

Whose Country's Good? Anglo-Australian Bicentennial Exchange

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1. See Helen Gilbert, 'Monumental moments: Michael Gow's *1841*, Stephen Sewell's *Hate*, Louis Nowra's *Capricornia* and Australia's Bicentenary', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 24 (1994), 29–45; Helen Gilbert, 'Reconciliation? Aboriginality and Australian theatre in the 1990s' in Veronica Kelly (ed.), *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: 1998) pp. 71–88; Geoffrey Milne, 'Black and White in Australian Drama: Melbourne 1988', *Meridian*, 9:1 (1990), 33–43.
2. Helen Gilbert, 'Monumental Monuments', p. 29.
3. Helen Gilbert, 'Monumental Monuments', p. 30.
4. Geoffrey Milne, 'Black and White in Australian Drama' p. 42 also documents that by 1990 'plays by or about Aborigines have again become thin on the ground, just as suddenly as they became all the rage in 1988'.

In 1988, the Bicentenary of the foundation of white Australia, unleashed an orgy of theatrical activity celebrating, mourning, and critiquing both the original event and the decision to invest so heavily in celebrating it. Many Bicentennial productions were specifically commissioned and so partly circumscribed by the terms of their commission. Male playwrights dominated and they tended to produce plays which worked with the notion of history and historiography with varying degrees of critical and commercial success.¹ As Helen Gilbert argues, this focus on history made sense as it responded to the fact that:

The Bicentenary represented a specific drive towards historicity in so far as it attempted to fix origins (in 1788) for the ideological construct of 'Australia' and to celebrate a sheer passage of time (two hundred years) as the temporal co-ordinate of our nation's story of growth and development.²

However, critical response to the Bicentennial theatre making was very mixed, reflecting the fact that:

'stories' designated as artefacts of the Government's Bicentennial largesse will inevitably be marked by sharper than usual critical response and, more crucially, particular critical expectations.³

Gilbert's persuasive analysis is complemented by Geoffrey Milne's overview of the theatrical year in Melbourne which documents a marked increase in the production of home-grown Australian plays, and in plays by and/ or about Aboriginal people.⁴ However, my focus in this essay is on a group of theatrical events that travelled overseas as part of the Bicentennial celebrations, plays which, when away from home, acquired new, and intercultural meanings.

Three major pieces of Australian theatre appeared in the UK for the

Bicentenary: the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) brought their production of David Williamson's *Emerald City* to the Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue; the Marli Biyol Company's production of Jack Davis's *No Sugar* travelled to the off West End venue of the Riverside, Hammersmith; and a British production of Stephen Sewell's *Dreams in an Empty City*, also appeared in Hammersmith, at the Lyric Theatre. Many Australian acts were seen, as usual, at Edinburgh, and Beverley Dunn's *To Botany Bay on a Bondi Tram*, a one woman show portraying the life of nineteenth-century Australian poet, journalist, feminist and socialist Mary Gilmore, travelled to the Young Vic Studio.

At this time awareness of Australian culture in Britain was reaching new heights for a variety of reasons including the fact that more Britons were travelling to, taking holidays in, or backpacking their way around, Australia. However, this increased awareness of Australia rarely extended to knowledge of Australian theatre and drama and although in 1988 the success of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in London was over thirty years in the past, the critical context in which Australian plays were interpreted in Britain was still partly based on the heritage of *The Doll*. The working-class realist dramas that *The Doll* brought over in its wake, such as *The Shifting Heart* and *The One Day of the Year*, set up limiting expectations in some British reviewers and Alrene Sykes's analysis of British reviewers' responses to Australian drama during the early 1970s detects a 'seeming obsession . . . with Australian plays as a revelation of what life is really like down under' although British plays of the period were not read as reflecting British lifestyles in the same way.⁵ Ironically, a rather different problem appeared in 1998: false recognition.

