

## Character summaries for *Our Country's Good*

Generic intro info:

- Historical play, written and staged in the Epic style, with episodic scenes (chronology and locations are broken up) for the purposes of presenting the audience with differing ideas/aspects of the experiences of the convicts and officers in Sydney Cove, 1789. Epic plays are also about the **possibility of change**. Transportation was for 7 years (from landing in the colony) and therefore the military had varying lengths of deployment, but usually several years. Therefore, all of the characters are imprisoned together. A perfectly-balanced play. 22 scenes, 11 in each act. 22 characters; 11 officers, 11 convicts/Aboriginal – allows doubling/multi-role playing: key stylistic ingredient of Epic Theatre. It is metadramatic – the planning, rehearsing and performing of a play (Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*) in a play. This happened. Evidence (scant) suggests it was performed once, indoors, to the officers, possibly an audience size of 40-60. The most detailed historical evidence for the period are the surviving pieces of Ralph Clark's diaries.
- You may want to therefore consider overarching aim of communicating to your audience the emotions associated with that incarceration/imprisonment: rage, sense of injustice, fear, solitude, companionship, rivalry, boredom (convicts) or fear, scepticism, doubt, rivalry, ambition, regret, boredom (officers).
- Quick description of stage type. Up to you, but we know that a thrust will accommodate a cyclorama and will enhance a more intimate audience experience for the predominantly realistic acting. It also provides opportunities for opposites/corner work, gradation of height levels upstage to downstage and...triangles!

Characters – once again:

### **The Officers and Rev. Johnson (with doubling suggestions):**

Capt. Arthur Phillip RN (navy, Governor of the prison colony) (doubling: Wisehammer): benevolent, humane, philosophical, reasonable, liberal – understands the wisdom of staging *The Recruiting Officer* and actively supports it against Major Ross' criticisms. Usually mild-mannered, softly-spoken, older, deeper pitch, slower delivery, calm and thoughtful demeanour. Had retired, asked to come back into service by the government.

Major Robbie Ross RM (major of Marines – in charge of the Marines in Sydney Cove) (doubling: Ketch Freeman): diametrically opposed to Phillip's position. A man who enjoys exercising his power over those beneath him (convicts and Ralph) – inflexible, deeply conservative in outlook, rigid. Usually loud in delivery, clipped 'parade ground' diction and volume/dynamics, always military in terms of posture and gait. Sees the convicts as 'vie-ridden vermin' (when agitated, resorts to alliterative phrases – quite funny for the audience, which, in turn, mocks him).

Capt. David Collins RM (doubling: Robert Sideway): liberal, (Advocate General – chief lawyer at the colony), reasonable, enlightened. Understands the importance of law

and order. And punishment. He changes his opinions in Sc.6, p21, after Phillip's important speech: "The theatre is an expression of civilisation." Again, usually mild-mannered and thoughtful; not quick to act/speak, but slower tempo, calm and considered.

Capt. Watkin Tench RM (doubling: Black Caesar, an Aboriginal): vehemently opposed to any attempt to slacken the harsh conditions in the Colony. Sees the convicts as being born that way; unchangeable; "the criminal tendency is innate". Like Ross, usually quick-tempered, inflexible, conservative, strong-minded, assertive, clipped, clear diction, strong voice.

Capt. Jemmy Campbell RM (doubling: John Arscott, Harry Brewer): seen as Ross' 'enforcer', but also can be seen as an incoherent and inflexible officer. Perhaps a drinker. Can be swayed by the convicts' work at times. Vocally is almost incoherent, fast-paced and with a heavy Scottish accent. Physically, a slovenlier character; poor posture and gait.

Reverend Johnson (doubling: Mary Brenham): only Sc.6, soft-spoken, swayed by arguments to stage the play, represents faith and a moral test for the agreement to stage the play. Softly-spoken and mild-mannered.

Lt. George Johnston RM (doubling: Duckling Smith): only Sc.6, for the play.

Lt. Will Dawes RM (doubling: Liz Morden): only Sc.6, mapping the stars, indifferent to the play.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Faddy RM (doubling: Dabby Bryant) only Sc.6, against the play. Why? He "doesn't trust the director" – why? He and Ralph are both 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants – he thinks the directing of the play is Ralph's push for promotion, above him. It is, in a way.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Ralph Clark RM: central figure of the play, a living embodiment of the central idea of the play, **the transformative nature of theatre**. He begins as someone who resents/hates the convicts; he ends the play in an adulterous relationship with one of them, but we almost see him as being on their level or, more accurately; they on his. Key lines: (p49) "You're right Morden, please excuse me" to Liz in rehearsal, and p90 "The theatre is like a small republic. It requires private sacrifices for the good of the whole". Ralph is complex. He gradually evolves from a desperately homesick, naïve and unworldly man (early on) through cautious understanding of the convicts' situation, through to acceptance of them as perhaps equals, as demonstrated in his love for Mary. He can be quick tempered and very defensive, physically isolated and solitary (earlier on) but become much more tactile, confident and even gregarious later on.

