

REVIEW: Captive Cast Shines in *Our Country's Good*

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Playwrights love to write plays about how difficult it is to stage a play, but Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* might just beat them all. How exactly do you stage a play in a godforsaken 18th-century land (the penal colony that would become the city of Sydney, Australia) with a group of convicts whose literacy rate is low but whose recidivism rate is high?

That's the task facing 2nd Lt. Ralph Clark, the officer who chooses to direct the incarcerated incorrigibles in a sophisticated comedy that tests the cast's ability to follow orders. The play within the play also tests the abilities of Clark and his fellow officers to establish order, as well as a sense of culture and understanding in a harsh world whose physical and social climate greatly discourages anything resembling humanity.

Our Country's Good concludes the 2007-08 season of Champlain Theatre, which like the convicts depicted in the play has been cast adrift from its home at Champlain College (to make room for the weekly tapings of the television show "Late Night Saturday With Tim Kavanagh") and settled into a new base at FlynnSpace, where it opened Wednesday night. Also like the petty criminals at the heart of the play, the college theater troupe has landed nicely on its feet, delivering a production that creates sympathetic characters out of rough-hewn people whose big hearts are buried beneath hard exteriors that circumstance has forced upon them.

Director Joanne Farrell leans on a cast she's learned to trust, and almost all of them deliver fine performances, starting with Champlain College senior Jason Briody as the officer who strives to improve the convicts' lives by giving them something to aspire to (he also strives to make romantic inroads with one of his actresses, Mary Brenham, played with charm by Champlain College senior Alison Caton). Briody, who made his mark as a freshman with an intense performance as the lead in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, gives Clark a Prince Charles-like bearing, mixing a regal presence with an affable authority that endears him to his hard-to-please cast, and to the audience as well.

Our Country's Good, based on a true story and Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*, veers with occasional strain from barbed humor to heavy drama, but the cast rolls with it well. Veteran actor John D. Alexander makes the thuggish thespian John Arscott lovable and comical, but in a second role as the tortured officer Harry Brewer pours out a painfully memorable performance. Emily Lyons, cast as Brewer's convict lover, Duckling Smith, is similarly impressive as she wrangles with how to deal with his decline. Amy Burrell-Cormier is also strong as an actress whose performance in the convicts' play is in doubt due to her pending death sentence.

Humor, though, carries *Our Country's Good*, and Champlain College senior Colin Cramer gives perhaps the most amusing performance as the Eric Idle-like pompous wannabe star, the pocket-picking charlatan Robert Sideaway. Alex Sevakian is hilarious as the coarse Dabby Bryant who dreams less of conquering the stage as she does of returning to her native England.

The collection of other officers gives uneven performances, though Patrick Pope is good and Mark Roberts rises above as the compassionate governor (and also delivers a touching performance as actor/convict John Wisenhammer). Bridget Butler sparkles in an all-too-brief appearance as a bawdy convict named Meg and a similarly truncated role as a fussy minister, but her part as an Aborigine seems shoehorned into the play, serving as a shallow reminder that European settlement in Australia brought harm to more than just the prisoners.

Our Country's Good works as a play where a lot of other stories of down-on-their-luck average Joes making good fail. It never relies on schmaltz, and it doesn't ask its characters to have out-of-character epiphanies. With help from Champlain Theatre's heart-felt production, the play demonstrates that a little compassion and a lot of teamwork will always win out over oppression and tyranny.