

Our Country's Good By Timberlake Wertenbaker

Production by: Amateur Players of Sherborne

Date adjudicated: Monday 8th June 2026

Adjudicated by: Sarah Ambrose

The Play

Our Country's Good is a thought-provoking ensemble drama based on the true story of convicts and officers in the first British penal colony in Australia who come together to stage a production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. Through the rehearsal process, the prisoners discover confidence, dignity and a sense of identity, while the officers debate the purpose of justice, punishment and rehabilitation. The play explores the transformative power of theatre, set against the harsh realities of colonial life and social inequality.

The play presents a number of significant challenges. Its large ensemble cast requires strong characterisation and clear storytelling, often with actors playing multiple roles. The episodic structure demands fluid scene changes, disciplined pacing and the seamless transition between often contrasting moods.

The play's success ultimately depends on the production's ability to create a cohesive ensemble and communicate the transformative journey at the heart of the writer's work.

The Production

The Amateur Players of Sherborne transformed their small but beautifully formed studio theatre into a highly immersive setting. Every part of the performance space, including much of the auditorium, was carefully considered. The consistently engaging attention to detail brought the action vividly to life and made the transition from ship to land entirely believable.

The highly detailed set extended across the stage and more than half the auditorium, immersing the audience from the moment they entered. Actors already on stage depicted the voyage to Australia, while a continuous soundscape created an engaging and atmospheric opening, and throughout.

With minimal stage directions and no guidance on props or costumes, the play offers considerable creative freedom, which this production used beautifully. The use of costume, makeup and props played a vital role in bringing the plays late eighteenth century setting to life, and worked incredibly well.

According to the programme, members handmade every costume, an impressive achievement given the large cast and number of characters. Each looked authentic to the period and distinguish the social divide between the Royal Marines and the transported convicts, with service men dressed in military uniforms and convicts wearing simple, worn clothing that reflected the harsh conditions of the penal colony.

Props used were often practical and versatile, including wooden crates, stools, ropes, tools, journals and basic stage items that helped create the settlement while supporting the play-within-a-play. Makeup was generally understated, focusing on creating a weathered, rugged

appearance to reflect the challenging environment, with subtle ageing, dirt effects and signs of hardship used to enhance realism. Together, these deliberate design elements helped establish the historical setting and supported the themes of the play.

The lighting design was highly effective in establishing both location and atmosphere, using a range of carefully crafted lighting states to distinguish between scenes aboard ship, on land, and the transitions from day to night. Cooler, confined lighting helped evoke the harsh and claustrophobic conditions of the voyage, while warmer, more expansive washes suggested the openness of the Australian landscape. Subtle shifts in intensity and colour temperature clearly marked the passage of time, creating convincing contrasts between daylight and evening scenes. A particularly striking feature was the beautifully realised back drop, which provided a constant visual reminder of the play's setting. This not only enhanced the scenic design but also worked seamlessly with the lighting to create mood, depth and atmosphere. Changes in colour, texture and brightness reflected the emotional tone of the action and supported smooth transitions between scenes, contributing significantly to the storytelling and overall production aesthetic.

The sound design was a significant strength of this production, helping to immerse the audience in the world of the play and support its narrative flow. Traditional folk and classical music from the period were used to excellent effect, reinforcing the historical setting and providing an authentic musical backdrop to the action. Throughout the production, atmospheric sound effects were carefully woven into the performance, including sounds of the sea, birdsong, and the Australian bush, continuously at an appropriate level to reflect each location and created a vivid sense of place. Particularly noteworthy was the use of voice-over recordings by Aboriginal actor Warren Clements as Killara. His evocative narration added a powerful Indigenous perspective to the story, providing moments of reflection and helping to bridge scene transitions with clarity and emotional resonance. This thoughtful integration of music, soundscape and narration enriched the storytelling, deepened the audience's connection to the setting and characters, and enhanced the overall theatrical experience.

The inventive closing song, performed by the whole cast, was particularly resonant. It gave the audience space to reflect on the play's themes and their continuing relevance today.

Direction

The direction demonstrated a clear vision and a deep understanding of both the play's themes and its ensemble nature. Great attention had been given to every aspect of the production, resulting in a cohesive and engaging theatrical experience. The imaginative design elements, including the evocative lighting, projections, soundscape and period costumes, worked seamlessly together to create a strong sense of time and place. Staging was fluid and inventive, making effective use of the small performance space and ensuring smooth transitions between the play's many short scenes. Equally impressive was the general quality of the performances, with the cast clearly guided to develop believable characters while maintaining the humour, pathos and humanity at the heart of the play. The production reflected confident and thoughtful direction that successfully united all creative and performance elements into a compelling production.

Performances

The cast as a whole delivered a committed and engaging performance, successfully bringing to life the many characters and contrasting themes within this ambitious production. There were several notably strong performances that demonstrated excellent characterisation, emotional depth and stage presence. However, given the large cast, multiple scenes and role changes, complex staging requirements and the considerable demands placed on performers throughout the production, the overall standard was not always maintained at the same high level in every scene. This is perhaps understandable in a play that requires such constant attention to movement, ensemble work and storytelling, and the company should nevertheless be commended for tackling a challenging and rewarding piece with enthusiasm and conviction.

