

# The Redemptive Power of Theatre and the Pursuit of Justice in *Our Country's Good*\*

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This paper aims to understand Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in the context of theatre in crisis in the 1980s Britain and attempts to find the contemporary resonance of this history play. Through exploring the adaptation and workshop of the play, discussing the transformative influence of rehearsals on the convicts in the Australian penal colony, and expounding on theatre as an important venue for rehabilitation and justice in contemporary society, the paper intends to disclose the playwright's commitment to theatre, her reassertion of the social role of theatre in contemporary Britain and her critique of Mrs. Thatcher's philistinism which impaired art, particularly theatre, to a great degree.

**Keywords:** theatre in crisis, transformative influence, rehabilitation, justice, Mrs. Thatcher

## Introduction

On 4 Dec., 1988, a conference on *Theatre in Crisis* was held at University of London Goldsmiths' College in association with *New Theatre Quarterly*, discussing the urgent issues facing the mainstream theatre, fringe theatre, and the questions of alternative funding and subsidy. It was the theatrical world's response to Mrs. Thatcher's new art policies under which substantial cuts in the Arts Council's<sup>1</sup> funding to theatre impaired the British theatre and redefined its cultural status. The Conference Declaration emphasized the distinct and important role theatre has played in the full and free development of all cultural activity and asked for sufficient funding for the sustainability of theatre's vigorous social role. A large number of contemporary playwrights and directors signed their names on the declaration in support of justice in theatre, among whom were British woman playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker and the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre Max Stafford-Clark (Gottlieb, 1990, pp. 57-58).

Before this political gesture to champion theatre, Wertenbaker and Stafford-Clark made artistic endeavors to stress the power of theatre in their collaboration of *Our Country's Good*, premiering on 10th, Sept. 1988 on a double bill with George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* at the Royal Court Theatre. An adaptation of *The Playmaker*, the play has earned a great deal of public acclaim and scholarly attention, and rightly sits as one of Wertenbaker's finest works in her rich repertoire. It garnered the Laurence Olivier Play of the Year Award

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\* **Acknowledgement:** This work was supported by a grant from "Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities" and a grant from "Research Supporting Program of Schools of Central University of Finance and Economics" (011650314014/010).

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<sup>1</sup> The Arts Council was set up in 1945, aiming to develop high-quality arts nationwide and to make London the centre of prestigious arts.

(1988), the Evening Standard Award for best play of the year (1988), and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best New Foreign Play (1991).

The criticism of the play centers on adaptation and theme. Val Taylor's "Mothers of Invention: Female Characters in *Our Country's Good* and *The Playmaker*" (1991) "examine(d) the transmission of the novel's female characters as an investigation of adaptation" (p. 334) and concluded that "Wertenbaker's play does not adapt Keneally's novel for presentation in another medium; using the potentialities of that other medium, *Our Country's Good* partners *The Playmaker*" (p. 337).

Ann Wilson in "Our Country's Good: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertenbaker's Adaptation of *The Playmaker*" (1991) compared Wertenbaker's play with the original novel, focusing on the alterations made by the playwright concerning Ralph Clark, Arthur Philip, Mary Brenham, and Liz Morden and illustrated how theatre liberates the convicts and officers both physically and metaphorically. The novel's concern with colonization is shifted to imprisonment and liberation in the play.

Yi-chin Shih in *How Timberlake Wertenbaker Constructs New Forms of Gender in Her History Plays* (2013) discussed crisis of imperialism and colonial resistance in *Our Country's Good* and "demonstrate(d) how the imperialistic masculinity of the British Empire in Australia is decentralized by the aboriginal resistance, the British convicts' colonized resistance, and the British officers' feminization" (p. 131).

Other critics discuss the dramaturgy of the play, such as meta-theatre, post-Brechtian epic mode, cross-dressing, and the augmentation of the social critique when *Our Country's Good* and *The Recruiting Officer* were performed in tandem and using the same cast (pp. 207-208).

Wertenbaker's (1996) revelation of writing the play to "explore the redemptive power of the theatre, of art, for people who had been silenced" (p. viii) diverted the critics' attention to the transformative power of theatre, but they fail to understand this thematic concern in the context of theatre in crisis in the 1980s when theatre suffered backlash due to Thatcher's art policies.

