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Metatheatrical Possibilities in a Re-Consideration of Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good*

Abstract

A discussion of metatheatrical possibilities in Timberlake Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* illuminates interpretive possibilities beyond the scope of its original British contexts. Though not conceived in Australia, the play was first performed in the Australian Bicentennial year and was based upon Australian author Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987), a novel about the first British colonial theatre production in Sydney. *Our Country's Good* boasts an extensive, international, production history. It has assumed canonical status in the UK where it was first staged under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court and is now taught regularly in British secondary schools (Bush 2013: 118-19). Due to its thematic relevance to Australian postcolonial history, this work also occupies a place in Australian theatre that, while recognised, has been little examined. Despite wide recognition of its Australian origins in Keneally's novel, reception of the play has been guided by the multiple contexts – theatrical/industrial, political and social – of its first production in Britain. Despite Sara Soncini's recognition of the usefulness of metatheatricality to the play's critical discourse (1999), the question of how metatheatricality relates to the play's Australian elements remains largely under examined. This discussion of *Our Country's Good* repositions it within the context of Australian drama. By offering a closer examination of metatheatrical strategies in *Our Country's Good*, including in the play's Australian productions, the article demonstrates how metatheatricality contributes to the work's distinctively Australian cultural value. In particular, it argues that the role described in the *dramatis personae* as the "Aboriginal" can be understood as one of the play's metatheatrical interventions. A more thorough understanding of this role as metatheatrical is vital to a full realisation of the play's critical capacities.

KEYWORDS: metatheatrical; Timberlake Wertebaker; *Our Country's Good*; Australian theatre

Timberlake Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988a) is a thoroughly metatheatrical play, staging, as it does, the convict rehearsals for the

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first theatre production in the British penal colony of Sydney Cove. As the play's final scene depicts the convict cast successfully beginning their production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), it ostensibly celebrates the power of art in the face of various hardships. Such has been at the heart of the work's British reception, beginning with its first production in 1988. Conceived by Max Stafford-Clark for the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, the play has largely been interpreted as a metaphor for the fraught conditions faced by theatre producers under the late 1980s Thatcher government.

As plays naturally attract new interpretations in foreign contexts, a point also made by Elizabeth Schafer (2010: 63) in relation to this work, it is unsurprising that *Our Country's Good* has done so in its Australian productions. Whereas British productions have largely approached the play's Australian setting and historical premise as secondary (if not incidental), Australian readings of the work have tended to focus on colonial themes. Although the play did not originate in Australia, it was written at the time of that country's celebration of the Bicentenary of British settlement. Additionally, the work was based upon Australian author Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987), a novel which gives an account of the first theatrical production in the British colony. George Farquhar's abovenamed Restoration comedy was performed by convicts on June 4, 1789, just one year after British arrival in Sydney Cove. Through its depiction of this theatrical event, *Our Country's Good* thus straddles multiple temporalities (eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries), and nations (Australia and Britain).

A discussion of this play's metatheatrical strategies offers insight into ways it can usefully be read beyond the scope of its original, British, contexts. By offering a closer examination of metatheatre in *Our Country's Good*, I illustrate how metatheatre is connected to the work's Australian cultural value. In particular, I argue that the role described in the *dramatis personae* as the "Aboriginal" can be understood as one of the play's metatheatrical interventions.

Defining Metatheatre

The term metatheatre was conceived by Lionel Abel in 1963, in a now widely known study entitled *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. As indicated in his title, the author presented an argument and hypothetical nomenclature for what he considered to be a new dramatic genre. While Abel does not draw upon Australian examples, the texts that inaugurate Australia's metatheatrical argument were written in the decades from which

he draws his contemporary examples and from which he writes.¹ The dramatic works of Patrick White (such as *The Ham Funeral*, 1965) and Dorothy Hewett (*The Chapel Perilous*, 1971), for example, both illustrate the ongoing dialogue regarding life and art that Abel suggests is central to metatheatre. Abel's work provides a history and a first definition of metatheatre that have been elaborated and debated by subsequent critics seeking to understand the evolution of metatheatre in the post-war period. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, in "Metatheatr': An Essay on Overload", critiques Abel's use of the term "metatheatre" to define a genre, outlining problems of "latitude" in the ways in which the term itself has been defined (2002: 87-119). Despite the often compelling criticisms of Abel's theoretical premise, the term metatheatre has gained strong critical currency in the decades since its inception. The publication of several key texts devoted to the subject, including a collection of essays edited by Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner in 2007, indicates that the term remains current, if not to denote a genre, then to describe actual dramaturgical devices used by present and past practitioners. Hornby suggests that metatheatrical techniques might include: the play-within-the play; the ceremony within the play; role playing within the role; literary and real life reference; dramatic self-reference; and the depiction of perception as a theme within the play (1986: 32).

My own discussion of metatheatre, for the purpose of this argument, views the term not in the Abelian sense, in relation to a genre, but as a series of dramaturgical techniques including those outlined by Hornby, in particular the play-within-the-play. I also discuss the depiction of "backstage" as a metatheatrical strategy particularly vital to the play's cultural discourse.