It is useful here to consider a formulation suggested by Martin Esslin, who became a champion of Australian drama after a visit to the country in 1974. He contributed 'an Outsider's View' on 'The New Australian Theatre' to a special issue of *Theatre Quarterly*, which focused on Australia, and which revealed how hard Esslin had to work in order to get a series of Australian plays accepted onto BBC radio.⁶ Esslin argues that a major problem with British responses to Australian plays is that, although the social background is unfamiliar, it is not always recognised as such, and much Australian theatre is read by the British as reflecting 'an urban world which is like our own, yet utterly unlike as well'.⁷ Esslin's concept of 'like' and 'unlike', or false recognition, is useful because it highlights the fact that for the British reviewers in 1988 the more clearly *unlike* a piece of Australian theatre was to British theatre, the more likely it was to be treated with respect.

The STC's production of David Williamson's *Emerald City*, a play wittily charting upper-middle-class neuroses and anxieties, as the central (and autobiographical) character, a writer, relocates from serious Melbourne to ritzy Sydney, certainly suffered from false recognition. Williamson was already known in London where *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *Travelling North*, *The Perfectionist*, *Sons of Cain* and *What if You Died Tomorrow?* had been performed. In the 1970s British reviewers had seen Williamson as brash and unapologetic, as documenting the excesses of his compatriots, and his plays were

5. Alrene Sykes, 'Australian Bards and British Reviewers', *Australian Literary Studies*, 7 (1975–76), 39–49.

6. Martin Esslin, 'The New Australian Theatre: An Outsider's View', *Theatre Quarterly*, 26 (1977), 48–9.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

8. Brian Kiernan, *David Williamson: A Writer's Career* (Revised edition, Sydney: Currency, 1996), pp. 208–09.

9. *Punch* (27 May 1988); *Financial Times* (10 May 1988); *Jewish Chronicle* (13 May 1988); *What's On* (18 May 1988).

10. *Independent* (11 May 1988).

11. *Guardian* (11 May 1988). Billington's reaction are highlighted here simply because he has consistently sought to explore and encounter Australian drama and theatre as often as he can, and has been an advocate of British theatre being more open to Australian influences.

12. *Daily Telegraph* (11 May 1988).

13. Both reviews appeared on 10 May 1988.

14. For example, *City Limits* (26 May 1988); *Daily Mail* (10 May 1988).

housed at theatres like the alternative, left-of-centre Royal Court. Williamson's biographer Brian Kiernan notes that for British reviewers Michael Blakemore's 1980 production of *Travelling North* had 'upset preconceptions that (being by Williamson, and an Australian) [the play] would be boozy and brutal'.⁸ *Emerald City* moved even further away from Williamson's 'boozy and brutal' image, but suffered from being susceptible to being read as 'like' much British theatre, for those who ignored, for example, the different ways in which class operates in Australia and Britain.

A very common rhetorical ploy used by the reviewers was to locate Williamson by his likeness to British playwrights: Simon Gray, Charles Wood, Peter Nichols and Alan Ayckbourn were all cited.⁹ Meanwhile the *Independent* crossed the Atlantic for a reference point and saw shades of Neil Simon.¹⁰ This comparisons game works as a shorthand, and gave British readers a sense of the location of Williamson's writing. Indeed such comparisons often feature as part of the marketing of a production simply because such identifications of 'likeness' can help sell seats. However, the overall effect is belittling and reflects the nineteenth-century colonial impetus which always sought to see Australia – and its landscape, its art, its literature and so on – as 'like' Britain's even when it palpably was not.

Michael Billington contextualised Williamson's work more rigorously. He reminded readers that Williamson had a substantial oeuvre and 'Like all his plays, David Williamson's *Emerald City* has a punchy vitality and a jabbing southpaw wit'.¹¹ Billington's confidence that references to Williamson's film script *Gallipoli*, and to actor Garry McDonald's Norman Gunston shows will be understood by his readers contrasts starkly with the *Daily Telegraph* which suggests that, to non-Australians, Melbourne and Sydney are 'as Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Tweedledee is the one with the harbour)' and so the play's contrast between the two cities makes little sense outside Australia.¹² This (parochial) complaint of parochialism pales into insignificance, however, besides the crassness of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*; the *Express*, in what was actually a positive review, opens with the comment 'It is a well-known fact that Australians cannot help being funny despite their intellectual pretensions'.¹³ Reductive comparisons with Dame Edna Everage and Sir Les Patterson played alongside the complaint that play was old hat;¹⁴ although reviewers couldn't agree on what precisely was 'old hat' about it.

