

Historical Play Proves Fascinating

Theater Review

By Jim Lowe Times Argus Staff

BURLINGTON – Theater based on history has an extra dollop of credibility, and that gives "Our Country's Good" added poignance.

Champlain Theatre opened an intriguing production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's historical drama, Wednesday at the Flynn Center's FlynnSpace, with professional, college student and community actors.

"Our Country's Good" is the story of a British army second-lieutenant in his country's new colony in Australia, a prison camp for men and women "transported" for the likes of stealing a loaf of bread. The officer attempts to use theater to bring some humanity to the squalid circumstances.

The basis for the play is the novel "The Playmaker" by Thomas Keneally (author of "Schindler's List"). Both the play and novel are based on letters and journals of Ralph Clark and other First Fleet officers, who supervised this prison. The characters did, in fact, exist. The 1789 convict production of Farquhar's "The Recruiting Officer," directed by Second Lt. Clark, is a matter of historical record.

Characters include the benevolent Gov. Arthur Phillips, who believes that the convicts can be rehabilitated, and the cruel Maj. Ross, who views them as human refuse. Ketch, the unwilling hangman, himself a convict, is recruited to act alongside Liz Morden, a woman wrongly accused of stealing food. As they are rehearsing the play, he is measuring her for hanging.

What performing this play gives the convicts and the few supporting officers is a glimpse of each other's humanity. Although parts of the play seem clumsily written, the story is truly powerful.

Champlain Theatre's production, directed by Joanne Farrell, is a mixed bag, but ultimately touching. At Wednesday's opening night performance, there will be difficulties presented by several of the actors playing dual roles. Occasionally, the actors' attempts at making the accents authentic made them difficult to understand. Still, there were some excellent portrayals, and the performance delivered the final punch.

Jason Briody, a Champlain College senior, after a stiff beginning, played Clark convincingly. Mark Roberts, a veteran of many professional productions, was effective and sympathetic, both as Gov. Phillip and John Wisenhammer, the Jewish convict and wordsmith.

John D. Alexander, a veteran professional, was particularly powerful as Brewer, a soldier in love with the convict, Duckling, coquettishly played by Emily Lyons. Patrick Pope, seen in a number of Lost Nation productions, delivered a powerful performance as Ketch, and was a not-too-nice Maj. Ross. Amy Burrell-Cormier, a relative newcomer, was particularly sensitive as the unfortunate Liz Morden.

There was no staging to speak of, which was fine. But some of the scenes, particularly when the officers were initially discussing the possibility of the play, were clumsy, and the pace could, at times, be quicker. Nevertheless, watching this play proved a fascinating experience.