

Society : Banbury Cross Players
Production : Our Country's Good
Date : 22nd November 2024
Venue : The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District : London District 12

© NODA CIO. All rights reserved

Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch for inviting me to report on Banbury Cross Players' delayed production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's "Our Country's Good". Katy Roberts welcomed me back to the newly re-opened Mill Arts Centre following the completion of flood repair works, and provided me with a copy of the splendid souvenir programme (complete with new NODA branding – thank you!).

The play is based on historical fact: in January 1788 a fleet of 11 vessels sails into Botany Bay to found a colony of convicts, and the Governor encourages a junior officer to stage a play as a learning experience for the prisoners. But this drama doesn't fit neatly into the cosy play-within-a-play template familiar from works ranging from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to "A Bunch of Amateurs". This is a dark, atmospheric and challenging piece which explores the redemptive power of art and the capacity of theatre to act as a force for social change, in the context of a brutal microcosm of society far removed from the norms of everyday existence. It was clear from the opening scene, when a convict is flogged over a capstan wheel, that this was going to be an uncomfortable evening's viewing.

The narrative thread develops slowly, as the key players emerge and are progressively drawn together by the challenges of staging the chosen drama, "The Recruiting Officer". This steady development of character is particularly true of the garrisoned officers; the similarities in their uniforms make them easy to perceive as an amorphous group, but one by one they reveal their individual traits and personalities. The early scene in which the officers gather socially over drinks is a critical moment in this process as the fault lines between the disciplinarians and the reformers begin to emerge.

Andy Parsons played Captain Arthur Phillip, called out of retirement to lead this great experiment in colonisation. Andy brought impressive natural authority to the role with excellent stage presence, and thoughtful measured delivery of his lines. His reformist views and belief in the benefits of engaging constructively with the convicts have to be pursued cautiously in order to hold together the fragile coalition amongst his officers, and his subtle encouragement of Lieutenant Ralph Clark whilst holding the hard-liners, led by Major Robbie Ross, at bay was very well judged. Andy was suitably sparing in his use of gestures, as he proved himself able to project his character's capacity to listen, to consider and to judge through relatively subtle changes in expression.

It is Lieutenant Ralph Clark, played by Richard Morris, who does most to involve the convicts in the staging of the play. His gentler, more cerebral nature is established from the start when he is discovered writing up his journal, and pining for the woman he has left behind. But this soft façade masks thwarted ambition and a steely determination to follow through on his beliefs, as he unites his company of actors and stands up to the threats and criticisms of his fellow officers. Richard has exactly the right voice for the role; warm and articulate, he possesses the power to persuade through reason. Similarly,

his body language expertly reflected his character, as he literally stepped back from confrontation and allowed his shoulders to sag just a little when things went against him. And things do frequently go against him, thanks in large part to the efforts of Major Robbie Ross, played by Bruce Walton. Ross snarls his way through the play, deploying his major's stick in a threatening manner that promises the violence he is invariably happy to administer. Bruce was able to project the innate brutality of the man, delivering his character's uncompromising views with unnerving certainty, and owning the stage through clever blocking. His opposition to attempts to rehabilitate the convicts practically amounted to insubordination, underpinned by his belief that the life of a soldier is worth much more than that of a prisoner. As a military man through and through, albeit with flawed principles, I would have liked to have seen him portrayed with the more pronounced mannerisms of a career soldier – for example in his posture and movement – to further differentiate him from the evidently conscripted officers who surround him.

These officers, in essentially identical uniforms, had to work hard to stand out as individuals with their own views. Jem Turner as Captain David Collins brought a legal perspective to discussions and debate, his role as a judge helpfully illustrated by the addition of a black gown. Jem was able to display his character's loyalty to Captain Phillip through his reasoned argument, his relative concern for the prisoners' welfare, and his determination that justice should be served. Captain Jemmy Campbell, played by Nik Lester, is very much in Major Ross's camp; his distinguishing characteristic is his taste for alcohol, and Nik proved able to build up his intoxication by degrees, from unguarded opinions to slurred speech and unsteady movements. Stephen Rouse played Captain Watkin Tench, who essentially believes that all convicts are merely barbarians: Stephen brought an entitled swagger to the role,

comfortable with his lack of intellectual curiosity, and concerned only with maintaining his own status and lifestyle. Finally, Arthur Stewart-Tanner portrayed Second Lieutenant William Faddy with airy condescension and indifference, and could draw on a wide range of expressions to illustrate this. While instinctively opposed to the play, his principal concern was that any efforts to rehabilitate the convicts shouldn't get in the way of his observations of the stars.