The British reviewers generally trod far more carefully when they encountered Jack Davis's *No Sugar* at the Hammersmith Riverside Studios 1 and 2. This play tells stories of displacement, oppression and survival from Davis's own family history at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the majority of the characters in Davis's work are Aboriginal, his plays are difficult to produce in the UK, and this production asserted its cultural specificity even more forcibly because Davis and several of his family were in the cast, enacting the stories of their grandparents and great grandparents. Some reviewers responded to this evident 'unlikeness' by trying to avoid reviewing *No Sugar* as theatre, and instead imparting information about Aboriginal issues, culled from

15. *Guardian* (18 June 1988).

16. *What's On* (22 June 1988).

17. *Daily Telegraph* (20 June 1988); *Sunday Telegraph* (19 June 1988).

the production programme. Michael Billington asserted *No Sugar* was 'an extraordinary occasion – unlike any other in the London theatre – that both sends us out knowing more than when we came in and that reminds us that drama is a form of anthropology'.¹⁵ However, by referencing Peter Brook's *The Ik* Billington suggested a theatrical context which gave kudos to the production, sited it within a tradition of intercultural theatrical exchange, and emphasised that London theatre goers should expect 'unlikeness' that challenged and expanded their horizons. Others were less open minded than Billington. *What's On* missed conventional, Anglo-European characterisation and acting, and suggested that didgeridoo music at end of the play would be preferable to having to listen to Davis 'briefly and awkwardly spell[ing] out some statistics about atrocities against Aboriginies' [sic].¹⁶ The *Daily Telegraph* suggested that the acting had 'rough edges' but hoped to see more of Davis's work while the *Sunday Telegraph* thought the production powerful but that it contained a 'certain artlessness'.¹⁷ All these comments raise the question of whose standards of art are being applied?

A couple of reviews invoked clichéd and inaccurate notions of the 'walkabout', despite the fact that the movement of Aboriginal people from one place to another in the play is imposed on them by white Australians. Three reviewers positioned *No Sugar* as documentary drama and nearly all said that the production had provided a major learning experience, something which perhaps allowed the reviewers to duck awkward questions about their own theatre aesthetics. Overall the reviews suggest cautious approval of, nervousness towards, and respect for 'unlikeness': and the production played to packed houses.

The third major Australian play appearing in London in 1988, Stephen Sewell's *Dreams in an Empty City*, was a box office disaster. *Dreams* is a hugely ambitious and wide ranging attack on late capitalism, which excoriates big business and its seduction of the innocent. The reviewers saw Sewell's play, like Williamson's, in terms of 'likeness': *Dreams'* interest in high finance meant that *Serious Money*, *Pravda*, *Fashion*, *Speculators* and the film *Wall Street* were all invoked. Michael Billington found the play impressive if 'sledgehammer', a combination of a mediaeval morality play and Graham Greene territory.¹⁸ Meanwhile *The Listener* thought *Dreams* 'an act of post-imperialist revenge, randomly targeted on West London' and suggested Sewell had 'learnt the art of dialogue from the fabled soap operas of his native land'.¹⁹ Ironically, given that *Dreams* is a parable of greed, corruption and the rottenness of capitalism, the production's own financial misadventures found a parallel with the onstage action. Michael Coveney explained that 'The Lyric Hammersmith's plans for a Bicentennial feast of new Australian theatre, "Oz 88" have been hit by a succession of disasters, most of them to do with money', and *Dreams*, which was 'reported to have cost £200,000', was the 'lone survivor on the programme', and was expected to make a large loss.²⁰

18. *Guardian* (10 September 1988).

