

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD

BY

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EXTRACT

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Extract

ACT ONE

I would expect students to have read the play themselves, if not in class, before starting the following work, which assumes some knowledge of the storyline and the characters.

Students should make sure that they record the results of all the experimental work they do on this text and take careful note of any decisions they make. They should also be aware that these decisions may need to be altered in the light of other decisions made further into the script. This is always going to be the case and does not invalidate the work they have done in any way, which will always have enriched their understanding. It is just that sometimes, one way of doing something will not work once you have fixed on your final idea for a setting, say, or for the interpretation of a character. In this case, you will need to go back through your past work making sure that there is a consistency to your final viewpoint.

Please note that I often suggest, say, two or three ways of performing something for experimentation, but that does not mean that there aren't many other ways of doing it. The important thing is the trial - because on the way each student may find their own answers, quite separate from those I suggest. The journey is what is important.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE: THE VOYAGE OUT

Before you even examine the first stage direction, remind yourselves of how many sudden and diverse scene changes there are in this play. Clearly, then, too naturalistic and detailed a setting is not an option.

Like Shakespeare, Wertebaker uses the character's words to set the atmosphere of the scene, so the set designer's job here is to enhance that atmosphere. Read the whole scene first [just the single page] to absorb that atmosphere. It is a shocking opening. We are plunged straight into the brutality of a flogging and the hunger, fear and misery of the convicts. There is a clear divide between the convicts below deck and the officers who have charge of them.

As a group, discuss ways that a ship at night could be suggested and the atmosphere created for an audience. Consider the importance of sound and light here. What sounds would conjure up a feeling for an audience of being out at sea? [Creaking? -it is a wooden ship. Waves slapping against the side? Not seagulls! - it is night!]

What light would help the atmosphere? Darkness, perhaps, except for a dim light - a lantern held by a sailor? the moon? on the flogging and another dim light on the convicts, perhaps is all you'd need. Would you want a very dim light on the huddle of all the convicts with perhaps brighter pools to pick out the faces of the three that actually speak? Or would you want to link all the convicts together more by light, lighting them the same whether they speak or not? It seems a small decision to make but I think it is important. The first idea makes little islands of each convict, emphasising their separation, even though we are still aware that there is a huddle of other bodies; the second idea links the convicts together more into a shared fate. What colour light would you use for each area - the deck and the hold?

It is a good idea to experiment with gels and at least a standing spot against a number of surfaces - a white cyclorama or back wall, a wooden floor, a floor with some covering, such as straw or sand, each other's faces, at the very least. Allow the students to discover for themselves the effects of different colours - what gel combinations suggest an interior such as the hold? Can you also make it seem an over-heated, smelly place, too crowded and wretched - just with light, using colour and suggesting how large an area needs to be defined? Do all the convicts need to be lit, or might it be enough to suggest that there are more going off into the shadows?

Experiment too with the exterior scene - would you want just the cold light of the moon [moon reflected on sea is actually quite bright] or does the holding up of a lantern give an extra feeling of confinement to this scene too? Like a guilty act that

we are witnessing? The lantern could be hung on part of the set - not necessarily held by a sailor. I know we haven't yet defined the set but it's something else to bear in mind. Experiment with making the colours of moonlight and of lantern-light, using your gels and standing-spot. Try out the effect on the surfaces I have suggested and on faces and bodies.

Back to the setting itself. At the end of the Act, we will look back and see how feasible your ideas are and what compromises we might need to make. But for now, let's go for the optimum - the idea that you would want to create an atmosphere of a ship and such detail as is suggested by the action within the scene.

What happens in the scene? A convict is flogged, overseen by an officer. Presumably there is someone else there doing the actual flogging. This happens up on deck. Below deck, in the hold, three convicts, huddled together with others, speak their thoughts aloud. It is night-time. After the flogging, the convict who was punished is thrown down with the others.

What are the implications of this for the setting? Jot down the basic minimum, in your opinion, that will be needed to create the setting physically. Then jot down what additions you would want to make which will either clarify the setting, or suggest atmosphere, or suggest period.

Once all this is done, bring back your findings to the group and talk through everyone's ideas. How many people came up with similar ideas? Discuss as a group: what seems, from this, to be the ground base of necessity? What added details would help contribute to atmosphere or period? What things are extraneous details which are not necessary?

I would suspect that absolute necessities were: some idea of levels - a deck and a hold. The hold needs to be bigger and the opening stage directions, which start with 'the hold' suggest that this area is more important than the deck. There needs to be some connection between the deck and the hold, since Sideway is dumped in the hold after his flogging. There needs to be somewhere to which Sideway is tied for his flogging. Or perhaps he is held.

