

Time Travelers

How The Aussie Convicts in *Our Country's Good* Came To Play Broadway

by Gerard Raymond



Martha Swope

Ron McLarty and Amelia Campbell in *Our Country's Good*.

FIRST A GROUP OF CONVICTS PUT ON A production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in Australia on June 4, 1789. Thomas Keneally writes a novel about it, *The Playmaker*, in 1987. Then playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker's turns the book into *Our Country's Good*, which Max Stafford Clark directs at the Royal Court in London. The play wins the 1988 Olivier Award for Best Play. Mark Lamos directs the play at Hartford Stage Company in 1990. This week his production arrives on Broadway.

Unashamedly theatrical and sharply written, *Our Country's Good* celebrates the redemptive quality of the theater by demonstrating the humanizing effects of playmaking on a group of English convicts who arrive in Australia in 1788 and the following year stage a performance of *The Recruiting Office* to honor the King's birthday.

"It's the idea that art can transform human possibility," says director Mark Lamos. "It is as if the convicts' innate humanity is struggling

to come through their performance of a play."

The first settlers in Australia were cast-offs from their own society. Branded as murderers, thieves, whores, and petty criminals they were shipped off to eternal banishment in a country that was totally alien to them. The immigrants, both prisoners and jailers alike, were strongly affected by the harsh climate of their new country and nearly starved due to lack of food supplies. Conversely the native aborigine tribes were devastated by this influx of white people who broke up their traditional territories and brought with them diseases like smallpox.

"Those first European Australians were involuntary immigrants in an exile they didn't

chose, and their crimes were written on their foreheads," comments the Australian-born author, Thomas Keneally. By the standards of Georgian England, Australia represented "deep space," Keneally explains. Looking for a way to celebrate how modern Australian society evolved from a gulag, he hit upon the idea of using the first recorded theatrical performance in that country as a "lens through which to look at the whole phenomenon" in his novel.

Keneally based many of his characters on real people. Lieutenant Ralph Clark, known historically through his journals, is the

From London to Regional Theater to Broadway

IT HAS TAKEN THREE YEARS for *Our Country's Good* to reach Broadway. The trip began at the Royal Court in London, September, 1988. Gordon Davidson, of the Mark Taper, first secured the American rights for a Los Angeles production, which was co-directed by Max Stafford Clark and Les Waters in October 1989. Although the Public Theater has an exchange program with the Royal Court, Joe Papp passed on bringing the original production to New York. Manhattan Theater Club tried to obtain the rights to the play for two years but failed.

When the rights finally became available, Lamos, who had been interested in doing the play for about two and half years, directed the it at Hartford Stage Company in September, 1990, inaugurating his second decade there as artistic director. Positive notices for the production led to plans for a Broadway production of *Our Country's Good*. The play is presented in New York under the auspices of The Broadway Alliance, the new scheme designed to mount plays at affordable ticket prices (\$12-\$24).

“The theater became an obsession for the prisoners. They would shout the lines to each other from cell to cell to keep rehearsing.”—Max Stafford Clark

playmaker of the title, although there is no record that he ever directed the Farquhar comedy. “Clark was obviously a sensitive man, in some ways a silly man and in some ways a brave man,” says Keneally.

Clark also had an affair with a convict named Mary Brenham. She plays Silvia, the heroine of the *Recruiting Officer*, in Keneally’s story and Clark falls in love with her during the rehearsals. Farquhar himself is said to have had an affair with the Silvia of the original London production.

The idea to turn *The Playmaker* into a play came to Max Stafford Clark, artistic director of London’s Royal Court, while he was directing Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money* in

New York in January 1988. He was reading the book “as relaxation from reading plays.” Coincidentally *The Recruiting Officer* happened to be a play that he had considered for the Royal Court. Deciding that a dramatization of Keneally’s novel would “make a wonderful double bill” with the Farquhar play, he obtained Keneally’s permission to adapt the book and returned to England to commission Timberlake Wertenbaker to write the play. Wertenbaker had previously written a period play for the Royal Court entitled *The Grace of Mary Transverse* (1985).

“I said yes, only if I could be very free with the book,” Wertenbaker recalls. “I want to make clear that it is not an adaptation, that would be

unfair to the book as well as to the play.”

Like many Royal Court plays written under Stafford Clark’s direction (including *Serious Money*), *Our Country’s Good* was developed out of a workshop. The author, along with a group of actors and the director researched various aspects of the play before a single line was written. Wertenbaker had never written in this manner before and was initially suspicious of the process, but Stafford Clark assured her that play would be completely her own.

“It’s like having a little army of researchers—you get a tremendous wealth of material thrown at you in a very intense way and you select what you want,” Wertenbaker explains. “It’s mostly very indirect but



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The company of *Our Country’s Good*. Timberlake Wertenbaker’s epic play opened April 29 at the Nederlander Theater.



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Peter Frechette and Tracey Ellis in *Our Country's Good*.

it gives you a lovely cushion to start from.”

Stafford Clark recounts that the first thing they addressed in the workshop was how the actors would inhabit a world of starving and brutalized people. They read books like Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*, a seminal, non-fiction account of the early Australian penal colony, interviewed prisoners and military officers, and researched 18th-century theatrical customs and London low-life of the period. At one session, the actors practiced whipping each other—with rolled-up newspapers.

As part of their research, Stafford Clark and his group worked with inmates who were putting on plays in prison. “The theater,” he says, “became an obsession for the prisoners. They would shout the lines to each other from cell to cell in order to keep rehearsing. Their commitment to the play they were doing was a real reminder of how potent the play must have been to the convicts in Australia.”

How much of the novel is in the play?

“Out of all the elements, Timberlake had to choose one in particular as the line on which to hang her play. I think she chose very wisely—

the redemptive quality of playmaking,” says Keneally. “It’s merely one strand in the book but it is strongly and expertly exploited. It shows these convicts being dignified by contact with Farquhar’s lines, being dignified by being permitted to move outside their fallen condition.”

In one of the most powerful scenes in the play, Major Ross, an officer violently against the convict production, intrudes into a rehearsal and starts abusing the convicts. One of the convicts starts rehearsing the lines of *The Recruiting Officer* and all at once the abject, sullen prisoners transform themselves into the country gentlemen and ladies of Farquhar’s romantic comedy. They have transcended the insults of the bully—they are actors.

Our Country's Good, which glorifies the power of the theater, couldn't have been written at a more opportune moment. As Stafford Clark says, it “struck a big chord” in England where the theater community was “under considerable stress and quite demoralized after ten years of fighting a government which had no sympathy with it.” And Mark Lamos sees, in the convicts’ triumph, parallels to the ability of art to survive over the recent wave of censorship in this country. □

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