Production and Perception

When *Our Country's Good* is viewed, as traditionally it has been, as a metaphor for the status of British theatre and society in the 1980s, the Australian setting of its events can appear secondary. Yet certain aspects have been crucial in cementing its position in Australian theatre history. The specific historical circumstances of this play's origins are frequently reiterated in critical discussions (Feldman 2013; Bush 2013). Wertenbaker's depiction of the first performance of a play by British convicts in the new colony is clearly significant in this respect and, as Hiley observes in a review of the original London production, it is in the play's final moments as the Recruit-

¹ I have discussed the use of metatheatre in Australian Drama, and its prevalence in recent decades, more extensively elsewhere. See Clode 2015.

ing Officer “goes on” that Australian theatre “is born” (1988). Central to this depiction of the “birth” of British colonial theatre in Australia, is the play’s indebtedness to Keneally’s novel and the research on Australian history which, through the Royal Court’s ensemble workshops, became incorporated into the play (Stafford-Clark 1989a; Sigal 2013). Historical source material drawn from Robert Hughes’ popular history *The Fatal Shore* (1988) along with extracts from the diary entries of First Fleet officers, were not only referred to by the company but, through improvisations and analysis, worked into the scenes and dialogue of Wertebaker’s text. Similarly, accounts of the Fleet’s experiences on the journey to Australia were embedded in the play’s dialogue. The result is more than an account of this history; rather, the play is a celebration and theatrical examination of this moment in Australia’s history, granted from an outside perspective.

This has led to diverse interpretations, both in production and reception. In its metatheatrical depiction of the rehearsal of *The Recruiting Officer*, *Our Country’s Good* has typically been viewed as a celebration of theatre and an argument for the social value of the Arts during the fraught political climate of late Thatcherite Britain (Weeks 2000: 147). Despite the arguments of some critics that *Our Country’s Good* privileges this celebration of theatre and theatricality at the expense of the more critical examination of the process of British colonisation offered in Keneally’s *The Playmaker*, others have contested that the play engages with the power politics of empire in ways that challenge and, at moments, subvert, its celebratory theme. Soncini, for example, argues that the play’s metatheatrical depiction of the rehearsal of *The Recruiting Officer* can be viewed as a project of empire building in which the convict cast, despite their apparent enjoyment of and temporary sense of liberation gained from rehearsals are, ultimately, oppressed colonial subjects (2000: 94-5).

In Australia, while reviewers continued to focus to some extent on the play’s celebration of theatre, there was a marked shift in emphasis from this theatrical theme to the question of how the play engaged with the nation’s colonial history (Soncini 2000: 279-82). One idea that resonated strongly in the Australian setting was that of the metatheatrical rehearsal for the convicts’ play as a metaphor for rehearsal for nation. This echoes one of the key themes of Keneally’s *The Playmaker*.

Our Country’s Good was first performed in Australia in June 1989, in two simultaneous productions, one a touring production by Stafford-Clark’s British ensemble, performed at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) Wharf Theatre, the other an Australian production for the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC), directed by Roger Hodgman and performed at The Playhouse. These productions, staged in the aftermath of Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations, garnered a range of critical responses on their position-

ing relative to that event. The metatheatrical project was also noted for its commemoration of the bicentenary of the first convict production in Australia, the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney Cove for the occasion of King George III's birthday (Stafford-Clark 1989a: xi). By staging productions of the same play two hundred years on, alongside Wertenbaker's metatheatrical exploration of the convicts' rehearsal process, the companies, both of which performed *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good* in repertory, offered what was at once a celebration of, and an opportunity to critically reflect upon, a moment in Australian theatrical history.

An understanding of the intertextual relationships between *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good* is useful in demonstrating how this repertory pairing opens up colonial themes for investigation (Feldman 2013: 155). First performed in London in 1706 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, *The Recruiting Officer* is set in 1704 during the War of the Spanish Succession (Shugrue 1966: xi). Irish playwright George Farquhar, a former lieutenant and recruiting officer for the British Army, is believed to have drawn upon his own military experience when writing the play. Locating its action in Shrewsbury, then a remote country town, Farquhar satirises the pursuits of Captain Plume and his fellow officers as they cannily recruit the town's men for military service, while simultaneously (and in a play upon the meaning of 'recruitment') pursuing romantic affairs with its women. As Feldman explains, part of Farquhar's comedy lies in his characters' manipulations of contemporary social boundaries. Heiress Silvia, for example, plays with class and gender boundaries, disguising herself as an officer in a scheme to marry Captain Plume.

The range of meanings effected by the repertory pairing of classic and more recent works has been of interest to critics, notably Soncini who, examining the use of metatheatrical techniques such as character doubling (which occurred both within and between productions in the Royal Court staging) skilfully articulates the repertory and its entire production process as a "dialogue with the Restoration" (Soncini 1999: 73). This perspective is reflected in Stafford-Clark's published account of the company's rehearsals, structured as an imaginative correspondence with Farquhar and titled *Letters to George* (1989a).