Two further characters are loosely associated with this ruling coterie of senior officers. Andrew Whiffin played Reverend Richard Johnson, ostensibly in the colony to provide moral guidance, but in reality merely providing a fig leaf of respectability for some of the officers' decisions. Andrew's performance harked back to an era when taking the cloth brought with it a certain social standing and certainly didn't imply any need to live by the faith; his ability to disappear into a crowd without sharing any opinion of note was certainly impressive. On the other hand, Phil Wintle as Midshipman Harry Brewer was impossible to ignore: tortured by the spirits of two men he hanged, one of whom was a rival for the affections of Duckling Smith, Harry is consumed by jealousy and remorse. Phil ensured that Harry's descent into madness was commendably well-paced, capturing his agonies in his eyes, and contorting himself as he loses control of his personality and emotions.

The company of convicts, shorn of the unifying influences of army uniforms and discipline, were able to establish their individual characters from the outset. Hannah Ramsden as Duckling Smith brought out her character's vulnerabilities: silenced by Harry's stifling jealousy, Hannah was still able to portray Duckling's hurt and frustration though understated movements and pained expressions. Her response to Harry's final decline, with its promises that she would behave in ways

to please Harry, shone an uncomfortable light on the ruthless exploitation of women at the time, made somehow more poignant by the way Hannah portrayed Duckling's rather passive acceptance of the consequences of those promises.

Mary Brenham, played by Emily England, is amongst the first of the convicts to catch the eye of Ralph Clark, and it turns out not just as a potential actor. Emily was able to bring a certain amount of innocence and humility to the character of Mary, despite her status as a convicted criminal; a lack of assertiveness in her posture, with head bowed and eyes cast down, helped with this. Mary is relatively well spoken and unusually can read albeit in a very mannered style, hinting at education and perhaps a more privileged upbringing. Her development of the character of Silvia in "The Recruiting Officer" brings about a corresponding increase in her own personal confidence, with lines delivered with understated clarity and conviction. Mary only attends the first audition because she is dragged along by her friend Dabby, played by Helen Williams. Dabby might have mentioned that she is from Devon on one or two occasions, and Helen delivered her lines with an authentic sounding West Country burr. She also managed to keep her character believable, never falling into the trap of portraying some sort of stereotypical bumpkin, while also giving Dabby a degree of humour and optimism that shone like a light in the dark. Her folksy singing helped to establish atmosphere at the very start of the evening.

Hilary Beaton portrayed Lizzie Morden with admirable intensity; with her tousled hair and hunted eyes she could gaze into the auditorium for us all to read her thoughts. Her involvement in the play is significant: an unreachable, troubled soul, her interactions both with authority figures and with her fellow convicts gradually become more positive as she discovers self-worth. Hilary skilfully developed the character

quite incrementally by slowing down Lizzie's responses and making her less prone to violence, and it's an important and moving moment when we hear her back story. Another character near the edge of insanity is Meg Long, played by Janice Lake: Meg is desperate to be involved with the play but her incomprehension of the auditions and her manic cackle makes her difficult to cast, unless of course Ralph was planning to stage "Macbeth".

There is a similar assortment of characters amongst the male convicts. Robert Sideway, a London pickpocket played by Ian Nutt, proves to be an enthusiastic actor, projecting his lines straight through the fourth wall, with each accompanied by a dramatic gesture. Ian himself demonstrated considerably more talent and subtlety; as Sideway was the victim of a vicious flogging in the opening scene, which made uncomfortable viewing, Ian ensured that Sideway's nervous energy and cautious character development was always underpinned by pain and fear. Sideway is always trying to build himself up, perhaps as an antidote to being knocked down by Major Ross, and Ian brought out the philosophical side of his character.

A similarly thoughtful prisoner, John Wisehammer (played by Philip Fine) had an impressive vocabulary and his word comparisons and definitions were often skilfully woven into a commentary on the action. Wisehammer is also Jewish, giving rise to some anti-semitic sentiments, most notably from Major Ross. Philip handled this aspect of his characterisation sensitively, and Wisehammer's observation that he didn't want to return to England because of the prejudice that he would face there must have given the audience pause for thought. Philip is also a skilful interlocutor ensuring, through his wry observations, that Wisehammer always reflected dialogue back.

Ketch Freeman, played by Martin Crook, is the colony's hangman, a job he was forced to take to avoid being hanged himself. He is not happy in his work, and his role makes it difficult for him to establish relationships with the other convicts. Martin portrayed his character's isolation and self-loathing with conviction; his lilting Welsh accent allowed him to introduce telling variations in tone and pace into his dialogue, most notably in the scene with Ralph. Here was another character whose mental turmoil and deep unhappiness was often difficult to watch. John Arscott's pain was more visceral; accused of stealing food, he is sentenced to a flogging, and Robert Hoare really brought out his character's suffering and physical anguish. Taking a role in the play provides Arscott with an emotional escape that is physically denied him, and Robert brought the right amount of passion and defiance to his characterisation. John Caesar, played by Suchit Kulkarni, is a late addition to the cast and isn't given much to do; as an outsider, Caesar is at constant risk of criticism and maltreatment, and Suchit ensured that Caesar carried himself with a certain stoic dignity.