19. *The Listener* (22 September 1988).

20. *Financial Times* (10 September 1988).

Dreams was produced by the production company 'Oz 88', headed by Annie Irving, with Diana Bliss as associate producer. At the time Bliss was a 'friend' of millionaire Alan Bond whom she later married whilst

21. *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) (6 June 1989).

22. *Sydney Sunday Telegraph* (4 June 1989).

23. The profile identifies Bliss as 'the Australian producer who made [the Royal Court visit] all happen' (the visit was also funded by the British Council, Singapore Airlines and Tanqueray Gin).

24. Sykes's analysis of British reception of Australian plays in the 1970s betrays a similar pattern where most attention is focussed on male – and usually blokish – playwrights. Sykes only discusses one play written by a woman – Alma De Groen's *The Joss Adams Show*.

25. *Time Out* (8 June 1988); the *Independent* (2 June 1988); *City Limits* (9 June 1988).

26. For useful general discussions of this see e.g. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women's Intercultural Performances* (London: Routledge, 2000); James Redmond, '“If the salt have lost his savour”: some “useful” plays in and out of context on the London stage', in Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland (eds), *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 63–88.

he was still in jail for financial irregularities.²¹ The *Sydney Sunday Telegraph* carried a profile of Bliss where she described her interest in 'new playwrights and radical theatre' and her role as the 'Australian representative of a prestigious group called the Women's Playhouse Trust, which seeks and produces new works by women, frequently at the avant guard [*sic.*] upstairs theatre at the Royal Court'.²² Bliss also claims she established the Equity deal whereby Australian Equity allowed the Royal Court to take *Our Country's Good* to Sydney in 1989 as a *quid pro quo* for the STC's wholesale export of *Emerald City* to London.²³ While Bliss's behind the scenes involvement in *Dreams in an Empty City* is extraordinary given that the play so savagely attacks precisely the kind of world she was moving in, and eventually marrying into, her contribution to the production of this play and *Emerald City* in London, and of *Our Country's Good* in Sydney, means that she was an absolutely key player in terms of the Bicentennial theatrical exchange.

Despite Bliss's declared interest in work by women, the only woman-authored Australian theatre given any attention by British reviewers in 1988 was Beverley Dunn's *To Botany Bay on a Bondi Tram* at the Young Vic Studio, which was mildly praised, although mostly ignored by the major reviewers, something that contrasts starkly with the extensive coverage of the productions of Williamson, Davis and Sewell.²⁴ What is noticeable in the reviews of Dunn's show is that they all focus on the description of a massacre of Aboriginal people as the most theatrically stunning moment of the production.²⁵ It was the moment of traumatising 'unlikeness' that shocked the reviewers and stuck in their minds.

When plays and productions travel of course their meanings change;²⁶ however, the Bicentennial theatrical ventures discussed here suggest that while post-colonial theory might seem the obvious tool to assess British reception of Australian theatrical exchange, the related theories of interculturalism, with their stress on cultural exchange, might be as useful for analysing (and possibly even marketing) Australian theatre travelling to the UK. While both *Emerald City* and *Dreams in an Empty City* were being subjected to false recognition by the British reviewers, the implicit question being asked in many reviews was: 'Why see David Williamson chart middle-class dilemmas, or Stephen Sewell anatomise greed, if British plays on the same subject are readily available?' Meanwhile *No Sugar* was manifestly inter-cultural, clearly expanded the London audience's horizons, offered challenging 'unlikeness', demanded, and generally received, serious respect. Perhaps a real indication of *No Sugar*'s success is the fact that it helped pave the way for the respectful reception in Britain of later productions focusing on Aboriginal experiences, such as the one woman shows *Ningali*, *The Seven Stages of Grieving*, *Box the Pony*, and *White Baptist Abba Fan*, and larger cast productions such as Jane Harrison's *Stolen* and the 2002 STC tour of Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers*. In the UK *No Sugar* was so self evidently 'unlike' and of a different culture, that it had to be recognised as intercultural theatre and could not be diluted by reviewers into a version of something British. Recognising all Anglo-Australian theatrical exchange more openly as inter-cultural, and not

