

## **A Convicted Cast: Roles in Our Country's Good**

On June 4th 1789, in celebration of the King's birthday, a group of English convicts staged Australia's first theatrical performance, George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. These convicts were transportees of the First Fleet, the name given to the ships sent from England to establish Australia's first colony. These convicts were people cast out of their country. People sent to a foreign and potentially dangerous land. For crimes such as a stolen candlestick or a single punch. People at sea for 252 days. Sent from their country, for their country's good.

In *Our Country's Good*, Timberlake Wertenbaker traces the experiences of Australia's first penal colony by exploring how society channels people into narrow social roles. In the 1700s, it was believed that criminality was innate and social roles determined a person's character. However, some believed in the necessity of improving the convicts' morals, because they were to establish the new English society in this land. In an effort to rehabilitate them, the colony's government commanded the prisoners put on a play. The play exposes the tension between believing, on the one hand, that people are irredeemable and, on the other, using them to establish a "civilized" English society.

Performing the *Recruiting Officer* shows the difference between the roles they perform onstage and the roles they perform socially. Wertenbaker riddles away at the expectations and assumptions we possess about certain types of people. Throughout the course of the play, characters are labeled and categorized, stifling their ability to break free of roles such as the officer, the woman, the hangman, the petty thief. As they perform onstage, the convicts begin to see their social roles as a performance similar to their theatrical roles. Despite the constraints they face within their identities, at the end of the day, it becomes clear that these roles are constructed.

Theatre erases social roles. Actors portray characters, allowing them to transcend their own circumstances. For a moment, the convicts in the play are able to be seen in a new light. They also have the chance to see themselves differently. Even with this sense of freedom, roles in theater are limiting also. Characters aren't able to choose the roles they play in the *Recruiting Officer*; the roles are given to them to perform. Even though they may transcend their circumstances for a moment, it doesn't change the realities of their social predicament.

In society today, there are some roles placed on us regardless of our actions. At the end of the day, our humanity boils down to the commonality we share as human beings rather than the ever-changing social roles we perform. *Our Country's Good* asks us what sorts of roles we put on? What roles are put on us? Can they be taken off? And if they can be, is there a residue left?