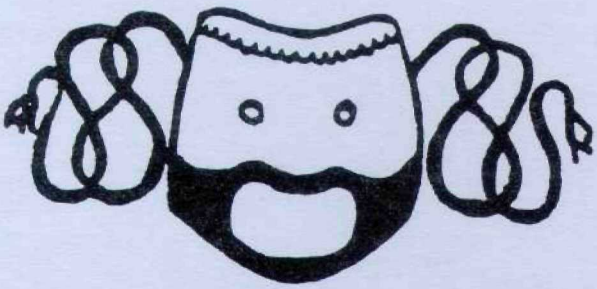
FREDERIC WOOD THEATRE

Our Country's Good



The University of British Columbia

FREDERIC WOOD THEATRE
presents

Our Country's Good

By
Timberlake Wertenbaker

Directed
by
Stephen Malloy

January 16 - 26
1991

Our Country's Good

SCENE TITLES

ACT ONE

Scene	Title
1	The Voyage Out
2	A Lone Aboriginal Australian describes the arrival of the first convict fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788
3	Punishment
4	The Loneliness of Men
5	An Audition
6	The Authorities discuss the merits of the theatre
7	Harry and Duckling go rowing
8	The women learn their lines
9	Ralph Clark tries to kiss his dear wife's picture
10	John Wisehammer and Mary Brenham exchange words
11	The first rehearsal

ACT TWO

Scene	Title
1	Visiting hours
2	His Excellency exhorts Ralph
3	Harry Brewer sees the dead
4	The Aborigine muses on the Nature of Dreams
5	The second rehearsal
6	The science of hanging
7	The meaning of plays
8	Duckling makes vows
9	A love scene
10	The question of Liz
11	Backstage

ANote on Timberlake Wertenbaker

Our Country's Good was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1988. It won the Evening Standard's Most Promising Playwright Award and the Laurence Olivier Play of the Year Award for 1988.

Additional works by Timberlake Wertenbaker include *The Third*, *Case to Answer*, *New Anatomies*, *Abel's Sister*, *The Grace of Mary Traverse* which won the Plays and Players Most Promising Playwright Award in 1985, and *The Love of the Nightingale* which won the 1989 Eileen Anderson Central TV Drama Award. Wertenbaker has also written the screenplay *The Children* based on Edith Wharton's novel, and a BBC2 film entitled *Do Not Disturb*.

Translations to her credit include Pierre de Marivaux's *False Admissions*, and *Successful Strategies*, Jean Anouilh's *Leocadia*, Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelleas and Melisande*, and Ariane Mnouchkine's *Mephisto*.

Of Imprisonment and Art: Our Country's Good

In the late 1780s, while the French were breaking chains in the throes of revolutionary change, England was in the process of clapping irons on Australia by converting it into one gigantic penal colony for her own criminals and outcasts. Robert Hughes has written a history of the inhumanity and degradation which marked the founding of Australia in *The Fatal Shore*; and from a single sentence in his account of those early years, Thomas Keneally has extrapolated an entire novel entitled *The Playmaker* which, in turn, Timberlake Wertenbaker has contracted into *Our Country's Good.*

Hughes's sentence is a chance comment on dramatic performance in a prison: "The first play produced in Australia was George Farquhar's Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer*, performed by an all-convict cast in 1789." This, clearly, is the starting point for Wertenbaker's investigation of the ways in which theatre can be a humanizing force in the most hopeless and brutalizing of circumstances. During the course of workshopping *Our Country's Good* she visited Her Majesty's Prison, Wormwood Scrubs, to see the prisoners performing a Howard Brenton play (which was considered too unsuitable for a prison audience, and so played to invited guests only). After the performance, the play's director commented on the attitude of the prison authorities towards the convict-actors and their extramural activity: "They don't think the prisoners should get applause. They're there to be punished. If the prisoners enjoy themselves that's not on." Several months later, after *Our Country's Good* had opened to acclaim, Timberlake Wertenbaker received a letter from Joe White, one of the convict-actors whom she had seen at The Scrubs. "Prison is about failure normally," he wrote, "and how we are reminded of it each day of every year. Drama, and self-expression in general, is a refuge and one of the only real weapons against the hopelessness of these places." If the attitudes of the prison officials represent the authoritarian forces for whom art is danger and sedition, then Joe White's simple eloquence provides the sub-text of Timberlake Wertenbaker's play. It offers the counter-argument that art can liberate us from the chains of social existence, that theatre can transform life on both sides of the footlights, and that the intransigence of censors and Philistines and totalitarian politicians can be opposed only by the artists' vital belief in the power of their craft to change the world.

Timberlake Wertenbaker's affirmation -- that the humanities do indeed humanize -- is an extraordinarily brave one to make in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Experience has endorsed a more cynical view of the arts, and W.H. Auden's admission that "poetry makes nothing happen" acknowledges the powerlessness of art to save lives or change the situation. We are more at home with failure, hopelessness, and despair. But *Our Country's Good* reminds us that modern cynicism is not the only response to romantic notions of transforming the world through artistic creation. Captain Phillip, the Governor-in-Chief of New South Wales, imbued with Rousseauist ideas about human beings' capacity to change and the liberating power of art, utters the sort of optimistic praise of theatre that educators and artists alike must cling to as a fiction of value:

> 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 that there is more to life than crime, punishment. And we, this colony of a few hundred will be watching this together, for a few hours we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers.