Set at the moment of Australia's British colonisation, *Our Country's Good* begins on board the hold of a convict ship. The play is comprised of twenty-one short, episodic scenes, each with its own explanatory title. The use of scene titles is one of the Brechtian metatheatrical techniques indicated by the text and which critics and reviewers have frequently noted in their broad recognition of the play's theatricality.² Employed as a way of

² Peter Kemp described the production as "stagily artificial throughout", referring

foregrounding the action or theme within each scene, the idea behind the use of such titles is that by hearing the scene announced in advance of its performance, audiences will be detached from the narrative and freer to engage critically in the action at hand.³ Wertenbaker's scenes are accordingly given titles indicative of their key themes and events, for example "The Voyage Out" (1.1) and "The First Rehearsal" (1.11). When performed by the Royal Court ensemble, these titles were announced by the play's officer characters (Stafford-Clark 1988). Together, the scenes dramatise the making of the theatrical production commissioned by Captain Arthur Phillip, first Governor General of New South Wales. As well as depicting the convicts' challenges in performing Farquhar's characters, the play presents arguments from the colony's officers, both for and against the production of the play. Phillip, whose conception for the production aligns with his plan for the foundation of the new colony underpinned by the principles of reason exemplified by the Enlightenment, sees the project as a means of establishing a social "contract" with the convicts (Wertenbaker 1988a: 59).

It is to these ends that Phillip appeals to Lieutenant Ralph Clark to oversee the project of staging *The Recruiting Officer* and, while rehearsals do proceed, his plan for the convict production is met by oppositional views from several officers, in particular Robbie Ross. These responses can be interpreted as a critique of the late 1980s conservative government's attitude towards the kind of political theatre traditionally produced by the Royal Court. Ross' objections can also be read in relation to the play's portrayal of empire. He, unlike the more liberal and, in Wertenbaker's depiction, sympathetic character of Phillip, considers his role in the foundation of the colony as being to oversee the convicts' exile and punishment. His concern, shared in varying degrees by other officers, is that the liberties afforded to convicts by participation in the play will lead to "insubordination, disobedience, revolution" (Wertenbaker 1988a: 26).

In response to his opposition, Phillip argues for a less punitive approach to nation making.⁴ As he explains to Lieutenant Clark during the play's second act, "I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals" (40). In presenting a view of theatre as a civilising agent, he determines that the largely illiterate convict community will ben-

to the company's method of introducing scenes "with Brecht-like summaries of their content" (1988). Several other reviewers commented upon *Our Country's Good's* use of metatheatrical techniques as being 'Brechtian', including, for example, Charles Osborne (1989).

³ For discussion of the theory behind Brecht's use of scene titles, see Willett 1959: 74

⁴ Ann Wilson (1991: 23) sees Wertenbaker's treatment of Governor Phillip as largely sympathetic, particularly when compared with Keneally's depiction of the Governor General in *The Playmaker*.

efit from the opportunity to learn the refined language of the nation's theatrical heritage. Phillip argues:

The theatre is an expression of civilisation. We belong to a great country which has spawned great playwrights: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, and even in our own time Sheridan. The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to.
(25)

In offering these sentiments, Phillip articulates a vision of theatre as a socially beneficial, democratic and ultimately educative force.

In view of the Royal Court ensemble's approach when researching the play, the critical reception of this work as an argument for the transformative power of theatre is hardly surprising. That the convict rehearsal proceeds in spite of the protests outlined above and that, ultimately, the convicts stage their production, appear to support this reading. Importantly, the production of the play-within-the-play as depicted by Wertenbaker can be seen as mutually transformative; not only does the production allow the convicts to transcend their immediate circumstances, but its rehearsal also effects change among the officers, notably the director Ralph Clark.

Although the transformative power of theatre has remained the focus of British productions, the work has naturally taken on different meanings in new production contexts. This was particularly the case in Australia where, despite the Royal Court's attempts to explain the play as a British and not an Australian story, it was interpreted in relation to Australian colonial and post-colonial history and the politics of empire. The production's 'cultural transfer' from London to Sydney was complicated by several factors, one of which was its physical dislocation from the Royal Court (Carlson 2009: 279). At the Royal Court, staged amidst funding cuts and the related threat of closure, the play had operated as a subversive celebration of theatre (Bush 2013: 133-4; Nightingale 1998). In the tour to Sydney, this impact was inevitably dissipated by the production's change in location and also, significantly, its material circumstances. The Royal Court production in Australia was made possible via the support of producer Diana Bliss, corporate sponsorship and the coproduction of the work with the Sydney Theatre Company. As one of Australia's two major subsidised theatres at that time, the host venue was relieved, both physically and fiscally, from the pressures that had impacted upon the Royal Court. In this sense, the production was distanced from the industrial and political contexts that it had first set out to critique.