Midshipman Harry Brewer RN: the other, much more junior Royal Navy officer there. A flawed character. A jealous, obsessive relationship with Duckling. Probably an alcoholic by this stage. Guilt-ridden; over Dabby, over past misdemeanours ("I was an embezzler once") and over his unfair treatment of the marine Handy Baker, who he believed Duckling had been unfaithful with and whose hanging for theft he helped secure. A 'friend' of Ralph's, but their relationship is awkward. Harry can be played with great energy – physically forceful, vocally he has the challenge of voicing

his (Cockney), Handy Baker's and Thomas Barrett's voices in Act II, Scene 3. The drinking should always influence his posture, gait, voice and reactions.

### **The convicts and the Aboriginal Australian**

An Aboriginal Australian: represents the indigenous population. Seen as mystical, in touch with the elements and nature (by the audience). Viewed as savage by the invaders. A key character device for representing another central theme of the play: **white colonial repression of indigenous populations and the imposition of European culture by force**. An audience may well think beyond this to North America, to slavery, to empire-building and the attendant victims of it. Modern day Australia is predominantly populated by immigrants, not Aboriginals. The character is usually physically more dynamic (early on) and weaker (smallpox – brought by the English) later on. His voice is rich, slower and deeper. He will gesture his meanings also.

John Arscott: a violent, hot-tempered and impatient convict. Physically aggressive, vocally aggressive. Possibly Cockney.

Black Caesar: a black convict, therefore on the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, like Jewish Wisehammer and Irish James (Ketch) Freeman. From Madagascar. An outsider. Desperate to be in the play to avoid punishments.

James 'Ketch' Freeman: 'ketch' is slang from a hangman. Irish, Isolated. Desperate to actually be an actor. From rural Ireland. Loquacious, enthusiastic but a pariah.

Robert Sideway: A Cockney, a pick-pocket and desperate to be an actor. He understands acting to be of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century and early 18<sup>th</sup> century **declamatory** style – all exaggerated arms, poses, facial expressions, vocal emphasis, dramatic pauses, heroic stances. He is seen first as victim of flogging, then described by Ross as "this animal". He is the chief comic character in the play. His highly exaggerated approach is often juxtaposed with Ralph's soberer, restrained reactions.

Metadramatically, his declamatory style (by 1789, out of fashion) is counterpointed by Ralph's unconscious insistence on what would become 19<sup>th</sup> century Stanislavskian Naturalism.

John Wisehammer: Jewish, intelligent, intellectual, a writer, a reader. In love (unrequited) with Mary Brenham. Writes a prologue for their performance, including the key lines "**we left our country, for our country's good**"; in other words – we were exiled from England, because England didn't want us anymore. Ironically, as he's Jewish, they probably never wanted him anyway. He doesn't "think English" (as Liz says), meaning, that he doesn't realise his lowly status in the world and accept it. He's usually softly-spoken, excellent diction and varied tone, gentle in his physicality.

Mary Brenham: a female version of Wisehammer. Educated, by convict standards, "she went to school 'til she was 10, she read to us on the ship" (Dabby to Ralph), and sensitive, thoughtful, fearful and manipulated by Dabby. Becomes Ralph's mistress. Usually softly spoken, quiet, gentle, observant.

Dabby Bryant: the most forceful and dynamic female character. Strong willed, strongly spoken (from Devon – West Country accent), controlling Mary, an equal of Liz in terms of toughness. Dabby, like Sideway, provides many comedic moments on stage. She, unlike Sideway, isn't remotely interested in the theatre; only in escape, which she achieved in real life, but not in the play. She mocks Liz's illiteracy, "you can't read!" but nor can Dabby. She claims to read "dreams, very well" and is therefore presented as a convict who survived on her aggression, wits and her suggested mystical powers. Dynamic, loud, interrupts frequently; stands strongly; usually occupies the centre stage so that others move around her. Only afraid of Ross.

Liz Morden: she is the archetype for the poor, uneducated, abused and trapped convict (many of whom filled the transport ships and prisons of 18<sup>th</sup> century England). She is the central victim figure, whose chaining and potential hanging for theft dominates the non-rehearsal colony life in Act II. Her transformation from brutish, aggressive convict to a person who can say, in Act II, Scene 10, "I will endeavour to speak Mr Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands" represents Wertebaker's central message in this play – she has been transformed by her theatre experience. Often played as bitter, harshly-spoken, aggressive and strong, to a gradually more softly-spoken, quieter, calmer and patient character.

Duckling Smith: her relationship with Harry Brewer symbolises the sexually repressive culture in the colony. Duckling is similar to Liz in her aggression and fear, but hates most other convicts. She is isolated, even when with Harry, but more so after his death. At the end, she seems to be accepted, and find acceptance from, the 'company'

Meg Long: a comic device for Act I, Scene 5, but can also be included in other convict rehearsal scenes, as a character laughing at their rehearsals. Her comedy is rooted in the sexual debauchery on the ship and the colony.