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Dramatic Publishing

Our Country's Good



By Timberlake Wertenbaker

Based upon the novel *The Playmaker*
by Thomas Keneally



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New Statesman

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Our Country's Good

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based upon the novel **The Playmaker** by

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(OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD)

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OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD

A Play in Two Acts
For Seven Men and Five Women with Doubling

CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN ARTHUR PHILLIP, RN
MAJOR ROBBIE ROSS, RM
CAPTAIN DAVID COLLINS, RM
CAPTAIN WATKIN TENCH, RM
CAPTAIN JEMMY CAMPBELL, RM
REVEREND JOHNSON
LIEUTENANT GEORGE JOHNSTON, RM
LIEUTENANT WILL DAWES, RM
2nd LIEUTENANT RALPH CLARK, RM
2nd LIEUTENANT WILLIAM FADDY, RM
MIDSHIPMAN HARRY BREWER, RN
ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN
JOHN ARSCOTT
DABBY BRYANT
BLACK CAESAR
KETCH FREEMAN
LIZ MORDEN
DUCKLING SMITH
JOHN WISEHAMMER
MARY BRENHAM
MEG LONG
ROBERT SIDEWAY

TIME: 1788/89
PLACE: Sidney, Australia

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 Jan. 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 Wischhammer and Mary Brenham Exchange Words |
| 11 | The First Rehearsal |

ACT TWO

| | |
|----|---|
| 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 |

In memory of John Price

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The Voyage Out

The hold of a convict ship bound for Australia, 1787. The convicts huddle together in the semi-darkness. On deck, the convict ROBERT SIDEWAY is being flogged. SECOND LIEUTENANT RALPH CLARK counts the lashes in a barely audible, slow and monotonous voice.

RALPH CLARK. Forty-four, forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty.

(SIDEWAY is untied and dumped with the rest of the convicts. He collapses. No one moves. A short silence.)

JOHN WISEHAMMER. At night? The sea cracks against the ship. Fear whispers, screams, falls silent, hushed. Spewed from our country, forgotten, bound to the dark edge of the earth, at night what is there to do but seek English cunt, warm, moist, soft, oh the comfort, the comfort of the lick, the thrust into the nooks, the crannies of the crooks of England. Alone, frightened, nameless in this stinking hole of hell, take me, take me inside you, whoever you are. Take me, my comfort and we'll remember England together.

SCENE TWO

A lone Aboriginal Australian describes the arrival of the First Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788.

THE ABORIGINE. A giant canoe drifts onto the sea, clouds billowing from upright oars. This is a dream which has lost its way. Best to leave it alone.

SCENE THREE

Punishment

Sidney Cove. GOVERNOR ARTHUR PHILLIP, JUDGE DAVID COLLINS, CAPTAIN WATKIN TENCH, MIDSHIPMAN HARRY BREWER. The men are shooting birds.

PHILLIP. Was it necessary to cross fifteen thousand miles of ocean to erect another Tyburn?

TENCH. I should think it would make the convicts feel at home.

COLLINS. This land is under English law. The court found them guilty and sentenced them accordingly. There: a bald-eyed corella.

PHILLIP. But hanging?

COLLINS. Only the three who were found guilty of stealing from the colony's stores. And that, over there on the Eucalyptus, is a flock of 'cacatua galerita' – the sul-

phur-crested cockatoo. You have been made Governor-in-Chief of a paradise of birds, Arthur.

PHILLIP. And I hope not of a human hell, Davey. Don't shoot yet, Watkin, let's observe them. Could we not be more humane?

TENCH. Justice and humaneness have never gone hand in hand. The law is not a sentimental comedy.

PHILLIP. I am not suggesting they go without punishment. It is the spectacle of hanging I object to. The convicts will feel nothing has changed and will go back to their old ways.

TENCH. The convicts never left their old ways, Governor, nor do they intend to.

PHILLIP. Three months is not long enough to decide that. You're speaking too loud, Watkin.

COLLINS. I commend your endeavour to oppose the baneful influence of vice with the harmonising acts of civilisation, Governor, but I suspect your edifice will collapse without the mortar of fear.

PHILLIP. Have these men lost all fear of being flogged?

COLLINS. John Arscott has already been sentenced to 150 lashes for assault.