27. The recent success of David Williamson's sellout London season with *Up For Grabs* in 2002 clearly had more to do with the starring presence of Madonna than with the British public's sudden hunger for Anglo-Australian drama.
28. *SMH* (30 May 1989). I'd like to thank Julian Meyrick and Meredith Rogers for their help in my research into *Our Country's Good*.
29. However, Steve Gooch's fine play *Female Transport*, which also looks at the convict origins of white Australia has not enjoyed anything like the success of *Our Country's Good*. The latter's success, however, was not immediate. Susan Carlson, 'Issues of Identity, Nationality, and Performance: the Reception of Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker', *New Theatre Quarterly* 35 (1993), 267–289 (p. 275) points out that there were empty seats at the opening night of *Our Country's Good* before enthusiastic reviews helped generate its great commercial success.
30. Ann Wilson, 'Our Country's Good: theatre, colony and Nation in Wertenbaker's Adaptation of *The Playmaker*', *Modern Drama* 34 (March 1991), 23–34 (see especially pp. 23, 25–9, 30, 31–2, 33).
31. Esther Beth Sullivan, 'Hailing Ideology, Acting in the Horizon, and Reading between Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker', *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993), 139–54 (especially pp. 143, 148, 150).
32. Peter Buse, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern*

confining this perspective to productions featuring Aboriginal people and their stories, might create less false recognition in the reception of Anglo-Australian drama in the UK.²⁷

What Australia received, courtesy of Diana Bliss, in return for the export of *Emerald City* was the Royal Court's production of *Our Country's Good*. Based on Thomas Kenneally's novel *The Playmaker*, with some material taken from Robert Hughes's history of the penal settlement, *The Fatal Shore*, and workshopped extensively by Royal Court actors, *Our Country's Good* was written by 'a British playwright of French–Canadian–Basque ancestry';²⁸ it was commissioned by a British director – Max Stafford-Clark – to play as a companion piece to a revival of Irishman George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, and originally performed by the English Stage Company. The play won the Laurence Olivier award for best new play in 1988, it has been revived many times, and the play lodged itself, in Britain, in the school syllabuses, with major consequence in terms of lucrative books sales and the dissemination of its ideas. In many ways it is not hard to understand *Our Country's Good*'s popularity: the play argues that theatre is humanising, even redemptive, and functions as a plea for more generous funding of the arts, in particular British theatre, which had suffered badly in Thatcher's Britain. Its view of Australia, it might be argued, is also one the British felt accustomed to: reiterating the convict past rather than presenting the challenge of contemporary Australia.²⁹

Despite its success, *Our Country's Good* has not escaped adverse criticism. For example, Wertenbaker's adaptation of Kenneally's novel is criticised in detail by Ann Wilson, who finds a decreased awareness of the politics of colonisation, a reduction in Aboriginal presence, a more romantic and less hard hitting treatment of women characters and a suppression of homosexual dynamics.³⁰ Esther Beth Sullivan goes further, and although she concedes that 'with all its attention to the dehumanising effects of English-made poverty, Wertenbaker's play serves as a critique of the ideology and practices that built the Empire', she argues the play is 'ideologically naïve', it 'shows a benevolent ruler who eventually brings his flock into line' and she asks, 'What more could conservatives want?'³¹ Peter Buse contends that *Our Country's Good* argues 'the potentially transformational and transcendent capacities of theatre' but 'obscures the line between culture and imperialism for the sake of a feel-good ending'.³²

