

“OUR COUNTRY’S GOOD”
Rotherfield Players 23 October 2009

It is hard to imagine a more demanding, more challenging play for an amateur troupe to take on than this Timberlake Wertenbaker play. This modern playwright was born in America but grew up in the Basque country, where the social complexities might well have contributed to the concept of a play about the creation of another play. In brief, the plot centres on a group of convicts sent to the newly established penal colony in Sydney, Australia. Brutal in their outlook, and in turn brutalised by the system, the convicts were subjected harsh treatment on the voyage out; cleverly and minimally stylised by director/actor Barry Shyvers and assistant director Sarah Truelove in the opening scenes, allowing the actors voices and stage presence to create the degrading images in the audience’s minds.

Simon Kerr-David’s emotive key leading portrayal of the lovelorn 2nd Lt Ralph Clark moved convincingly from a dichotomy of diffidence and ambition to a stammering determination to overcome the other authorities’ objections, and to see the convicts undeveloped sensitivities enhanced; their poor lives hopefully improved by completing the staging of “The Recruiting Officer” against all odds. Ultimately Clark’s own life was enhanced by the sweet and true Mary Brenham played with a beautiful, modest and restrained presence by Alice Burrell.

The rest of the cast had it much harder – as it is something of a tradition in productions of this piece to replicate one of the key elements in the sub-play – everyone played at least two widely different characters ! As this complex play involves 22 scenes, it would be impossible in one short note to cover every element of each character but Alan Powell’s powerful interpretation of the inadequate, possessive and desperate Harry Brewer was a compelling and passionate tour de force throughout. The part of Harry’s reluctant, if promiscuous, beau Duckling Smith was very well drawn by Amelia Simmons, culminating in a moving lament of promises over Harry’s rapidly expiring body.

We always expect good drama from Becky Syms, but even regular playgoers were surprised by the initial sheer raw power and barely suppressed violence of infamous “bad girl” Liz Morden, whose gradual moral transmutation would be seen as one of the key successes of Lt Clark’s humanising campaign. Raunchy, funny, self deprecating, owning the audience’s attention -who could that be – well with both Kate Organ and Kate Awcock on stage it had to be both of them. With a seasoning of subtle pathos that would have won Masterchef, these two talents kept the action and story alive every time they were on stage.

Following up with truckload of gentle humanity seeping into his twin roles as Governor and convict, Chris Walton-Turner was able to bring his talents to the fore by framing himself as the moral rapier piercing the bigotry of Shyvers’ Major Ross, Barry’s ability to contrast the hateful Ross with the weak and guilt ridden hangman Ketch serving as a fine example to the team as to how to discriminate characters when doubling up on parts. There were elements of gentle humour to soften some of the harsh realities and Adam Hardy did a fine job of creating in Sideway an unctuous clown that would have neatly dovetailed into any Dickens novel.

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As a script the play has its faults, unnecessary complexities and unexplained nuances – how does Clark reconcile his love for Mary with his earlier proclaimed love for his wife in distant England; just why is Ross so embittered- but as a production this most difficult play was stunningly executed - well done to Producer Andrea Butler, the directors, and the extensive technical support team.

Peter Thompson