

## Getting Down Under

Theater Review: *Our Country's Good*

By Elisabeth Crean

Bill Clinton's national saxophone-playing debut is the best-remembered segment from Arsenio Hall's 1989-1994 late-night talk show. But a regular monologue feature — "Things That Make You Go Hmmm" — also entered the pop culture lexicon.

Just as Hall puzzled over the incongruous, inexplicable and downright strange, I've encountered the first play that has truly made me go, *hmmm*: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988). While Champlain College's current production featured entertaining performances from an energetic ensemble of student, community and professional actors, much about the oddly disjointed play is confounding.

Based on a true story, *Our Country's Good* takes place in the opening months of British settlement in Australia, at the tiny prison-camp foothold that later becomes Sydney. The first shipload of soldiers and prisoners arrives, and the fledgling colony struggles for survival. To improve morale, the governor encourages a young officer, Lieutenant Ralph Clark, to stage a play with convicts as actors. This creates controversy among the other officers, especially because some feel the show Clark chooses — a light comedy about military life — might undermine their authority. The governor supports Clark, however, and so casting and rehearsal plans proceed.

Most of the convicts have been exiled for trivial offenses. In 1789, even a petty theft conviction could carry a death sentence, both in England and in the new colony. A break-in at the dwindling food depot leaves some of the actors facing a possible date with the hangman, who is a fellow cast member. Infighting among the actors and harassment from hostile soldiers also jeopardize the rehearsal process. Meanwhile, sexual liaisons between officers and prisoners further complicate the dynamics between captors and captives. And a lone aborigine hints at the coming confrontation between cultures. Eventually, the show does go on.

Wertenbaker crams a lot of Big Ideas into *Our Country's Good*, which received a handful of awards including a 1991 Tony nomination for best new play after a brief Broadway run. But she asks a lot of questions without trying to answer them. The officers debate the hot Enlightenment-era topic of nature versus nurture. Is the convicts' criminality "an innate tendency," or can fallen men be redeemed? They argue whether the colony's purpose is to punish or rehabilitate. And the playwright's navel-gazing query looms awkwardly over the life-and-death issues of crime and punishment: Does theater have a civilizing influence?

A play that poses unanswered questions can provoke thought. But when that same play also starts several narrative threads without ultimately tying at least some of them together, that provokes frustration and confusion. We don't need every loose end woven into a perfect tapestry. But after emotionally investing in a brace of characters, the audience deserves more than an unfinished theatrical shrug.

Storytelling failures and "Say what?" moments (including crude sexual language that often seems gratuitous) undermine some genuinely appealing characters and themes. For example, the wandering aborigine never goes anywhere, dramatically speaking. A major character dies, but his death doesn't seem to carry much weight within the plot. The play ends just as the



Left, John D. Alexander; Center from Bottom, Emily Lyons, Mark Roberts, Alexandra Sevakian, Walt Levering, Amy Burrell-Cormier and Alison Caton; right, Jason Briody

long-awaited “play-within-the-play” begins. Will it go well? Have the actors grown from the experience? Wertenbaker leaves us hanging.

That said, director Joanne Farrell, her production team and cast executed the oddball script with remarkable skill. Farrell used the FlynnSpace as a black box, with no fixed set elements. With lights dimmed between scenes, cast members functioned as crew, bringing small pieces of furniture — bench, desk, chair, settee — and props on stage from behind the black curtains that concealed two back walls. The fact that many actors went barefoot helped make these transitions quiet and seamless, doubtlessly guided by S.M. Payson’s savvy stage managing.

With an elegant lighting scheme, John Devlin filled in other scenic elements, such as jail cell bars and tropical foliage. Tony Tambasco’s imaginative sound design also helped shift locations, with sounds of rolling surf, for example. Cora Fauser’s detailed costumes provided the stark visual distinction between empowered and powerless characters. Bright, clean soldiers’ uniforms contrasted sharply with tattered, homely prisoners’ garb.

Costume shifts were especially important, because 11 actors played 19 parts: five in single roles; the rest double or triple cast. Most of the distinctions between roles were clearly defined — some brilliantly so.

Mark Roberts gave Governor Phillip both gravitas and joviality. Folded hands and furrowed brow showed the leader’s thinking side, while Roberts’ voice boomed when the gov needed to project troop-rallying confidence. As logophilic and lovestruck convict John Wischammer, Roberts showed his character’s vulnerability: His eagerness to placate his captors alternated with a deep sense of his situation’s injustice.

Patrick Pope played his disparate pair of roles so convincingly that I initially thought there were two different actors! As Major Ross, he hissed, spat and seethed with judgmental rage, his eyes so ablaze with hate that they seemed blinded to the convicts’ humanity. As prisoner and executioner James Freeman, however, he moved with hand-dog body language — bowed head, averted gaze, rounded shoulders — that showed how severely Freeman’s spirit had been battered.

Colin Cramer portrayed his distinct roles with charm and flair. As the pickpocket Robert Sideaway, Cramer hilariously depicted the budding thespian’s gaudy attempts at melodramatic stage antics. As Captain Collins, on the other hand, his carriage and mannerisms connoted patrician refinement and self-assurance.

John Alexander crafted strong performances, even though his three roles were among the least well written. Especially haunting was his portrayal of Harry Brewer’s drunken hallucinations. Brewer, the governor’s assistant, is convinced the men he has executed have come back for him. Alexander showed Brewer sick with terror, desperate to escape the visions unfolding vividly before him.

Among the actors with solo roles, Alex Sevakian and Jason Briody excelled. As Dabby, Sevakian demonstrated how feistiness can mask wistfulness: She’s a defiant convict who is really a homesick Devon farm girl at heart. Briody occasionally rushed some of Lt. Clark’s lines, but his flushed cheeks and stiff spine conveyed the young officer’s gawky determination to accomplish his quixotic mission as a theater director.

The only casting miscue came in doubling two women in men’s roles. Using Sevakian in the small officer’s role of Faddy was a minor distraction, but I found it very odd to have Bridget Butler playing Reverend Johnson. She did her best to lower her voice and “act male” — enough to make me puzzle over just who was under those robes. Playwright Wertenbaker doesn’t discourage such cross-gender casting; Cherry Jones received her first Tony nomination for playing the Rev and one of the female roles in the 1991 Broadway production. But in the Champlain production, this casting quirk drew unnecessary attention to itself and pulled focus from an important scene.

Overall, the actors’ effective portraits created a desire on the part of the audience to know their characters’ fate. It’s quite a commentary on the script that an epilogue in the Champlain College program notes, drawn from two nonfiction texts, proved more illuminating than did the play itself. We get resolution about the characters by learning what happened to the real people who inspired them, not from the playwright’s pen.

History provides great source material for the dramatist. But it takes a lot of work to shape truth into something theatrically compelling and coherent. Otherwise, you might just leave your audience going, *hmmm*.