal style to her audience, and thus to manipulate language as an instrument of self-empowerment.<sup>24</sup>

Liz's mastery of both thieves' cant and the language of Farquhar suggests also her aesthetic pleasure in both kinds of eloquence. Another convict who delights in words for their own sake and is eager to teach others is the would-be writer Wisehammer. The historical Wisehammer's name may have suggested to Wertenbaker an appropriate characterization based on the early twentieth-century American slang term *wisenheimer*, that is a person who is "ostentatiously and smugly knowing," a "smart aleck," from the German *wise* and the German or Yiddish surname form *enheimer*; the term is at once comically inflated and possibly "tinged with anti-Semitism."<sup>25</sup> (Wisehammer is Jewish, and, therefore, according to Liz, not really English). Like Liz, Wisehammer has educated himself from a canonical text (in his case, Johnson's dictionary) both to appreciate words ("I like words" [17]) and to use them with force and precision. Wisehammer's sensitivity to the nuances of words, though occasionally expressed with comic pomposity, enables him to reflect more analytically than the other convicts both on the causes of his transportation ("Betrayal. Barbarous falsehood. Intimidation: injustice" [23]) and on the way language

itself can be manipulated so that the same words have different meanings for rich and poor, oppressors and oppressed: "Country can mean opposite things. It renews you with trees and grass, you go rest in the country, or it crushes you with power: you die for your country, your country doesn't want you, you're thrown out of your country" (17). The pleasure Wisenhammer and Liz take in learning a language that is more refined and sophisticated than any they have known encourages them to use that language self-consciously and creatively. Thus aesthetic appreciation of the newly discovered language, in the first instance, empowers the speakers and enables critical thinking (rather than simple acceptance of the social order from which they have claimed the more refined discourse). For Liz and Wisenhammer, in particular, language is, in Wertenbaker's words, "a potent manifestation of hope."

Where Liz gains primarily self-empowerment and hope for her own future from her appropriation of Farquhar's language and performance in his play, Dabby and Wisenhammer of all the convict-actors use their participation in *The Recruiting Officer* to offer the most incisive commentaries on their real-life situation. Dabby acts on her pragmatic belief that plays should show "life as we know it" (31), that is, that they should address contemporary concerns. During the rehearsal of a scene between Silvia and Plume, which focuses on the sexual and legal meanings of the word *will*, Dabby takes the opportunity to point out that a woman, meaning specifically Mary, should always look out for herself and have a contract in any relationship with a man. And Wisenhammer uses the same rehearsal to assert his equality with Ralph as Mary's suitor; as Captain Brazen he kisses Silvia-Mary, declaring, against Ralph's objection, that Plume and Brazen "are equal in this scene" (30).

Wisenhammer, the best-educated of the convicts, expresses the most explicitly Brechtian view of drama. He believes in "Theatre for Instruction": "A play should make you understand something new. If it tells you what you already know, you leave it as ignorant as when you went in" (31). And when Dabby says that she would like to see a play set in the present, Wisenhammer advocates instead alienation and historicization: "It doesn't matter when a play is set. It's better if it's set in the past, it's clearer. It's easier to understand Plume and Brazen than some of the officers we know

here" (31).<sup>26</sup> Wertenbaker's own Brechtian use of history endorses Wisehammer's position. She sets both *The Grace of Mary Traverse* and *Our Country's Good* in the eighteenth century "to highlight contemporary issues."<sup>27</sup> Like Brecht himself in adapting *The Beggar's Opera* as *The Threepenny Opera* and Wertenbaker in using the myth of Philomel to comment on the silencing of women in *The Love of the Nightingale*, Wisehammer makes the most radical use of the text of *The Recruiting Officer* by altering it. Explaining that the convict audience will not understand the classical allusions in the original prologue, he writes a new one that satirizes the transportation of convicts—"We left our country for our country's good" (38). Ralph, though sympathetic to Wisehammer's endeavor, will not allow the new prologue to be spoken for fear of offending the likes of Major Ross. Thus the convicts' triumphant performance of *The Recruiting Officer* requires the suppression of its most radical element. Still, the prologue has been written, Dabby acknowledges its truth, and Sideway says that it can be used in the theatre that he plans to establish (and historically did establish) upon his release from the penal colony.<sup>28</sup>

While firmly endorsing the power of theatre to liberate the human spirit, *Our Country's Good* remains mindful of the political constraints that may be inherent in or imposed upon theatrical activity. In the play's final scene, in the midst of the convicts' excited preparations for going onstage, Dabby declares that after the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* she intends to escape. When the other convicts object (Mary going so far as to threaten to inform Lieutenant Clark), Dabby reminds them that theatre is ephemeral and not the same as life—"Because the play's only for one night. I want to grow old in Devon" (36). Her fellow actors, caught up in the excitement of the theatrical moment and their dreams for the future, pay Dabby scant attention. The actual theatre audience, however, has been given the opportunity to hear a dissenting voice. Wertenbaker thus complicates our sympathetic response to the other convicts' joyful optimism.