In a more theatre centred discussion of *Our Country's Good* and its reception in the UK, Australia and North America, Susan Carlson underscores the fact, ignored by Wilson's, Sullivan's and Buse's primarily literary responses, that the play works differently in every production, with every different audience, and that pronouncements on what the play says about theatre and therapy, theatre and empire, or theatre and government subsidy are provisional on local performance decisions and conditions. Carlson then establishes that in Australia *Our Country's Good* was received as being more about colonisation, and that terms such as 'colonial' feature routinely in discussions of the play, while in the UK the play was read as being more about theatre.³³ Carlson also usefully establishes a contrast between the Royal Court production,

British Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 163, 165. A more positive reading of *Our Country's Good* is provided by Christine Dymkowski in "'The Play's the Thing': The Metatheatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker" in Nicole Boireau (ed.), *Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality in the Contemporary British Stage* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 121–35.

33. Susan Carlson, 'Issues of Identity', p. 279. For a review stressing the colonial context see, for example, *North Shore Times* (14 June 1989).
34. Susan Carlson, 'Issues of Identity', p. 282. The Melbourne production was the one I first saw.
35. Gilbert (p. 29) points out this slogan 'of course, suggests a monolithic version of Australian history and uses the discourses of nationhood to erase difference'.
36. *Financial Review* (2 June 1989).
37. *Financial Review* (2 June 1989). Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George: The Account of a Rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern, 1989), pp. 24–9.
38. *Financial Review* (2 June 1989).
39. *Bulletin* (30 May 1989). This ignorance extended to the work of their source author Thomas Kenneally. Stafford-Clark comments: 'I don't think [Kenneally] knows much about the theatre' (p. 59). Kenneally, of course, has written several successful plays, most notably the challenging and thought provoking *Bullie's House* (1980), as well as *Gossip From*

which played Sydney, and the Melbourne production, which had a 'hard edge' and which foregrounded Aboriginal presence.³⁴

By the time the Royal Court's production of *Our Country's Good* appeared in Australia, Bicentennial fatigue was well under way for even the most enthusiastic supporters of the 'celebration of a nation', as the contemporary slogan advertising the Bicentenary had it.³⁵ In addition, the theatre goers who might be expected to associate with the politics espoused by the Royal Court – leftish liberal and supportive of theatre – tended to be precisely those most repelled by the Bicentennial celebrations, as an insult to Aboriginal people who had little cause to celebrate two hundred years of white invasion. Consequently, the enthusiastic reception accorded to the play and production in Sydney is surprising, as is the extent to which the production was accepted as offering a history of the founding moment of white Australian theatre.

In reality *Our Country's Good* has little to do with Australia. It is a state of the nation drama reflecting the misfortunes of theatre in Thatcher's Britain, which utilises Australian theatre history to deliver a polemic in theatre's defence and when the production played to a Sydney audience it was not originally designed to address, it was inevitable that its meanings would change. For example, the *Financial Review* assured Sydney-siders that the Royal Court 'has always operated at the edge of English theatre and society – subverting, tackling controversial and politically confronting topics' and specialising in 'dangerous theatre';³⁶ however, what might be read as 'dangerous' about the Sydney visit, unfortunately, is its reinscribing of empire and colonial politics.

The Royal Court team were aware of this danger and tried to forestall it by situating their work as reflecting contemporary Britain rather than performing Australian history. Max Stafford-Clark stated: 'An Australian audience shouldn't be looking for a specifically Australian experience' because the improvisations which helped create the play had inevitably come from the performers' and director's own, non-Australian experiences, improvisations which are described in some detail in *Letters to George*.³⁷ Stafford-Clark also identified material the company would have liked to explore further such as 'the Aborigine-Governor relationship', but which they felt their lack of 'understanding' would make inappropriate.³⁸ He suggested that 'we're dealing with Australian history from a point of comparative ignorance. But that is our blessing as well as our burden'.³⁹

Timberlake Wertenbaker also saw *Our Country's Good* as tangential to Australia: after stating 'I didn't want the play to be just a historical account of a country I didn't really know' she argued that she was using the device of the history play to examine the present moment:

You can use the past to distil a particular question or illuminate some aspect of a situation. For me it is a cleaner way to talk about the present because it immediately avoids naturalism which in turn avoids prejudices, preconceptions and an assumption of knowledge.⁴⁰

Elsewhere Wertenbaker commented that 'she knew exactly as much about Australia as her characters do, newly landed on its shores – in other words, only an impression of its landscape and not much more'

the Forest (1983) and *Halloran's Little Boat* (1966).