This paper aims to understand Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in the context of theatre in crisis in the 1980s Britain and attempts to find the contemporary resonance of this history play. Through exploring the adaptation and workshop of the play, discussing the transformative influence of rehearsals on the convicts in the Australian penal colony and expounding on theatre as an important venue for rehabilitation and justice in contemporary society, the paper intends to disclose the playwright's commitment to theatre, her reassertion of the social role of theatre in contemporary Britain and her critique of Mrs. Thatcher's philistinism which impaired art, particularly theatre, to a great degree.

### **Adaptation and Workshop: The Enlightenment on the Cast**

Post-war Britain experienced the second golden age of drama due to several factors: the Arts Council's financial aid to arts; the abolition of the censorship in drama in Britain in 1968; the establishment of national theatres; the emergence of the alternative theatre and the fringe theatre; and the development of feminist theatre and queer theatre. All these injected new vitality into Britain's theatre. Such a momentum sustained into the 1980s until Mrs. Thatcher substantially cut the funding and subsidy to theatre and dragged many theatre companies into financial difficulties.

The downward trend in theatre drew the attention of the directors, playwrights and artists who were concerned with the prosperity and political potential of theatre. When Stafford-Clark commissioned Wertenbaker to adapt Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* for the stage to celebrate the 200th anniversary of

colonization in Australia, Wertenbaker saw it as “a good opportunity to write about the redemptive, ‘humanistic’ aspects of theatre and theatre-making” (Bush, 2013, p. 144) and possibly, a chance to reaffirm the function of theatre in social life. And she told the director that “this was the way to give a forward thrust to the novel” (Greene, 2006, p. 57).

The playwright got a full support from the director both professionally and emotionally. They employed the Joint Stock research-driven workshops to do the adaptation. Before the workshops, Wertenbaker considered carefully what to delete and what to amplify from the novel. She made notes concerning the two contrasting views about theatre: “(1) The theatre is a waste of time and resources, pointless, silly, corrupting, evil, dangerous; (2) the theatre is pleasurable, good for the mind, good for the body, enriching, humanizing” (Bush, 2013, p. 118). These views are fully explored in the debate scenes in the play.

The workshops involved the director, the playwright and the cast. They did the two productions simultaneously. Rehearsing *The Recruiting Officer* at the same time greatly benefited them. The performers gained an understanding of the tastes of the 18th-century Britons, the acting and writing styles of the period and the challenges the settler-convicts had to confront to mount Farquhar’s play. On top of that, the company did a lot of in-depth research. They read Robert Hughes’s *The Fatal Shore*, Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, and the diary of Lieutenant Ralph Clark who directs Farquhar’s play in *Our Country’s Good*. They tried to examine a full spectrum of Georgian society and to understand injustice, discrimination, social violence, and isolation their characters would have experienced, and how the convicts’ lives differed from their own.

In order to get access to the psychological recesses of the convicts and be immersed into the historical context, the actors improvised certain scenes, mainly concerning the theme of violence and the identity and personality of the convicts. Through improvising the scene of punishing the convicts, the actors and the playwright could have an acute understanding of the inner state of the convicts, which was conducive to creating round characters. Improvisation could also help find solutions to certain technique problems. The actors’ intuition can lead them to the answer. For instance, whether Liz was to break silence and defend herself before she was put to death remained undecided. Yet after the improvisation of the scene, the actress who played Liz was sure that she would speak up to defend herself. The actors’ intuition and experience helped a lot in the making of the play. Interviews were also adopted for the profile of the characters.