TENCH. The shoulder-blades are exposed at about 100 lashes and I would say that somewhere between 250 and 500 lashes you are probably condemning a man to death anyway.

COLLINS. With the disadvantage that the death is slow, unobserved and cannot serve as a sharp example.

PHILLIP. Harry?

HARRY. The convicts laugh at hangings, Sir. They watch them all the time.

TENCH. It's their favourite form of entertainment, I should say.

PHILLIP. Perhaps because they've never been offered anything else.

TENCH. Perhaps we should build an opera house for the convicts.

PHILLIP. We learned to love such things because they were offered to us when we were children or young men. Surely no one is born naturally cultured? I'll have the gun now.

COLLINS. We don't even have any books here, apart from the odd play and a few Bibles. And most of the convicts can't read, so let us return to the matter in hand, which is the punishment of the convicts, not their education.

PHILLIP. Who are the condemned men, Harry?

HARRY. Thomas Barrett, age 17. Transported seven years for stealing one ewe sheep.

PHILLIP. Seventeen!

TENCH. It does seem to prove that the criminal tendency is innate.

PHILLIP. It proves nothing.

HARRY. James Freeman, age 25, Irish, transported 14 years for assault on a sailor at Shadwell Dock.

COLLINS. I'm surprised he wasn't hanged in England.

HARRY. Handy Baker, marine and the thieves' ring-leader.

COLLINS. He pleaded that it was wrong to put the convicts and the marines on the same rations and that he could not work on so little food. He almost swayed us.

TENCH. I do think that was an unfortunate decision. My men are in a ferment of discontent.

COLLINS. Our Governor-in Chief would say it is justice, Tench, and so it is. It is also justice to hang these men.

TENCH. The sooner the better, I believe. There is much excitement in the colony about the hangings. It's their theatre, Governor, you cannot change that.

PHILLIP. I would prefer them to see real plays: fine language, sentiment.

TENCH. No doubt Garrick would relish the prospect of eight months at sea for the pleasure of entertaining a group of criminals and the odd savage.

PHILLIP. I never liked Garrick, I always preferred Macklin.

COLLINS. I'm a Kemble man myself. We will need a hangman.

PHILLIP. Harry, you will have to organise the hanging and eventually find someone who agrees to fill that hideous office.

(PHILLIP shoots.)

COLLINS. Shot.

TENCH. Shot.

HARRY. Shot, sir.

COLLINS. It is my belief the hangings should take place tomorrow. The quick execution of justice for the good of the colony, Governor.

PHILLIP. The good of the colony? Oh, look! We've frightened a kankaroo.

HARRY. There is also Dorothy Handland, 82, who stole a biscuit from Robert Sideway.

PHILLIP. Surely we don't have to hang an 82-year-old woman?

COLLINS. That will be unnecessary. She hanged herself this morning.

SCENE FOUR

The Loneliness of Men

RALPH CLARK's tent. It is late at night. RALPH stands, composing and speaking his diary.

RALPH. Dreamt, my beloved Alicia, that I was walking with you and that you was in your riding-habit – oh my dear woman when shall I be able to hear from you –

All the officers dined with the Governor – I never heard of any one single person having so great a power vested in him as Captain Phillip has by his commission as Governor-in-Chief of New South Wales – dined on a cold collation but the Mutton which had been killed yesterday morning was full of maggots – nothing will keep 24 hours in this dismal country I find –

Went out shooting after breakfast – I only shot one cockatoo – they are the most beautiful birds –

Major Ross ordered one of the Corporals to flog with a rope Elizabeth Morden for being impertinent to Captain Campbell – the Corporal did not play with her but laid it home which I was very glad to see – she has long been fishing for it –

On Sunday as usual, kissed your dear beloved image a thousand times – was very much frightened by the lightning as it broke very near my tent – several of the convicts have run away.

(He goes to his table and writes in his journal.)

If I'm not made 1st Lieutenant soon...

(HARRY BREWER has come in.)

RALPH. Harry—

HARRY. I saw the light in your tent—

RALPH. I was writing my journal.

(Silence.)

Is there any trouble?

HARRY. No. *(Pause.)*

I just came.

Talk, you know. If I wrote a journal about my life it would fill volumes. Volumes. My travels with the Captain— His Excellency now, no less, Governor-in-Chief, power to raise armies, build cities—I still call him plain Captain Phillip. He likes it from me. The war in America and before that, Ralph, my life in London. That would fill a volume on its own. Not what you would call a good life.