Captain Arthur Philip RN, played by Patrick Knox

A commanding and assured performance, successfully capturing the intelligence, humanity and authority that define the colony's governor. Possessing a strong stage presence, he immediately established himself as a figure of leadership, holding the audience's attention whenever he was on stage. His confident delivery and measured manner conveyed Phillip's thoughtful approach to governance, while his interactions with both officers and convicts demonstrated the character's belief in justice, compassion and the potential for rehabilitation. The performance balanced firmness with empathy, creating a credible and engaging portrayal of a man determined to bring order and civilisation to a challenging new world.

Mary Brenham & Lieutenant George Johnston RM, played by Charlotte Berry

A compelling and authentic performance, capturing both the vulnerability and growing confidence of the character of Mary Brehham with great sensitivity. Her delivery was clear and engaging throughout, bringing warmth and credibility to Mary's journey from an uneducated convict to a woman transformed by the experience of theatre. Her natural stage presence and genuine emotional connection to the role ensured that Mary's personal development remained one of the most touching and memorable aspects of the production, and worthy of recognition.

The transformation to Lieutenant George Johnston, was believable and very well managed.

Lieutenant Ralph Clark RM, played by Sam Frost

A thoughtful and well-rounded performance, successfully capturing the character's journey from a dutiful but uncertain officer to a passionate advocate. He conveyed Clark's intelligence, sensitivity and growing confidence with conviction, allowing the audience to clearly follow his emotional and moral development throughout the play. Through assured characterisation and sincere delivery, he brought warmth and authenticity to the role, ensuring that Ralph Clark remained one of the production's most engaging and sympathetic figures.

Mary (Dabby) Bryant & 2nd Lieutenant William Faddy, played by Bev Taylor-Wade

A convincing performance that brought energy and humour to the role. Her strong stage presence ensured the character Dabby, stood out within the convict ensemble, while her reactions and interactions reflected a clear understanding of the collaborative nature of the piece and strengthened the group dynamics central to the play.

Deputy Judge Advocate David Collins & Robert Sideway, played by Clive Miller

Both roles were played convincingly, creating two distinct and believable characterisations. As Collins, he conveyed the officer's intelligence and pragmatic approach to colonial life with confidence and conviction. In contrast, his portrayal of the convict Robert Sideway captured the character's passion for theatre and determination to find purpose through performance.

Ann (Duckling) Smith, played by Hazel Perrett

A compelling and deeply emotional performance, capturing the character's vulnerability and resilience with remarkable authenticity. She demonstrated a strong connection to the role, allowing the audience to empathise with Duckling's difficult circumstances while appreciating her determination and spirit. Her emotional honesty brought genuine poignancy to key moments, particularly those that explored the harsh realities of convict life and the hope offered through participation in the theatre project. With a nuanced portrayal and convincing stage presence throughout, she ensured that Duckling remained one of the production's most affecting and memorable characters and worthy of recognition.

Midshipman Henry 'Harry' Brewer, Captain Jeremy Campbell RM, John Arscott, played by Gary Brooks

Portraying the multiple roles demonstrated impressive versatility, creating three clearly distinct characters through effective changes in vocal delivery and physicality. As Brewer, he conveyed the character's sensitivity and inner conflict with conviction, while his portrayal of Captain Campbell brought an appropriate sense of military authority and rigidity. In contrast, his performance as the convict John Arscott captured the challenges and vulnerabilities of life within the penal colony. The transitions between roles were well defined.

Liz Morden, played by Maureen Nethercott

A memorable and engaging performance, bringing great depth and authenticity to one of the play's most challenging roles. She convincingly conveyed the harsh realities of Liz's conviction and situation, capturing the character's hardened exterior while allowing glimpses of the vulnerability. Her measured delivery and strong emotional control gave weight to Liz's often sparse dialogue, ensuring that every appearance carried significance, creating a character who resonated strongly with the audience and worthy of recognition.

Lieutenant William Dawes RM, played by Rosi Castle, Captain Watkin Tench RM and John Wisehammer, played by Andrew Middleton, John Newton and Marines, played by Jilly Hudson and Barry Nethercott, Lieutenant Governor Robert Ross RM and Ketch (James) Freeman, played by Andrew Holt, Rev. Richard Johnson, played by Gilly Savage, and John Caesar, played by David Pileri

The ensemble cast made a valuable contribution to the success of this production. Collectively, they created a rich and believable world, bringing variety to the many contrasting personalities that populate the colony. Overall, performances established clear characterisations, whether portraying authority figures, convicts or members of the military, while remaining fully committed to the collaborative spirit of the piece. Together, they provided a solid foundation for the storytelling and demonstrated the importance of ensemble performance in bringing *Our Country's Good* to life.

Summary and Conclusion

The Amateur Players of Sherborne have delivered a thoroughly engaging and accomplished production of *Our Country's Good*, successfully meeting the many challenges presented by Timberlake Wertenbaker's powerful ensemble drama. The production combined imaginative design, atmospheric technical elements and some strong performances to create an immersive and convincing portrayal of life in the first Australian penal colony. Particular strengths included the attention to detail in the set, costumes and soundscape, the highly effective lighting design, and a clear directorial vision that unified most aspects of the production into a cohesive whole. The ensemble nature of the piece was embraced wholeheartedly, with the cast demonstrating for the most part strong characterisation, excellent collaboration and a clear understanding of the play's central themes.

The result was a moving and thought-provoking interpretation that not only entertained but also encouraged reflection. The Amateur Players of Sherborne are to be congratulated on a memorable and entertaining production.