In addition, although the Royal Court's production remained essentially unchanged, its interpretation by Australian audiences was guided by a different set of social and theatrical circumstances from those that had in-

formed the play's London reception. Notably, the setting of late eighteenth century Sydney Cove, which had served as a metaphor for contemporary Britain, was no longer historicised in the same way. Upon arriving in Sydney, Stafford-Clark and the Royal Court ensemble were struck by the fact that their performances at the STC's Wharf Theatre would be taking place just "half a mile away from the site of the original historical performance" (Carlson: 279). Moreover, the "historical names" of the play's *dramatis personae* were names familiar to Australian audiences (ibid.). This level of immediacy, disrupting as it did, the reading of the play as British metaphor, explains the Australian production's focus upon colonial history. As mentioned previously, this effect was likely heightened by the production's proximity to the Bicentenary, an event that had brought the politics of Australia's colonial and post-colonial history to the forefront of national consciousness.

The play's connections to Australian history were mediated by the Australian media's coverage of the Royal Court tour. *Our Country's Good* was billed as both a convincing "Convict Play" (Carmody 1989) and the "Inside story of the birth of theatre in Australia" (Lateo 1989). The play's immediate relevance to Australian audiences was further foregrounded by references to the historical characters and events referred to within it. For example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* mentioned "Robert Sideway", explaining how this character, a convict and former pickpocket, had become "the colony's first theatre producer after making his debut in *The Recruiting Officer*" in 1789 (Evans 1989). In the history from which the play is drawn, Sideway is notable for having opened Australia's first colonial playhouse, only seven years after the convict production of *The Recruiting Officer* (Jordan 2007: 42).

"Backstage"

A critical focus on one of the play's metatheatrical dimensions, the scene titled "backstage", allows us to better realise the potential of the indigenous Australian role, a role which carries particular nuances in the context of an Australian production. Wertenbaker's "backstage" scene depicts not only the convicts' position within the colonial project, but the marginalisation of the Aboriginal Australian within the new society. The treatment of the Aboriginal Australian both here and throughout the text, contains the potential to disrupt the play's otherwise celebratory tone. Critics have viewed Wertenbaker's depiction of the Aboriginal Australian as one of the work's most problematic aspects (Bush 2013: 118-19). Even prior to *Our Country's Good* being staged in Australia, Billington and other review-

ers had expressed disappointment in the play's diminution of what had occupied a more central place in Keneally's novel (see Billington 1988). In *The Playmaker*, the impact of British colonialism upon Australia's Indigenous inhabitants is explored at length. Indeed, the importance of this theme is highlighted by a dedication to "Arabadoo", the Indigenous Australian man whose "real-life" capture and secondment to Arthur Phillip occupies one strand of Keneally's narrative.

The treatment of the Aboriginal Australian in *Our Country's Good* was viewed by many critics as tokenistic (Asquith 1988; Kemp 1988; Billington 1988). Unlike the novel, Wertenbaker's play does not include any active exchange between the Indigenous and British colonial communities, despite the fact that she had explored this possibility when writing the play (Bush 2013: 119). Bush explains that Wertenbaker had initially wanted to allocate more space to exploring the relationship between British colonial and Indigenous cultures. Evidence of this is found in early draft material, in particular a scene in which an Aboriginal Australian and a convict attempt to communicate with one another, each speaking in their own language. Within this draft scene, both the convict and the Aboriginal Australian express their wish to "go home" – a mutual sentiment designed to highlight a shared status as 'subjects' of the colonial experiment. As Bush explains, the ultimate omission of this material from *Our Country's Good* reflects Wertenbaker's realisation that she lacked "the language" to accurately represent the Aboriginal voice (119). Consequently, although the play does not ignore the question of colonial/Indigenous relations, the depiction of the Aboriginal Australian is vastly reduced. Verna Foster describes this as "a reduction [of the novelist's] treatment of colonization to four brief choric appearances by a lone bemused and ultimately diseased aboriginal" (1997-1998: 418), and while critics have broadly viewed this aspect of the play as being under-written, it is nonetheless worth considering further. In what follows, I argue that with the very stripping away of the Aboriginal role to four brief choric appearances, Wertenbaker imbues the role, consciously or otherwise, with a metatheatrical function. Within this function lies the potential for a powerful social critique.

Wertenbaker's Aboriginal Australian appears in four short moments throughout the play. Upon the first appearance, which occurs in Act One scene two, Wertenbaker uses a metatheatrical scene title to establish the character's function from the outset. As the "Lone Aboriginal Australian describes the Arrival of the First Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20, 1788" (Wertenbaker 1998: 4) he is established as both an on-stage audience to the colonial project and a character who exists outside of it.⁵ From

⁵ In the first edition the scene is titled "Convict Fleet in Botany Bay on January 20,

this moment, the Aboriginal Australian plays a similar role to a Greek chorus (a point acknowledged by several critics) in providing commentary on the events at hand (Soncini 1999: 92-3; Carlson 2009: 280-1; Bush 2013: 118-19). Soncini argues that this use of the Aboriginal Australian as an on-stage audience member foregrounds the act of viewing for the audience at-large (92-3). This metatheatrical strategy highlights the spectacle of the First Fleet's arrival and allows the audience to see the process of colonial arrival played out as though it is a theatrical event (*ibid.*). The language used by the Aboriginal Australian, along with his physical placement (always at a distance from other characters) enhances this effect.