As actors, we cultivate imaginative sympathy with the suffering of others. As audience, we cultivate judgement even as our imaginations are challenged and trained. And so we acquire our freedom from the shackles of custom and the manacles of conventional thought.

Staging *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney Cove in 1789 is another revolutionary triumph of art over fixed systems, of human nature over every attempt to strip men and women of dignity and life. It is a lovely vision and a necessary lie. In his heart of hearts, Captain Phillip knows that the play will not change *much*. But it can make some *small* thing happen. Like the diagram in the sand which teaches the slave-boy the principles of geometry, theatre can provide a blueprint of freedom for an enslaved society and remind us--nothing more--of alternative possibilities. Even Auden, in the stanza that concludes his invocation to a great fellow artist, finally concedes to the optimistic metaphor that structures Timberlake Wertenbaker's play and defines the joyous vision of *Our Country's Good:*

> In the deserts of the heart
> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.

Errol Durbach, Department of Theatre

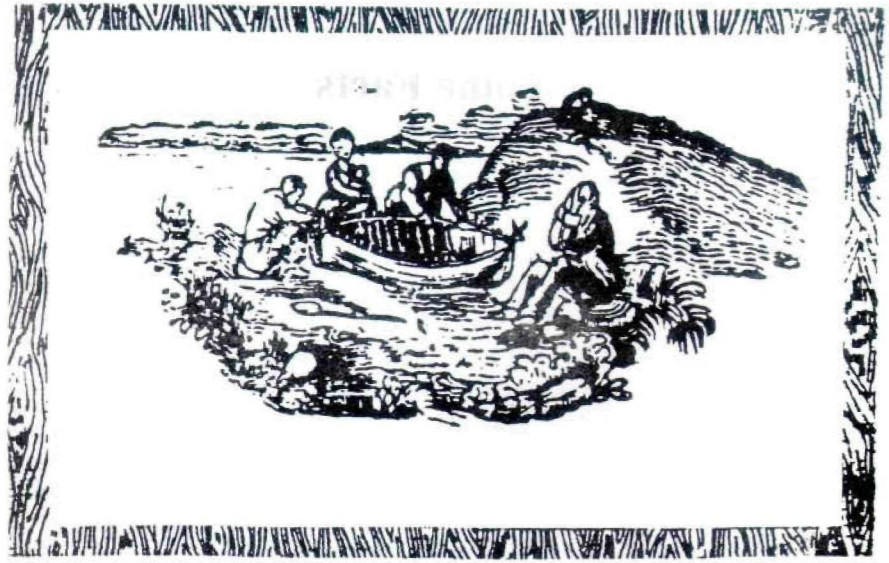
Some Facts on the "First Fleet"

I

Offense	Number
Minor theft	431
"Privy theft," (including breaking and entering)	93
Highway robbery	71
Stealing cattle or sheep	44
Robbery with violence (mugging)	31
Grand larceny	9
Fencing (receiving stolen goods)	8
Swindling, impersonation	7
Forgery of documents, banknotes, etc.	4
Other	35

II

Age (yrs.)	Men	Women
under 15	3	2
16 - 25	68	58
26-35	51	50
36-45	11	6
46-55	4	3
over 56	3	3
Total convicts of known age	140	122



"Castaways", woodcut
by convict W. Gould,
1829

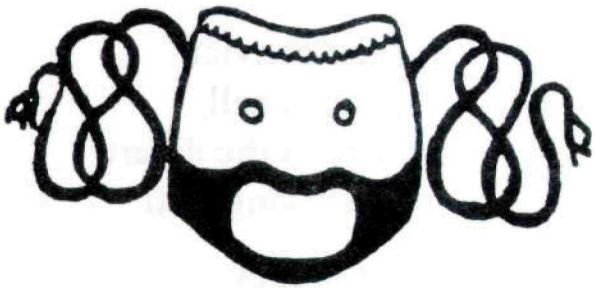
I was the convict
Sent to hell,
To make in the desert
The living well:

I split the rock;
I felled the tree—
The nation was
Because of me.

Anonymous

A Note on the Director

Stephen Malloy is an Assistant Professor in the Acting Division of the Theatre Department at UBC. A recent arrival from the East, Mr. Malloy's work as a director includes *The Empire Builders* and *Lady Audley's Secret* for the University of Ottawa and Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* for the National Arts Centre Atelier. Mr. Malloy's latest production for the NAC was *Sadly As I Tie My Shoes* by Sara Graefe which was honoured as the critics' choice for the best new play of 1988. Last January Mr. Malloy directed Sam Shepard's *Curse of The Starving Class*, at the Dorothy Somerset Studio.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

Dorothy Somerset Studio

THE GHOST SONATA

by August Strindberg
January 22 - 26

TOP GIRLS

by Caryl Churchill
February 27 - March 9

Frederic Wood Theatre

HAMLET

by William Shakespeare
March 6 - 16

BOX OFFICE 228-2678