40. *The Australian* (24 May 1989). Wertenbaker here echoes her own character Wisehammer who in reply to Dabby's question 'Why can't we do a play about now?' states 'It doesn't matter when a play is set. It's better if it's set in the past, it's clearer' (Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, London: Methuen Drama, 1998), p. 74.

41. *Bulletin* (30 May 1989).

42. *Variety* (14 June 1989).

43. *Bulletin* (30 May 1989).

44. *Sunday Telegraph* (11 June 1989).

45. *North Shore Times* (14 June 1989).

46. Katharine Brisbane, 'Beyond the Backyard', introduction to *Australia Plays: New Australian Drama* (London: Nick Hern, 1989), p. vii.

47. *SMH* (13 July 1989). Olivier, of course, helped sponsor the tour of *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* to London. For analysis of Olivier's tour of Australia see Julian Meyrick, 'Sightlines and Bloodlines: The Influence of British Theatre on Australia in the Post-1945 Era', in Elizabeth Schafer and Susan Bradley Smith (eds.), *Playing Australia: Australian Theatre and the International Stage* (Amsterdam and Atalanta: Rodopi, forthcoming 2003).

48. The MTC opened their production of the play on the day after the ESC opened in Sydney.

49. *Financial Review* (30 June 1989).

and she suggested that as the film rights of *The Playmaker* did not belong to the Royal Court, an Australian film adaptation might be appropriate.⁴¹

Variety accepted this argument and characterised *Our Country's Good* as a play 'not about Australians, but displaced Britons'.⁴² However, the majority of Sydney reviewers constructed the play as Australian history. The *Bulletin* claimed that the play 'did for Australian history what Shakespeare's plays have long been doing for British "colonial" history'.⁴³ The Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* praised the play for 'its insight into the performance of the fledgling colony's first play';⁴⁴ and the *North Shore Times* applauded its 'fine focus on our colonial beginnings'.⁴⁵ Even an apologist for Australian drama such as Katharine Brisbane was accepting and commented:

Australia is not used to being interpreted in this way. She is much more used to being ignored. And since Australia and the Australian theatre has in the last forty years gone full circle from seeking to be part of the British scene, to rejecting it savagely, raiding it corporately and finally embracing it as part of our cultural heritage and our financial right, the event is apposite.⁴⁶

However, two odd moments in the tour suggest something less apposite: the *Sydney Morning Herald* records that the cast and audience at the matinee on 12 July stood in respect and marked the death of Laurence Olivier, by applauding him.⁴⁷ Olivier's relations with Australia were always in the high colonial vein: his tour of Australia in 1948 was staged by the British Council as a quasi Royal Tour of the colonies, and, at the height of his career, Olivier, to a large extent, embodied the extreme Anglocentric theatre tradition that plagued Australian theatre in the 1950s. Secondly, the fact that Wertenbaker's play was performed one day before the anniversary of the original convict production of *The Recruiting Officer*, that is on George III's birthday, 4 June 1789, ensured several inches of extra copy in the newspapers, but also suggests a reinscription of empire and, indeed, eighteenth-century colonialism.⁴⁸

Some Sydney reviewers were resistant: the *Financial Review* suggested that 'The new materialism sweeping Britain and Australia' might find 'the seriousness of the Court just a little quaint and more than a little embarrassing', and although the headline labelled the production 'The best of British' it also mused over precisely whose history was being played out on stage:

For an Australian audience it seems an entertaining and sometimes provocative look at the early days of the colony. But *Our Country's Good* is more radical than that. Whose history is it anyway? When does it stop being England's history and become Australia's? Australia was the world's first concentration camp. As descendants of the gulag we are inclined to see this. But it's really about England and this Royal Court presentation is a courageous step towards an examination of the English colonial conscience.⁴⁹

By contrast the *Sydney Review* was clear: 'There may be some who find it hard to suppress a cry of 'cultural cringe', but xenophobia has no place

50. *Sydney Review* (July 1989). This review then went on to make the extraordinary, and culturally cringing statement that the Royal Court performers 'conveyed an unmistakably erotic message hardly ever carried by Australian actors'.