The convict Fleet's arrival is described as a kind of other-worldly vision, or nightmare: a "dream which has lost its way" (Wertenbaker 1988a: 17). As the Aboriginal man watches this historical event unfold, he interprets it using language evocative of Aboriginal "Dreaming" mythology.⁶ This language signifies the character's use of his own cultural understandings as he attempts to make sense of the unfamiliar event before him. His conclusion, perhaps based on a sense of impending danger, is that it would be "best to leave it alone" (Wertenbaker 1988a: 17).

Wertenbaker's use of the word "dream", as well as evoking an idea relevant to Aboriginal culture, creates a link with another notion of 'dreams'. Notably, dreams had been part of Keneally's inspiration behind *The Playmaker*. The novelist had been drawn to the diaries kept by Lieutenant Ralph Clark, in which Clark describes the vivid and often disturbed dreams he experienced during the early days of settlement in Sydney Cove. Consequently, Clark's dreams, and his attempts to purge himself of them, are incorporated into Keneally's narrative in *The Playmaker*. Beyond this, dream imagery is central to the play's metatheatrical staging of British colonial settlement. In describing the arrival and subsequent activity of the convict Fleet as a kind of dream, the Indigenous man casts the event into a kind of spiritual realm, a realm that, like theatre itself, is somehow suspended from everyday reality. Here through his metatheatrical narrative, the Aboriginal Australian creates the analogy of the Fleet's activities as a performance – specifically, the performance of British colonisation upon

1788"; see Wertenbaker 1988a: 17. Despite their differing scene titles, the same action occurs in both editions.

⁶ For discussion and definitions of Australian Aboriginal "Dreamtime", or "Dreaming", see Elkin 1974, and also Korff 2019. Here, Australian Aboriginal Mudrooroo's definition of 'Dreaming' is offered as follows: "'The Dreaming,' or 'the Dreamtime,' indicates a psychic state in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, or the law, or that special period of the beginning". It is noted that there is, in fact, no exact English equivalent for the ideas contained within this Indigenous spiritual concept.

Australian shores.

The beginning of the play's last scene represents an important moment in the Aboriginal Australian's viewing experience. Here he questions the relationship between dreams and reality in his interpretation of the British community's presence. By this time afflicted with smallpox, a disease unknown in Indigenous communities before British settlement, the Aboriginal man appeals to the off-stage, contemporary audience "Look. Oozing pustules on my skin, heat on my forehead. Perhaps we have been wrong all this time and this is not a dream after all" (Wertenbaker 1988a: 51). Not only does the character describe his condition, but by directing the audience to "Look", he once again highlights the act of viewing. Here, though, rather than outlining what he sees (as he has done in each previous appearance), the character turns the audience's gaze upon himself for the first time. In viewing the dream that "is not a dream after all" but ultimately the historical event of Australia's British colonisation, the audience is in this way invited, in the final scene, to consider the impact of colonisation upon the Indigenous people. The character's metatheatrical direction of the audience to "Look" at him, effects both a different kind of viewing (as the subject of the gaze has changed) and a looking back, upon Australian history. Here the final scene's title, "Backstage", is significant and, to some extent, explains the limited representation of this character throughout *Our Country's Good*. The relegation of the Aboriginal Australian to this kind of 'behind-the-scenes' appearance can be read as a comment on the minor part into which he has been cast by the British settlers. Wertenbaker's metatheatrical depiction operates as a comment on the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians both in the play's historicised 1789 setting and beyond. Moreover, that the Aboriginal character belongs to the 'other' world, a world outside the British colony, enables a kind of metatheatrical performance that challenges both his status as 'other' and the dominant hegemony itself.

The Aboriginal man's exclusion from the performance event (in both senses – both the convicts' production of *The Recruiting Officer* and the performance of the new society that this performance represents), is emphasised in the lines that follow. Observing that the local tribespeople have gathered around before the pending production, the convicts remark:

MARY Are the savages coming to see the play as well?
 KETCH They come around the camp because they're dying: smallpox.
 MARY Oh.
 SIDEWAY I hope they won't upset the audience.
 (Wertenbaker 1988a: 51)

Sideway's comment relates, on one level, to the on-stage audience of the

1789 performance. On another level, however, it can be applied to the wider audience of the present-day viewer. If recognised by the viewer in the moment of performance (or even afterwards) this comment may work to engage the audience in a critical reflection upon Indigenous Australians' marginalisation.

In expressing his concern about the audience's response to an Aboriginal presence, Sideway places the needs of the production, and arguably the colonial project, ahead of the Indigenous community who are visibly dying. As Soncini argues, this moment, in spite of its brevity, complicates the reading of the celebratory ending that follows. In her analysis of this scene she explains that "the convicts' solidarity", though enhanced significantly by their involvement in the theatrical project, "does not comprise their Indigenous fellow oppressed, who are therefore automatically banished from both the enjoyment of culture and the colony's social experiment" (1999: 93).