What was more beneficial to the playwright’s and the cast’s understanding of the power of art and the contemporary resonance of the history play was their visit to HMP Wormwood Scrubs and the interviews with the prisoners. This helped them to have a profound understanding of how prisoners felt about punishment, disgrace, and humiliation on the one hand and to witness how theatre had changed the lives of these prisoners on the other hand. The cast saw at the Scrubs a spectacular performance of Howard Barker’s *The Love of a Good Man* (1978) by the life-prisoners, and through talking to the convict performers, they found to their surprise the convicts’ passion for theatre and the theatre’s transformative impact on them. Barker himself also described the influence of the 1988 performance on the convicts:

In the performance they affirmed the drama as freedom. They asserted the superior life of the imagination. In the moment of performance they were not in custody.... They felt gratitude for the existence of speech and metaphor, and made it their own.... They wished to inhabit other life. (as cited in Reynolds, 2013, p. 179)

The similar experience happened to the convict performers of Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* at

Blundeston prison. Wertenbaker remarked that “it seems to me that the play had come full circle, performed in that prison room with an intensity and accuracy the playwrights dream of” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 163) She kept a long time correspondence with the convict performers whom she first made acquaintance with when watching their performance of *The Love of a Good Man*. These letters are included in her collection of plays and show in a vivid way the power and value of theatre.

What happened to the contemporary prisoners helps illuminate the theme of *Our Country's Good* and helps the audience gain a better understanding of how the staging of *The Recruiting Officer* transforms the first settler-convicts in Australia as depicted in Wertenbaker's play.

During the different stages of the making of the play—the workshops, the visit to the prison and the interviews and correspondence with the prisoners, Wertenbaker felt the great impact of theatre and this has further confirmed her belief in the transformative power of theater: “I think art is redemptive and the theatre is particularly important because it's a public space. That's the crucial element. It's discursive and it's public. And there are very few of those spaces left.” (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 144)

For the director, playwright, and performers, the rehearsal and production of *Our Country's Good* have fundamentally affected their outlooks, their view of society, and their empathy. They realize the importance of maintaining social justice and humanity and are keenly aware how theatre plays an important role in actualizing that.

### **Transformation of Convicts in the Penal Colony**

What the director, playwright and actors experienced in the making of the play is echoed and highlighted in *Our Country's Good* when the convicts “discover a form of language and identity” (Greene, 2006, p. 57) and resist the colonizer in way of mimicry in the process of staging *The Recruiting Officer*.

How theatre empowers, liberates and educates is explored in various ways and is convincingly expounded through the transformation the convicts undergo in performing Farquhar's play.

*Our Country's Good* starts with a very depressing scene on the First Fleet heading toward the Botany Bay in Australia in 1787. On board are the criminals in exile for petty crimes and hostile officers who are in charge of them. The community is stratified and the conflict between the two parties is stressed when the convict Robert Sideway is being flogged by the officer. In the darkness, convicts huddle together and worry about what is awaiting them in the foreign land. These deserted convicts are subjected to humiliation, hopelessness, violence, and physical and spiritual torture.

As the play progresses, changes are brought about to the lives of the convicts when Ralph Clark, supported by the Governor Philip, is going to produce a play. Convicts find dignity, humanity, self-esteem, and self-knowledge in staging the play, and awakened from the numbness of the wretched convict life, they start to have hope and dream for future.

Arguing against the opponents of theatre, Clark says that he has already noticed some changes in the convicts when they read lines from the play: “They seem to acquire a dignity.... They seem to lose some of their corruption” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 208). Such changes become more noticeable when the convicts are devoted to rehearsals. Besides developing self-esteem, the convicts find solidarity among themselves and fight against the brutality of the officers.

Mary is a girl lack of confidence. She hates being a mistress of the officer, and yet that is her only way to raise her child. Playing Silvia enlightens her to the possibilities that women are entitled to and what love really

means: “She is bold, she breaks rules out of love for her Captain and she’s not ashamed” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 261). Mary gradually grows into an independent and assertive woman and she finds the courage to live with Clark, the man she loves.

For Arscott, playing Kate gets himself temporarily away from misery, imprisonment, slave life, punishment, and hostility; Sideway is enlightened to the injustice they have suffered at home; Wisehammer finds his potential in fantastic imagination and his sensitivity to words. He looks forward to starting a new life with Mary in the colony.

The regenerative power of theatre is best demonstrated through the transformation of Liz Morden, who decides to speak up for herself right before she is sentenced to death. Drama empowers her and makes her voice heard. Liz is a fictional character; she is the artistic result of the actors’ and playwright’s interviews with the prisoners. Rehearsing the play helps Liz find her lost voice and she dares to clear herself of the mischarge. The power of language, “as a means of self-expression and self-determination” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 181), is probed into in the play. “Deprivation of language is spiritual death” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 181). By regaining her voice, Liz has a renewal of life both physically and metaphorically. Having a voice of their own gives the convicts a new angle to scrutinize their lives and to see their potentials.

