

# The transformative power of drama in our country's good



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Wertenbaker wrote *Our Country's Good* in order to depict a developmental process for the characters. Through the Howardian theory of redemption, by learning from each other, and by acting in their production of *The Recruiting Officer*, they transform into what Phillip calls “members of society again” as they “help create a new society in this colony.” The word ‘transform’ originates from the Latin word ‘transformare,’ meaning literally ‘to change shape or form,’ but normally has connotations of evolving rather than deteriorating. In Act 2 Scene 2, Wisehammer says, “It doesn’t matter when a play is set. It’s better if it’s set in the past, it’s clearer” and so, when the word ‘transform’ is applied to the theatre, it seems to suggest that as the characters physically change their appearance or mannerisms to act their characters in *The Recruiting Officer*, they equally change their way of thinking. They learn from the play’s history. Therefore, while Wertenbaker truly controls the transformations through his artistry, the characters seem to be transforming and improving themselves of their own accord.

Ralph demonstrates that he follows orders and does what he has to, to try and get out of the colony. In Act 1 Scene 6, he says, “We could...transcend... the brutality...and remember...England” as here ‘transcend’ means ‘to climb across’ or ‘to surpass,’ but this idea of going over suggests that Ralph does not want to directly contend with difficulty. Instead, he tries to evade trouble in order to keep moving. In Act 2 Scene 2, Ralph shows his complete obedience to Phillip with the terse, disjointed feedback —“Yes and I-,” “Sir-” and “I see- Sir”— which implies that here, too, Ralph follows through on duties to avoid confrontation and to keep life in the colony simple. Yet Ralph has not changed at all, and still wants to escape. This theme is further

emphasized as in the original performance of *Our Country's Good* in 1988 each of the actors played two or three characters; however, David Haig only played Ralph Clark. While this tactic could be simply practical, as Ralph appears throughout the play, it more likely suggests that he does not transform; the actors play various characters as they all work towards being united, but Ralph is left behind.

Moreover, Ralph uses Mary in order to camouflage the hardships of being on the ship. In Act 2 Scene Nine (The Love Scene) it is clear that Mary and Ralph are having an affair, but as earlier on, Ralph seems anxious and afraid—" He looks at his watch. Gets up. Paces." His relationship with Mary could be a means for him to forget the colony, in much the same way as Arscott uses the theatre to forget—" When I say Kite's lines I forget everything else". However, with the affair's status as illicit (as Ralph is married to Betsey Alicia) and with Ralph's desire to escape, Wertenbaker could be conveying the flaws of humans. Phillip understands this idea in Act 2 Scene 2, as he seems to have been made omniscient by Wertenbaker. He tells Ralph here that " Socrates irritated the state of Athens and was put to death for it" to suggest that Ralph has irritated the colony and the convicts by not accepting his own faults, but by simply blaming others, and hence is not a good Lieutenant. Instead, Phillip states that the convicts are to " be made an example of...by redemption" and that while Ross treats the convicts like animals—" Now wag your tail and bark"—Ralph can try " redeeming [their] humanity." Ralph however turns to the idea of martyrdom by paralleling Jesus—" I will lay down my life"— but Phillip explains that their experience is not about deification or religion—" The Reverend's an ass"—but about

fundamental humanity, so fundamental that the Aborigine understands deeply two scenes later —“ How can we befriend this crowded, hungry and disturbed dream?”

In Act 2 Scene 2, Phillip also conveys the ideas of the Philosophy of the Imperfect in that trying is what matters, even if “ we may fail.” He suggests here that it’s no good ‘ transcending’ and trying to escape, as then one won’t move forward. Dabby does not understand this at the end of the play, as she uses the play to escape —“ bravo Dabby, hurray, you’ve escaped”—and is hence unhappy—“ Please, I want to go back to Devon”—while Mary, who uses the play to liberate herself, ends with the striking and independent exclamation “ I love this!” Here, Wertenbaker suggests that those who use the play to forget do not end up as happy as those who use the play to transform. The irony is that the convicts understand this while Ralph does not—“ Unexpected virtues are often matched by unexpected virtues in people” (Phillip).