By exposing in various ways the contradictions in Governor Phillip's idealistic enterprize, *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. The critical voices of actors such as Dabby and Wisehammer, Liz's appropriation of Farquhar's language, and the inadvertently Brechtian elements in Ralph Clark's production of *The Recruiting Officer* demonstrate some of the most far-reaching of those possibilities.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this essay was given at Text and Presentation Comparative Drama Conference XX at the University of Florida in March 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Keneally, who combines fact and fiction in his novel, chooses the historical Ralph Clarke to direct the play; it is not known who actually directed *The Recruiting Officer*. See *The Playmaker* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987); Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989) 51-55.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Hilary de Vries, "Of Convicts, Brutality and the Power of Theater," *The New York Times* (30 Sept. 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Edwards, Review of *Our Country's Good* at the Royal Court, *The Spectator* (24 Sept. 1988); in *London Theatre Record* (9-22 Sept. 1988) 1267.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Carlson notes this distinction between the responses of theatre critics and academic critics ("Issues of Identity, Nationality, and Performance: the Reception of Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker," *New Theatre Quarterly* 9 [August 1993]:267-89). Compare theatre reviews of the Royal Court production (collected in the *London Theatre Record*, 9-22 Sept. 1988) and of the Hartford Stage Company production (collected in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 52 [1991] 297-303) with the essays by Ann Wilson and Esther Beth Sullivan: Wilson, "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertenbaker's Adaptation of *The Playmaker*," *Modern Drama* 34 (March 1991): 23-34, and Sullivan, "Hailing Ideology, Acting in the Horizon, and Reading between Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker," *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 139-54. Wilson's essay helpfully compares Wertenbaker's play with Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*.

<sup>6</sup>Wilson 31.

<sup>7</sup>Carlson 275.

<sup>8</sup>Jim Davis, "A Play for England: The Royal Court adapts *The Playmaker*," in *Novel Images: Literature in Performance*, ed. Peter Reynolds (London: Routledge, 1993) 177. See Stafford-Clark's account of workshopping *Our Country's Good* in *Letters to George*. Davis suggests also that Max Stafford-Clark's "unironic direction of the play as a celebration of the theatre's potential to empower" (188) may have erased a degree of irony in Wertenbaker's presentation of the effects of theatre. The celebratory tone

is especially apparent in the Royal Court's use of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which, Davis points out, is not referred to in the first edition of *Our Country's Good*, but which does figure in the second.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) viii.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Rosenthal and Jacobson 183.

<sup>11</sup>Quotations are taken from Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good* (London: Methuen, 1989).

<sup>12</sup>Leonie Kramer, ed., *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: OUP, 1981) 176-77.

<sup>13</sup>D. L. Kirkpatrick, ed., *Contemporary Dramatists*, 4th ed. (Chicago: St. James Press, 1988) 554.

<sup>14</sup>I am indebted to Professor Inge Leimberg for her suggestion that I examine the associations of the names of the characters in *Our Country's Good* and for some of the specific associations. Her suggestion that Governor Phillip might evoke Sir Philip Sidney is reinforced by his connection with Sydney Cove.

<sup>15</sup>Bruce A. McConachie, "Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History," *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1989) 39-40, 41.

<sup>16</sup>For "Jack Ketch" see Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, ed. Paul Beale, 8th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1984) 608.

<sup>17</sup>On "dab" see Partridge 285.

<sup>18</sup>Frank Rich, "Broadway Season's Last Drama Offers a Defense of Theater," *The New York Times* (30 April 1991); in *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 302-03. Rich points to the influence on Wertenbaker of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, also a cross-cast comedy about colonialism directed by Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court. (The decision to have female actors playing male officers in Wertenbaker's play may have been more pragmatic than theoretical. See Stafford-Clark 182.)

<sup>19</sup>This opinion is based on a comparison of the two fine productions I have seen in Chicago. That in the more makeshift theatre obviated sentimentality by the dinginess of the surroundings and the dirt of the costumes. Carlson similarly points out that *Our Country's Good* was more successful at the Royal Court than at the plusher Garrick Theatre in the West End, to which the production subsequently moved (279).

<sup>20</sup>On "Lady Jane" see Partridge 661.

<sup>21</sup>Wilson 27.

<sup>22</sup>On "side" see Partridge 1087.

<sup>23</sup>See Davis 183.

<sup>24</sup>Anne Varty in her recent study of women's language in contemporary plays similarly points out that those female characters "who can switch linguistic codes according to context enjoy greater power whatever their status. Related to power generated by the switching of codes, is the ability to step in and out of both behavioural and linguistic stereotype" ("From Queens to Convicts: Status, Sex and Language in Contemporary British Women's Drama," *Feminist Linguistics in Literary Criticism*, ed. Katie Wales, *Essays and Studies* 47 [1994] 88).

<sup>25</sup>See Robert L. Chapman, ed. *New Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 470.

<sup>26</sup>Among Brecht's writings most pertinent to the views on theatre variously expressed by Wisehammer and Dabby are "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" and "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett [London: Methuen, 1978] 69-77, 91-99). Interestingly, Brecht's *Trumpets and Drums* is an adaptation of *The Recruiting Officer*.

<sup>27</sup>Davis 177. Davis notes that the contemporary British issues addressed in *Our Country's Good* relate to rehabilitation versus punishment of prisoners, the purpose of education, and "the value of art and theatre in a community beleaguered by funding cuts" (178).

<sup>28</sup>Kramer 176.