(Pause.)

Sometimes I look at the convicts and I think, one of those could be you, Harry Brewer, if you hadn't joined the navy when you did. The officers may look down on me now, but what if they found out that I used to be an embezzler?

RALPH. Harry, you should keep these things to yourself.

HARRY. You're right, Ralph.

(Pause.)

I think the Captain suspects, but he's a good man and he looks for different things in a man—

RALPH. Like what?

HARRY. Hard to say. He likes to see something unusual.

Ralph, I saw Handy Baker last night.

RALPH. You hanged him a month ago, Harry.

HARRY. He had a rope—Ralph, he's come back.

RALPH. It was a dream. Sometimes I think my dreams are real— But they're not.

HARRY. We used to hear you on the ship, Ralph, calling for your Betsey Alicia.

RALPH. Don't speak her name on this iniquitous shore!

HARRY. Duckling's gone silent on me again. I know it's because of Handy Baker. I saw him as well as I see you. Duckling wants me, he said, even if you've hanged me. At least your poker's danced its last shindy, I said. At least it's young and straight, he said, she likes that. I went for him but he was gone. But he's going to come back, I know it. I didn't want to hang him, Ralph, I didn't.

RALPH. He did steal that food from the stores.

(Pause.)

I voted with the rest of the court those men should be hanged, I didn't know His Excellency would be against it.

HARRY. Duckling says she never feels anything. How do I know she didn't feel something when she was with

him? She thinks I hanged him to get rid of him, but I didn't, Ralph.

(Pause.)

Do you know I saved her life? She was sentenced to be hanged at Newgate for stealing two candlesticks but I got her name put on the transport lists. But when I remind her of that she says she wouldn't have cared. Eighteen years old, and she didn't care if she was turned off.

(Pause.)

These women are sold before they're ten. The Captain says we should treat them with kindness.

RALPH. How can you treat such women with kindness? Why does he think that?

HARRY. Not all the officers find them disgusting, Ralph—haven't you ever been tempted?

RALPH. Never! *(Pause.)* His excellency never seems to notice me.

(Pause.)

He finds time for Davey Collins, Lieutenant Dawes.

HARRY. That's because Captain Collins is going to write about the customs of the Indians here—and Lieutenant Dawes is recording the stars.

RALPH. I could write about the Indians.

HARRY. He did suggest to captain Tench that we do something to educate the convicts, put on a play or

something, but Captain Tench just laughed. He doesn't like Captain Tench.

RALPH. A play? Who would act in a play?

HARRY. The convicts of course. He is thinking of talking to Lieutenant Johnston, but I think Lieutenant Johnston wants to study the plants.

RALPH. I read 'The Tragedy of Lady Jane Grey' on the ship. It is such a moving and uplifting play. But how could a whore play Lady Jane?

HARRY. Some of those women are good women, Ralph, I believe my Duckling is good. It's not her fault—if only she would look at me, once, react. Who wants to fuck a corpse!

(Silence.)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you, Ralph, I have shocked you, haven't I? I'll go.

RALPH. Is His Excellency serious about putting on a play?

HARRY. When the Captain decides something, Ralph.

RALPH. If I went to him—no. It would be better if you did, Harry, you could tell His Excellency how much I like the theatre.

HARRY. I didn't know that Ralph, I'll tell him.

RALPH. Duckling could be in it, if you wanted.

HARRY. I wouldn't want her to be looked at by all the men.

RALPH. If his Excellency doesn't like Lady Jane we could find something else.

(Pause.)

A comedy perhaps...

HARRY. I'll speak to him, Ralph. I like you.

(Pause.)

It's good to talk...

(Pause.)

You don't think I killed him then?

RALPH. Who?

HARRY. Handy Baker.

RALPH. No, Harry. You did not kill Handy Baker.

HARRY. Thank you, Ralph.

RALPH. Harry, you won't forget to talk to His Excellency about the play?

SCENE FIVE

An Audition

RALPH CLARK, MEG LONG. MEG LONG is very old and very smelly. She hovers over RALPH.

MEG. We heard you was looking for some women, Lieutenant. Here I am.

RALPH. I've asked to see some women to play certain parts in a play.