The action was complemented by a small band comprising guitar, accordion, recorder, tabor and – could it be? – a didgeridoo. The musicians – Jim Plester, John Wright, Colin Critch and Dave Lovick – were able to reinforce a strong sense of place with their plaintive renditions of melodies derived from Australian traditions. The accordion and recorder in particular lent the drama a melancholic air, and the sadness and hopelessness embodied by so many of the characters – and not just the convicts – was all the more affecting as a result. The balance between the band and the onstage dialogue was good, although some of the recorded speech was faded in and out rather abruptly.

The bleakness of the play was reflected in the very spare set, designed by Richard Ashby; a raised platform, a ship's mast and spar, a hangman's noose, a ship's capstan doubling as the Governor's desk and a collection of wooden crates was pretty much the sum of it. The crates in particular were used flexibly and creatively in different scenes. The rear wall of the auditorium served as the backdrop; it proved impossible to avoid casting shadows on this wall, but it somehow highlighted how little these early settlers actually possessed. The lighting design (by Clare Lester and the team at The Mill) drew on a narrow palette suggesting heat and dust, and there were some dramatic cues to highlight the impact of the lash. Characters with soliloquies within group scenes were carefully picked out in the plot. Terry Andrews organised the personal properties, and I was pleased to note that the drinks reception involved actual liquids in authentic-looking glasses. I also liked the way the prisoners wore identity cards, even though the audience had little opportunity to read them: Might they have been projected onto the back wall as they made their initial entrances? Or left scattered on the auditorium floor for the audience to read during the interval?

The costumes by Jane Shanahan were a notable strength of the production; the military uniforms looked exactly right, and were often worn quite casually to indicate lax discipline, or physical exhaustion, or both. Harry was identified as a midshipman by his straw boater. On close examination the shoe buckles looked suspiciously fake, but this is a tiny detail. The male convicts' clothes were ripped and bloodstained, consistent with physical work and frequent floggings, and if the women's costumes were in significantly better condition, they drew on the same flat range of colours with details that fed into the characterisation; Mary's rather prim dress and Liz's loose, ill-fitting top come to mind. Kim Nicholls' and Jenny Tustian's work on wigs, prosthetics and make-up was also notable –

from the cuts and wheals resulting from the floggings, to the characteristic Georgian wigs worn by many of the senior officers.

Presenting this play involved a large cast and significant technical input, and yet it still added up to considerably more than the sum of its parts. It was a difficult, challenging watch at times, and I feel sure that Director Chrissie Garrett would make no apology for that. The cruelty, the inhumane conditions, and the prejudices were all rendered quite graphically, and it was sobering to think that the principal narrative and characters had been based on historical records – something like this actually happened. And yet, despite the sadness, the corruption and the exploitation, there was something burning at the heart of the play. Was it hope? Some of Phillip and Clark's reforming ideas were shown to work. Some of the convicts were shown a different path. Perhaps the arts in general, and theatre in particular, have redemptive powers after all. And while antisemitism, xenophobia and misogyny remain deeply embedded in our society, this production served as a reminder that such social issues can and should be addressed.

Perhaps Chrissie's greatest achievement was in drawing so many excellent performances out of the company. In part, this was thanks to sound theatre craft: the available space was used well with the officers generally confined to the upstage raised platform, and the convicts downstage on the auditorium floor. Everyone knew their lines and characters thoroughly: cues were hit sharply, the actors knew when and how to listen to each other, and while I felt one or two members of the cast had a tendency to employ gestures unnecessarily, this wasn't a major issue overall. Movement around the stage, or the lack of it, contributed greatly to the pervasive sense of oppression and despair. I was particularly impressed with the early social

scene, as several conversations between officers were allowed to run simultaneously, with the key dialogue highlighted through intelligent blocking and careful volume control.

There are so many layers to this play, so it should be noted that there were also moments of humour. Anyone who has ever been involved in amateur theatre will have recognised the behaviours of some of the actors during rehearsals for “The Recruiting Officer”, particularly with reference to the direction they are receiving. And is there a dramatic society that hasn’t occasionally left rehearsing the bows to the last possible moment?

As the play project nears completion, the characters involved, both convicts and officers, are drawn together. They’re not so different from each other after all, not least in their coarseness and casual cruelty. And they are all invaders of a foreign land and regard the native dwellers as savages, a fact we were periodically reminded of through Glen Miles’ recorded interjections as a representative of the indigenous people, accompanied by projections of their art. There was a lot to process here, and the audience was still doing so as it streamed out into the chill Banbury night. Sat at my computer screen a little over 24 hours later, I still don’t think I’ve processed it all.

Andrew Walter

NODA Regional Representative, London District 12

23rd November 2024