Looking at the basics, it is probably best to have the main part of the stage, which includes all the front area, as the hold - made smaller through the definition of light and by the fact that the convicts are squashed together. The deck can be higher, smaller and further back. There could be steps or the suggestion of a hatch linking the two areas. Could there be a mast - or part of a mast and rigging, to which he is tied?

The additions that might be more helpful, to add atmosphere might include: ropes, chains, a sail or sails, rigging. These done in imaginative combination can suggest period and also the confinement of the prisoners.

The rest could be done with lighting and sound as discussed. The actors also are very much a part of this environment and what they do within the space will contribute enormously to the atmosphere. Look again at the raised level - shape? Width?

For the moment, we'll leave the setting here, though I would like there to be an indication in all practical work of the two levels decided on as a base minimum. Have the back half of the studio or stage on which you are working built up with rostra whenever feasible. It is always best to work within the idea of a setting. That way, the set will grow organically too - to meet the demands of the different scenes within the script.

As a whole group, find an effective grouping for the prisoners in the hold. Where in this grouping would you place the three convicts that speak? What is the most effective way of reaching - perhaps different parts of - the audience through this positioning?

Now exclude three members of the group - to play Ralph Clark, Sideway and the man who is flogging him - who might that be out of the officers? Perhaps it is most likely to be Harry Brewer.

Mimic the action of the flogging on the upper level. Try it a number of ways:

Ralph watching every stroke, to check that justice is being done

Ralph watching, but clearly uncomfortable with it

Ralph turned away, covering up his dislike of it by a military stance - doing his duty

Which of these do you think best fits the stage direction of him counting with a barely audible, slow and monotonous voice?

Try:

Sideway screaming on every stroke

trying to be brave, just grunting perhaps

drooping from the wrists - he has passed out.

Which did you find most effective and why?

How do the convicts react to this flogging? Can they hear it?

Have them:

wincing on each stroke, clearly listening

making so many groans and moans themselves that they can't hear

some oblivious and uncaring, some listening and aware

Again, which feels best - and looks best to you? Justify any decisions made -

always. Look carefully at the reaction written in through the stage direction:

Sideway is untied and dumped with the rest of the convicts. Is he conscious? No

one moves. A short silence. Are they beyond caring? or are they afraid? Why does

no one help Sideway? Perhaps they are tied up or chained? Experiment to find

suitable answers for yourselves.

Now look at the speeches. Why do you think Wisehammer starts with a question?

Try out the tone of this with and without the question-mark. What difference does it make?

Now try out Wisehammer's speech:

Sitting cramped up on the floor, speaking out front to the audience with no actions except his facial expressions

Speaking from an entanglement of limbs which are him and a female convict entwined

Speaking the first half out front, but then crawling around amongst the others 'seeking comfort' - perhaps being pushed away, and finally accepted on the last line.

Which do you think is best?

How would you best show the separation of the three actors? - the fact that they are in their own thoughts, not making direct communication with each other.

By having them scattered amongst the group perhaps?

By a perceptible pause between each speech?

By having the speeches overlapping - so that John starts on, say, 'we'll remember England together' and Mary starts on 'with salt and...'

Try all three possibilities and discuss the effect of each.

Before leaving the scene, decide what it is that you think Mary is talking about. What did she do for 'love?' Is this a hook left by the playwright which is going to be explained later? For an actor playing Mary it will be important when creating a rounded portrait of the character - or a Stanislavskian 'through-line.'

ACT ONE, SCENE 2 A LONE ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN....

Here we have the first introduction of the mysterious figure of the Aborigine. This symbolic character needs to be differentiated from everybody and everything else from the start. He stands for Australia itself, so there should be nothing too naturalistic about the way he is presented.

Later on, we will consider how to dress him, and whether his symbolic nature needs emphasis through other means such as sound or light. At the moment, let's just think of how to perform him.

The sudden insertion of this short speech might not make clear to an audience who this character is. Discuss whether you think the wording of the introduction to the scene should also be included somehow. 'A lone Aboriginal Australian describes....' could be projected on a screen, could be narrated, or could be said by the Aborigine himself.

First of all, though, what happens to the actors [and the setting] of the first scene? Do they remain in place for the aborigine's speech?

Do they get 'herded off' by the officers, keeping the idea of convicts and guards even through the scene change?

Do they go off in a blackout, removing any bits of the set that need to move also?

Can we make the change more fluid by any means? Perhaps we can suggest what the Aborigine 'sees' by having characters move offstage in slow motion as he comes on - like the 'dream' that he sees them as.