Later, in Act 2 Scene 7, Dabby understands transformation through engagement in the words of The Recruiting Officer but does not apply such transformation to the play and to her life. She says that “ Marriage is nothing, but will you look after her?” and thus explores the idea of structure becoming meaningless if there is no emotion; if the convicts see the play as simply a form of drama, as opposed to a method for them to transform, the play becomes useless. While indirectly realizing this here, at the end, Dabby does not understand the idea and sees the play as a structural device, and hence offers a contrast to the momentum of the play and to Arscott’s ideals: “ When I say my lines, I think of nothing else. Why can’t you do the  
<https://assignbuster.com/the-transformative-power-of-drama-in-our-countrys-good/>

same?/Because it's only for one night" Dabby does, however, develop from her hardened cynicism to passion and romance. In Act 2 Scene 7, she says that " Love is the barter of perishable goods," and this language of trade and industry suggests that she views love through the lens of being a convict; prostitution as a means for living is the only idea of love she has had. In Scene 11, though, she appreciates beauty and uses the language of romance (" I saw the whole play, and we all knew our lines, and Mary, you looked so beautiful") and this transformation seems to be a fulfillment of Phillip's earlier prophecy: " The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to." The language of theatre and the freedom of expression have caused Dabby to appreciate the beauty of humanity.

In Scene 7, there seems to be a love clash between Ralph, Mary and Wisehammer. Wisehammer tells Mary, " I would marry you...you would live with me" and, while acting, kisses her. However, Ralph " angrily" becomes offensive: " I doesn't say Silvia is kissed in the stage directions!" While clearly a conflict, this is in fact also a transformation from the very first scene as Wisehammer speaks in the language of lust and profanity—" what is there to do but seek English cunt"—and Mary distances herself from love, belittling it —" I don't know why I did it. Love, I suppose." By acting the characters in the play, and openly demonstrating emotion for each other as they disguise it as the emotion of Silvia and Brazen, they allow for their sentiment and affections to grow.

Furthermore, there is also some clash on the concept of doubling in the play.

Arscott argues that he, unlike Dabby, does not want to play himself, since "<https://assignbuster.com/the-transformative-power-of-drama-in-our-countrys-good/>

When [he] say[s] Kite's lines...[he] forget[s] the judge..." Here, Wertenbaker explores theatre as therapy. As other characters use the play as escapism, Arscott tries to become absorbed by drama and lets it change him; at the end of the play, Arscott is enthusiastic and is the first to go out on stage—"Halberd! Halberd!" However, before going on stage, Arscott threatens that "I'll kill anyone who laughs at me"; Wertenbaker seems to suggest that while everyone can be transformed or improved by theatre or another means, at our cores we remain the same. In accordance with the Lockian theory of innate criminality, Arscott will always, to some degree, still be a convict. Dabby, though, desires "to play [herself]." The cause of this impulse seems to lie in that it's familiar and easy for her, and having lost family or friends in her life before conviction, "myself" is all she really has left, so she clings to it. However, Dabby could also be trying to achieve the same as Arscott through a different means. Arscott wanted to become the character in the play in order to change himself, but Dabby wants to play herself so that anything she does differently in the play can have a direct, transformative impact on her life.

Wertenbaker explores the idea that if people have nothing in their life to work towards, they will devolve, but once they possess something they are responsible for, they fight for it and use it to transform. This is exactly what occurs in *Our Country's Good* as the convicts use theatre to improve themselves. Some fail to recognize the potential for improvement, and end up as despondent as they were to begin, but what is ultimately true is that all the convicts, once they had been given drama, were the active ones in transforming their own lives. It is simply that motivation that needs laying

down before they can work to change themselves into anything they want: Sideway wants to start a theatre company, Wisehammer to become a writer, Liz and Ketch an actress and actor, and Dabby a playwright. As Governor Phillip says, " When he treats the slave boy as a rational human being, the boy becomes one, he loses his fear, and he becomes a competent mathematician."