Producing the play also helps the convicts to stand together and to fight against the atrocity and oppression of the officers. They are no longer isolated and lonely; instead they show mutual understanding and support. When Major Ross humiliates and insults Mary, Sideway and Liz start to rehearse boldly, insinuating the injustice they have suffered. By speaking the lines from the play, they defy and rebel the authority.

The convicts’ resistance to the colonizer is carried out in mimicry, a very effective means acclaimed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Mimicry is a mocking, distorted and destructive mimesis, which aims to subvert the authority of the colonizer. Rehearsing the play empowers the convicts and enables them to fight back.

“While there is life there is hope” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 264). The line from Farquhar’s play resonates throughout *Our Country’s Good*. It is theatre that helps the convicts to find hope and envision a new life in the penal colony.

The play ends on an optimistic note with the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* when the class distinction is temporarily broken down and the convicts and officers heartily enjoy the performance. A community emerges.

Wertenbaker makes the thematic use of theatre in the play. By highlighting the transformation of the convicts, she acclaims the power of theatre. But this potential is not limited to the 18th-century colony; the vitality of theatre exudes in contemporary society.

### **Debate on Theatre: The Important Venue of Education and Justice**

In the preface to *Our Country’s Good*, Wertenbaker observes that “As I write this, many Education Departments of prisons are being cut—theatre comes under the Education Department—and the idea of tough punishment as justice seems to be gaining ground in our increasingly harsh society” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 164). Such a climate sparked off extensive rioting in British prisons. Wertenbaker’s remake here “draws parallels between the politics of crime and punishment in the 1780s and the 1980s”. The play is her endeavor to “carve political metaphor out of historical narrative” (Bush, 2013, p. 144).

Though the play is about what happened in the 18th century, how it was written associates it with

contemporary issues. Stafford-Clark remarks that “the parallels between the situation the convicts were in and our own society don’t have to be looked for, you stumble across them every moment” (as cited in Reynolds, 2013, p. 177).

One thematic concern of the play is the inhuman situation in British prisons. The play begins to present the audience the suffering, flogging, humiliation, and desperation that the transported convicts faced during the voyage which turned the ship into a hell, but that hellish sight is not new today. These are still part of the social ills. The parallels between the judicial system in the 18th century and in the 1980s and even today are successfully established at the start of the play. Prisons in the 1980s Britain were horrible, quite similar to the situation in the Victorian Age, when Newgate was overcrowded with prisoners committing petty crimes and large numbers of criminals were deported to Australia, a penal colony and totally abandoned by the civilizing society.

The playwright diverts the audiences’ attention to the worsening situation in the 1980s Britain when prisons were quite notorious, described as “institutions of which we should be ashamed. They are absurdly expensive, yet scandalously inhumane.... They are overcrowded and unhygienic” (Reynolds, 2013, pp. 178-179). Prisons were criticized for “enforcing idleness and encouraging helplessness” and for “punishing” rather than “reforming” prisoners (Reynolds, 2013, p. 179). Mrs. Thatcher’s emphasis on self-reliance and individualism marginalized the downtrodden and prisoners usually felt they were brutalized and discarded by the society.

Wertenbaker asserts in the play that theater works more effectively in rehabilitating criminals than inflicting physical punishment and degradation on them. Her view of the redemptive and transformative potential of theatre is best explored through the debate scene when Governor Philip and other officers argue about the merits of the theatre in Act One, Scene Six.