Try out a number of these alternatives:

The Aborigine moving on in slow, smooth motion whilst the characters say the end of their speeches in Scene 1 - then the paces reverse - after Mary's line, the convicts etc. go into slow motion, rising from the ground to exit at different times extremely slowly, and beginning to move off [they could be being 'herded' by the officers], as the Aborigine, moves into a more normal speed. His eyes and head follow them off. Then he begins to speak in a slow, dreamy manner.

The Aborigine comes onto the upper level, a different side to the flogging and is separated from the action by a spotlight, which cuts out the previous scene, now in darkness. He remains there.

The light remains on the actors in the previous scene but the actors freeze - in attitudes of hopelessness and sorrow [the convicts] or resolution [Ralph], which they hold, lit, throughout the Aborigine's speech. The Aborigine comes into the centre of them, moving, albeit slowly, as a contrast to their frozen positions.

The Aborigine comes on at normal speed and walks to the centre front of the stage, just being 'an actor' and announces the scene by speaking the title of the scene. As he does this, the rest of the cast move quietly and efficiently offstage behind him. The actor playing the Aborigine then 'becomes' the character briefly, for the speech.

Try the speech itself:

Slowly, dreamily

Fully acted out - i.e. alarmed on sighting the boat. Pause after 'oars' for watching. Then dismissive - touch of fear.

As if he is a tribal wise man teaching the rest of the tribe

Which fits best with however you have chosen to bring the Aborigine on?

SCENE THREE: PUNISHMENT

Once again, start by considering how to move from scene two to scene three. The Aborigine's movement is probably quite differently paced to the white incomers. So the four men will be coming on whilst the Aborigine is still there and beginning to move off. This could be made to look more directly threatening to the Aborigine, as the men have guns and are shooting birds. Could there perhaps be a moment as they enter when we hear a shot and the Aborigine turns, in exquisite slow motion, to look directly at them before his exit? Discuss this idea and others. Decide on the effect of the guns here and what you want it to have. So far we have only seen the officers in charge in the role of aggressors. There has been no separation of characters as yet. The lack of sympathy we are feeling at this stage towards these men is borne out by the first words they say too.

What are the set implications that you could take on board from the first speech. Could the mast on the upper level, in the background, perhaps have been transformed into a gallows - as a symbolic reminder of 'punishment'? [I know that later on Ketch complains that no gallows have yet been built and they are using a tree, but the shape of the gallows could be a potent symbol.] Otherwise, they are out in the bush. An open space is all that is necessary. Consider what the floor covering might be: sand? or a sand/earth coloured paint, distressed to look like dry country?

Read this whole scene carefully now, allocating different members of the group for each character and then answer the following, through discussion:

If this were a Brechtian play, where characters have different 'attitudes' - what attitude does each of these have to punishment by hanging? Is it clear what Harry Brewer's attitude is - he is the lowest ranking man here and his opinions do not carry any weight with the others - but nevertheless? Do you think it matters at this point? Perhaps Harry should be neutral here.

As a group, what do you feel about the hanging versus flogging punishments discussed? Why does Phillip prefer flogging? In the light of Tench's information about flogging, is Phillip right? What do you think Wertenbaker's intentions are here?

The juxtaposition of this scene with that of the aborigine suggests what? Think about the attitudes shown to the animals, birds and landscape. Think of the noise of shooting and Phillip's comment that Watkin Tench is 'speaking too loud'. Does this give you any further ideas as to how to treat the scenes with the aborigine?

Divide the group up into foursomes. [Wrong numbers leave out Harry, or add the Aborigine.] In the group each person is allocated one of the four characters and must prepare a short monologue in which they put over their opinions about crime and punishment, based on what they say in the scene. For Harry, you may take into account something of what he starts to feel later in the play if you like. Though possibly neutral here, because he is 'doing his duty' and 'respecting his officers' he must have buried some personal feelings - which will later emerge to torment him.

The other theme that is begun in this scene is that of the civilising effect of education and, specifically, theatre. What are the different attitudes of Tench, Phillip and Collins to this idea? Be very clear what each one stands for. In threes, deliver a short monologue showing each of the three men's attitudes to educating the convicts, using the evidence of the scene.

Try Collins' speech: 'I commend your endeavour...':

**like a schoolmaster explaining
with alarm, even a touch of anger
thoughtfully, as if really considering Phillip's idea**

Which do you think fits best with your idea of Collins?

In the light of all this discussion, look at the following lines:

Phillip: 'And I hope not of a human hell, Davey. Don't shoot yet, Watkin, let's observe them. Could we not be more humane?'

Pace this speech out deciding on where to put in pauses. What is the tone of each