

**I**t was a true story that inspired Timberlake Werenbaker to write *Our Country's Good* — a play about a play staged by a convict colony in 18th-century Australia. Director Mark Nash has recreated the drama — under more benevolent circumstances — with one of the finest acting ensembles Vermont is likely to see this season. Nearly to a person, Nash's well-cast 13-member troupe does exceptional work. If the Steelers had this deep a bench of talent they'd have won on Sunday.

Raw and alive, *Our Country's Good* unblinkingly dramatizes the inhumane conditions under which Britain's exiled petty criminals lived in 1788. At the curtain's first rise, Northern immediately sets the playwright's intended tone with the sight of six filthy prisoners copulating while a fellow inmate is flogged. This juxtaposition of desperate connection and pain is the common experience in the lives of the genteel officers, cruel guards and toughened criminals portrayed. Throughout, Werenbaker fearlessly explores our instinct to defy or exploit the things that separate us — gender, class, nationality, religion — in order to survive. Despite the tale's somber tone, its message is ultimately one of hope.

This is no easy play to pull

# ACTS OF CONVICTION

By Amy Rubin



**THREE'S A CROWD:** *Inmates act out in Our Country's Good.*

off. The story alone is a challenge — it addresses over 20 characters' disparate desires. And gracefully moving all those bodies around the shallow stage at Burlington City Hall is a tough feat. But Nash and crew come up with appropriate solutions, like double-casting and a multi-level platform set. Costumes by Lois Jackson are highly effective, not only for

their period authenticity, but for their unkempt condition — one of many details that transports us to this dusty outpost.

If stand-outs can be found among such a strong cast as this one, they include Paul Ugalde, who is as dignified a blueblood as he is an endearing Cockney thief. Matthew Amory insightfully interprets the dutiful Lieutenant Clark, and Jenn

Taber exhibits terrific physical control, managing to be both fierce and hopeless as Dabby. We get to see Ben Ash's notable range and depth in three roles — each with its own dialect. A delightfully thuggish John D. Alexander shines in a small part, and Ben Blankinship creates some fine moments with his marvelously decaying Harry Brewer.

WITH THIS show, Nash establishes himself among the best acting coaches in the state. But, while he was expertly prepping his players, he lost sight of the show's pacing. Too often, scenes beg for more movement. And the script's unfortunately large number of set changes slow down the works — a problem abetted by unnecessarily delayed line delivery at each scene's start. It's a shame that Nash — who also designed the set — didn't opt to speed things up with permanent props on a divided acting area rather than use the entire stage for each scene.

All told, the pace creates a two-and-a-half-hour evening, which is a bit much for an audience doing its best to follow numerous subplots in a venue cursed with a muffled sound system. But the benefits of seeing so much good acting outweigh the show's flaws. With *Our Country's Good*, Northern Stage places itself at the threshold of professional-level production. □



PHOTO: MAFÉ SASAHARA

*Our Country's Good*,  
by Timberlake  
Werenbaker. Directed by  
Mark Nash,  
produced by Northern  
Stage. Burlington City  
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