Governor Philip intends to impose the classically derived sense of order upon the colony and turn it into a civilizing community. For him, the European order is embodied in the great classics produced by the playwrights. Drawing on the Greek notion of theatre as an obligatory and unifying element within society, he remarks:

The theatre is an expression of civilization.... The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to. It will remind them there is more to life than crime and punishment. (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 206)

Governor Philip believes in nurture and thinks that watching a play can help convicts cultivate “attention, judgement, patience, all social virtues” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 207). When Tench thinks “the criminal tendency is innate” (p. 188), the Governor refutes that real plays with “fine language, sentiment” (p. 189) can uplift the convicts and it is important to “encourage them now to think in a free and responsible manner” (p. 206). On the other hand, many officers hold the opposite view of theatre and of how to create a new society. Collins believes that “the quick execution of justice [is] for the good of the colony” (p. 189). And Ross thinks theatre “teaches insubordination, disobedience, revolution” (p. 209). The dividing views are presented sharply in Scene Six and they provoke the audiences to speculate on the issue and come to their own conclusion.

Wertenbaker herself has been greatly influenced by Greek tragedy. Her translation of Sophocles’ plays has immersed her into the Greek idea of theatre. She believes in “the power [of theatre] to bring out the best in people” (as cited in Reynolds, 2013, p. 178), just as Clark says theatre can “transcend the darker, transcend the

brutality—remember our better nature and remember England” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 208). Violence and brutality only drive the convicts to despair and humiliation, while theatre, or culture in general, can help them acquire a more positive self-image. Now such a view has been widely applied in America, where many prisons and communities have already adopted drama projects as part of education, rehabilitation and discipline and they really work. For instance, in developing its black communities, America resorted to culture, turning it into a driving force for social change and revitalization and employed art for identity construction and for appeasing racial riots.

The play confirms the confidence in the power of theatre and its ability to transform people’s lives and sets the audiences to think about the situation in the 1980s Britain, when art and culture were cheapened and degraded after Mrs. Thatcher was in office. Her philistinism endangered the prosperity of culture. Unlike Winston Churchill who cherished the value of culture, she worshiped money and commercialized art and culture. Cutting Education Departments of prisons deprived the prisoners of the chances to be rehabilitated and assimilated into society and the prisoners were totally given up by society. On the contrary, *Our Country’s Good* stresses that in reforming convicts, “self respect and empowerment rather than punishment and degradation” should be the priority (Reynolds, 2013, p. 179). Because of Wertenbaker’s severe critique of the British prisons and her celebration of theatre, Sara Freeman claims the play to be “a political statement of opposition against the policies of a conservative government”.<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion

The 19th-century thinkers Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold believed firmly in the potential of culture. In Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, culture, seen as a striving towards an ideal of human perfection, is regarded as the opposing spirit to barbarism, philistinism and the consequent anarchy. Wertenbaker has inherited the idea. She believes in the motto that culture fights backwardness and extremism.

American playwright Edward Albee observes that the playwrights have to offer some explanations for human condition, to effect social reform and to bear the social responsibility to inform the audience of the society so as to reform it. This is the ideal that guides Wertenbaker’s playwriting. Her plays address the politically pressing concerns of contemporary society: exile, displacement, flight, floating identity, language, illegal immigration, political unrest in Eastern Europe, apartheid in South Africa, the backlash of feminism, the silencing of women, violence against the minorities, racial discrimination and cultural hybridity, the representation of England’s “heritage”, and the after-effects of the Empire, etc. She intends to pursue justice in her playwriting.

Wertenbaker claims her plays to be “skeptical, not didactic” (Milling, 2012, p. 196), by which she means she does not impose ideas on the audience; instead she presents different points of view in her plays and encourages the audience to think critically. Jane Milling thinks “her plays hailed a potent idea of British theatre as a place for vivid illustration of debate, provocative argument and cultural reaffirmation” (p. 197). This is Wertenbaker’s great contribution, considering the 1980s was “a culture of greed and social Darwinism” (Bush, 2013, p. 15).

Because she cherishes and champions theatre, Wertenbaker is extremely enraged with Thatcherism which embodies a complacent belief in individualism, free market values and materialism rather than creative forces

<sup>2</sup> Sara Freeman, “Wertenbaker, Timberlake (1951-?)”. *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=5520>.

that consolidate and inspire and angry with the governmental regulation of theatre. Art has been turned into a commodity and been marginalized, and subjected to the manipulation of the market, struggling for its survival. However, Wertenbaker is optimistic that with the efforts of the committed playwrights, theatre will continue to prosper and sustain its vigorous social roles.

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