In an early draft of the play now held in the British Library, the convicts' concerns with the Indigenous presence at their first performance were even more detailed than they are in the play's published editions (Wertenbaker 1988b). Following Sideway's announcement that after his sentence he intends to "start a theatre company", Mary says "there are some sick aborigines around the stage, can we have them removed?" (Wertenbaker 1988b: 137). The deletion of this line from the script before the Royal Court premiere can be seen to soften the play's critique, particularly as it alludes to the historical 'removal' of Aboriginal people from Australian society due to sickness and by other means. Yet the deletion of the line between rehearsal and first production has not been accounted for in any relevant criticism to date. One possible explanation for this is that it may have been seen as likely to reduce audience sympathy for the character of Mary, or to detract too much from the play's celebratory ending. As demonstrated above, Wertenbaker uses the strategy of metatheatrical narration to encourage audience reflection on this subject. The fact that this reading, if realised, sits uncomfortably alongside the celebratory tones of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and the related mood of theatrical triumph that ends this play, ultimately demonstrates the play's capacity to hold multiple perspectives in tension. As the following discussion of approaches taken in production illustrates, this tension is a productive one in the sense that it invites reflection upon the play and ultimately upon society, long after the production ends.

The Metatheatres of "The Aboriginal Australian" in Production

The approach taken to the Aboriginal role was a major point of contrast between the Royal Court's Sydney production and the simultaneous production by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1989. Unlike the Melbourne production, Stafford-Clark's cast did not include an Indigenous Australian actor but rather maintained the original casting, as it did for the majority of roles. Thus, in Sydney as in London, the Aboriginal Australian was played by Jude Aduwudike, a British actor of Nigerian heritage, who also played Captain Watkin Tench and the convict Black Caesar. During the planning of the Royal Court's visit to the Sydney Theatre Company, the casting of a non-Indigenous actor in an Aboriginal role was perceived to be a potential problem by Richard Wherrett, then Artistic Director of the STC. Wherrett's concerns were acknowledged by Stafford-Clark in a facsimile sent in March 1989, three months before the company's tour. The British director writes:

I certainly understand your concern about the aboriginal role although I'm not sure how to set about resolving it. There seem to be three possible solutions: the first would be to confront criticism, say this is an English company and to point to the lack of aboriginal actors in London. A second could be, as you suggest, to re-cast. I am loath to do this as part of the impact with both pieces is in seeing a close company at work, and absorbing an eleventh actor with a few days rehearsal would work against that. Our budget is stretched already. A third possibility would be to drop the part altogether. I think it's one of the least successful themes of the play: ironically, we had therefore been preparing to expand the role! In any case, I will talk to Timberlake and the actors as soon as we begin rehearsals. (Stafford-Clark 1989b)

This letter, previously unexamined by scholars, highlights the role as a particular challenge in the cultural transfer of *Our Country's Good* to Australia. Wherrett's suggestion that it be re-cast to incorporate an Indigenous actor is understandable in light of the Bicentennial celebrations that had just passed and which had been a site of particular anxiety for many Australians.⁷ As Maryrose Casey explains, the climate of cultural tension in the lead up to the events of 1988 had culminated "in a march by 30,000 Indigenous Australians in Sydney on Australia Day, 26 January 1988, protesting the treatment of Indigenous Australians and celebrating their survival" (Casey 2004: 175). In his managerial capacity, Wherrett was attuned to

⁷ Also the fact that there were, at this time, a number of outstanding Indigenous actors working in Australian theatre. For a further discussion of the Australian Bicentennial contexts see O'Brien 1991.

what, in the aftermath of the Bicentenary – an event viewed by many as commemorating two hundred years of Indigenous cultural dispossession, could be perceived as a further colonising project (O'Brien 1991: x). Wherrett's concerns belie his awareness of immediate social, political and theatrical contexts that had brought heightened public sensitivity to issues affecting Indigenous Australians. Within these contexts, Casey suggests, "the bicentenary was used by a range of artists as an opportunity to communicate through the forum of theatre" (175). Indeed, as critics have acknowledged, the bicentennial year saw a proliferation of works "dealing with Aboriginal experience", written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous playwrights (Milne 1991: 64). Plays by Indigenous writers included Jack Davis' *Barungin*, first staged in February at the Playhouse, Perth, then later as the finale of a Davis trilogy in Melbourne (Milne 1991: 64; Casey 2004: 175-6). Davis' plays brought to light a range of issues including the problem of Indigenous deaths in custody, addressed most powerfully in *Barungin* (Casey 2004: 177). Notable works by other Indigenous playwrights included Eva Johnson's *Murras*, Bob Mazza's *The Keepers*, Vivian Walker's *Kadi*, and a number of plays staged at the 1988 World Expo in Brisbane (175-6). In discussing works written and produced at the time of the Bicentenary, Casey explains that "the initial invasion and settlement [of Australia by British colonists] were not [typically] the focus", with most addressing "contemporary issues" (177). Nonetheless some, among them *Barungin*, could be seen as an "ironic counterpart" to the Bicentennial celebrations (177). In a similar manner, the revisionist histories presented by a number of non-Indigenous playwrights offered a counter-discourse to the celebration of British settlement; Michael Gow's *1841* and Stephen Sewell's *Hate* are two such works (Gilbert 1994: 29-30).

Bearing in mind the contexts discussed above, Stafford-Clark's focus on the importance of the British ensemble, a focus which was maintained in spite of Wherrett's concern, could be construed as an echo of the very colonial project that is played out in the final scene of *Our Country's Good*. Here, as in Wertebaker's "backstage" scene, the bonds between the British cast who had worked on the making of the production were privileged over and above the inclusion of an Indigenous Australian actor in the theatrical event. In a further colonising gesture, these concerns were countered by the British company, who emphasised in publicity material that this was a British, not an Australian production and that, as such, Australian audiences "shouldn't be looking for a specifically Australian experience" (Stafford-Clark qtd in Schafer 2010: 63). In this way they reclaimed this moment of Australian history as particularly British.⁸

⁸ See also Morley 1989. Morley quotes Stafford-Clark's statement that: "An Aus-

While the British touring production was received in largely positive terms by Sydney reviewers, the Royal Court company's emphasis upon the contexts that had shaped the play originally did not prevent some critics from expressing anxieties about the colonising aspects of the project itself. Schafer, for example, has examined what she terms the unfortunate "reinscribing of empire and colonial politics" (2010: 63) that occurred during the Royal Court's Australian tour, describing how, at the invitation of one of the British cast members, the "cast and audience at the matinee on 12 July stood in respect and marked the death of Laurence Olivier, by applauding him" (64). This event, doubly commemorated via its reporting in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, exemplifies the way in which the production reinscribed empire by celebrating an icon of British theatre whose "relations with Australia" and Australian theatre, as Schafer argues, "were always in the high colonial vein" (ibid.).

Although the Aboriginal Australian's casting seems to have been accepted in Sydney on the understanding of this being a touring production, reviewer John Carmody observed that the treatment of the role itself seemed "gratuitous ... neither long nor artistically secure enough to make any worthwhile dramatic or ethical contribution to the play" (Carmody 1989). Carmody was also among the few critics to qualify the play's depiction of the "first Australian play" beginning his review with the observation that "theatre, in the form of the corroboree, has an exceedingly long history in this country; by contrast, English-language theatre is, according to our best records, precisely two hundred years old" (ibid.).

In drawing attention to corroboree as an ancient cultural – and theatrical – practice, Carmody highlights a further colonising dimension of the Royal Court British tour.⁹ In relegating the Aboriginal Australian to the margins of the stage, Wertenbaker's play occludes an acknowledgment of corroboree as both cultural practice (a form of theatre) and intercultural exchange. Moreover, given that the Royal Court's repertory staging of *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good* was billed as commemorating the bicentenary of a colonial theatrical event, the production might be seen, in the same way as the Bicentenary of nation had been seen by many

tralian audience shouldn't be looking for a specifically Australian experience – be it of prisons, or of the social history. Improvisation sessions have come from the performers' and director's own experiences and, inevitably, 'Australian' element were not as familiar to us. We were less able to explore that sort of experience. We would have liked, for example, to take the Aborigine-Governor relationship further, but that would have called for a type of understanding we couldn't tap into."

⁹ For a discussion of corroboree as one of the earliest forms of inter-cultural contact between Indigenous communities and British settlers, and also a continuing tradition in Australian theatre, see Christine McPaul 2009.

Australians in 1988, as a sidelining of Indigenous Australian culture.

While several critics have commented on the colonising dimensions of the Royal Court project, few have examined how the Aboriginal role was handled in the Australian production, nor how, when the metatheatrical dimensions of this role are realised to full effect, the role can lend a powerful element to the play's production.¹⁰ The recent contribution to a chapter on stagings of *Our Country's Good*, written by Roger Hodgman (director of the MTC production), describes how this role was cast differently from its casting in the British touring production (qtd in Bush 2013: 161-6). This casting, I suggest, reveals the metatheatrical potential of the role of the Aboriginal Australian, through which the play's critique of the process of British colonisation can best be realised in production.

The simultaneous timing of the 1989 Sydney and Melbourne seasons attracted considerable attention from reviewers, some of whom combined their assessment of each company's approach into a singular, comparative, review (e.g. Neil 1989). Most significant among the differences observed was the MTC's all-Australian casting, including popular Indigenous actor and musician Tom E. Lewis, who doubled as the Aboriginal Australian and Black Caesar. At the time of casting, Lewis was best known for his lead role in the 1978 film *Chant* of Jimmie Blacksmith, a film that adapted Thomas Keneally's Booker-nominated novel of the same name. Also highly regarded for his theatrical roles, Lewis' casting brought a new emphasis to the role, lending it both authenticity and authority (IMDB).

It is not surprising that Australian directors of *Our Country's Good* have wanted to make more of the Indigenous role. Hodgman, for one, was acutely aware that in the aftermath of the Bicentenary, many Australians had renewed appreciation for the fact that what to some had been a "celebration" had, to others, been "the anniversary of an invasion and the beginning of a threat to their ancient civilization" (qtd in Bush 2013: 163-4). In discussing his direction of the 1989 MTC production, Hodgman describes how, rather than focusing on the fact that the role appeared to be "under-written", he tried to approach the play's inclusion of an Indigenous character as an opportunity to "at least touch upon this vital strand of our history" (164). Without altering Wertebaker's dialogue in any way, Hodgman emphasised both the Aboriginal man's presence and, paradoxically, his marginalisation in the society depicted within the play. The casting of a well-known actor was one of the ways in which the character's presence was enhanced. In addition, rather than have the actor exit between his few brief speeches, Hodgman had Lewis remain on stage throughout. Highly visible, the Ab-

¹⁰ Schafer (2010) offers a discussion of the role of the Aboriginal as realised in the MTC production but does not discuss its metatheatrical dimension.

original Australian was perceived as a “powerful presence” (Larkin 1989) “hovering at the fringes of most of the action” (Neill 1989), a contrast with the Royal Court’s “minimal, perhaps token” representation.

Hodgman further extended the presence of the Aboriginal Australian by having Lewis incorporate sound into his performance. The actor/musician, whilst still visible in his position on the margins of the stage, played a didgeridoo as an aural motif throughout the play. Besides adding a strong, distinctive, Indigenous sound to the production, what is remarkable about this staging is the way in which it physically incorporated Indigenous performance into the play’s own theatrical celebration. By staging Lewis’ performance of the didgeridoo, Hodgman’s production played out a resistance to the idea of the colonial performance as Australia’s first theatre. Here, as a metatheatrical performance within a metatheatrical performance, the MTC acknowledged a theatrical tradition that long pre-dated the one celebrated in *Our Country’s Good’s* convict production.

The Melbourne Theatre Company’s staging of the Aboriginal Australian was undoubtedly one of the factors that contributed to observations among reviewers that this production had a darker edge than the Royal Court production. Another, related, factor was the different approach that Hodgman took to staging the “backstage” scene. Feldman has discussed how this scene, as written by Wertenbaker, works to involve the theatre audience in the play’s celebration of theatre and its transformative effect upon the convict cast (2013: 153). In line with this view, the Royal Court production, as described above, showed the convict actors on stage, as though preparing to go out in front of a curtain (positioned up stage). The theatre audience was thus positioned as though they were part of the on-stage convict cast. From this vantage point, they were both included (and arguably swept up) in the convicts’ preparations and excitement as the play ends and the production of Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* begins.

While this approach to staging encourages the audience to participate in the exciting energies of the backstage moment, a different approach, as taken in the Melbourne production, invites a more qualified response. Here the staging was reversed to show the convict cast upstage, facing the theatre audience who thereby became analogous with the audience of the 1789 convict production. Oakley, reviewing the production, argued that the result was “anti-climactic” – suggesting that the celebratory energies of the play were complicated by this change in spectatorial position (qtd in Carlson 2009: 282). However, positioned this way, audience members were forced to take up the subject position of a British convict and, as a result, were also implicated in the marginalisation and exclusion of the Aboriginal man. Carlson argues:

because this second staging maintains a traditional distance – and a tension between those on stage and those off, and because it conflates those in the audience with the oppressive colonizer, it is more in keeping with the hard edge of the Melbourne production. (282)

As demonstrated in these key differences between the British and Australian productions of 1989, Wertebaker's play resonates in differing ways depending on the approach taken in its staging. In particular, the treatment of metatheatrical dimensions including the "backstage" scene and the Aboriginal character, can impact upon the extent to which the play is received as celebratory, critical, or indeed as Soncini argues, both (1999: 95-6). Soncini maintains that, even when the backstage scene is presented from its more engaging perspective, locating the audience alongside Wertebaker's convict actors:

[the play's] festive ending could be understood as a shrewd trick to involve, and thereby implicate the audience. It is upon leaving the auditorium that disturbingly mixed feelings about the meaning of one's response to *Our Country's Good* begin to surface. (95)

It is in this post-show reflection, the critic argues, that audiences are best able to reflect upon the play and here, too, that they realise that the celebration of theatre is at once a celebration of its transformative powers, its colonising powers, and a comment on its exclusion of Indigenous Australian culture.

Conclusion

While *Our Country's Good* offers a celebration of theatre and theatricality that was compelling in its original British contexts, over time and particularly in its Australian production contexts, more critical elements connected with colonial themes have become salient. This discussion has illustrated the importance of the play's metatheatrical strategies in realising these themes in production. In particular, the recognition of the Aboriginal Australian as a vital metatheatrical component of the play opens up opportunities for more nuanced productions of *Our Country's Good*.

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