51. Buse, *Drama + Theory*, reminds us that the prologue from which this phrase is taken wasn't actually written for the 1789 production of *The Recruiting Officer* but by a journalist in London after the event.

52. *SMH* (5 June 1989); *Sun Herald* (11 June 1989). The *Sun Herald* was one of the least enthusiastic reviews, and suggested that the play is 'not . . . wholly successful'. Much greater general resistance appeared on the other side of the Tasman. The New Zealand premiere at the Court Theatre (8 July 1989) prompted the *Dominion Sun Times* (16 July 1989) to fulminate: 'Wertenbaker has an annoying tendency to treat the audience as complete morons, continually beating us over the head to make sure that we've noticed her profound insights. . . . It is ironic that a play which emphasises the educative power of theatre should be so crudely didactic itself'. The Aboriginal character was played by an actor 'awkwardly blacked up' (*Star* 19 July 1989) which made the *Press* reviewer 'uncomfortable' (19 July 1989).

53. *Independent Monthly* (July 1989).

54. Susan Carlson, 'Issues of Identity', pp. 281–82.

in response to such fine work'.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the use of personal pronouns often became loaded and while '*Our Country's Good*' can refer either to Britain or to white Australia, it can never encompass Aboriginal Australia.⁵¹ For the *Sydney Morning Herald* the play 'creates a past so palpable that it resonates in the present, both in the Sceptred Isle and on the Fatal Shore' but the *Sun Herald* commented more aptly that 'Theatre, in the form of the corroboree, has an exceedingly long history in this country; by contrast, English-language theatre is, according to our best records, precisely two hundred years old'.⁵²

Meanwhile the Melbourne Theatre production of *Our Country's Good* struck out in a different direction and created a thoughtful but troubling reading of the play. The *Independent Monthly* particularly highlights:

The Aboriginal presence is stronger. At the Wharf, Jude Akuwudike is a ghostly, peripheral figure. In the Melbourne version, Tom Lewis becomes a positive force – still a spectator and victim, but one who makes haunting comment between scenes with his didgeridoo, giving a hooting, growling dimension that the Sydney production lacks.⁵³

This review also describes a change in the ending of the play: the paying audience instead of being backstage, positioned alongside the nervous but excited actors before the beginning of the performance of *The Recruiting Officer*, were positioned in front; thus, as Susan Carlson points out, the paying audience were positioned alongside the colonial and oppressive original audience.⁵⁴ Reviewer Geoff Milne was also more resistant than many of his Sydney counterparts to the feelgood element to *Our Country's Good* and commented:

we're left with perhaps a rather sentimentally optimistic ending that suggests that the play (Culture?) has been the salvation of its participants (the Nation?). In the light of actual Australian history this is not an easy argument to accept.⁵⁵

The Melbourne *Age* referenced real history in highlighting that 'the didgeridoo-playing Tom E. Lewis provides a reminder that there were others in the colony in 1789 than those registered on the official muster'.⁵⁶ The *Australian* felt that by comparison Aboriginal presence in the Royal Court production was 'minimal, perhaps token'.⁵⁷

My own reservations about *Our Country's Good* have always centred around the presentation of Aboriginality and the play's, for me, problematic deployment of a multi-purpose black actor, even though this is within what is established by the written text as a clearly Brechtian context, where casting need not deal in realism.⁵⁸ It is particularly interesting that while some British reviewers jibed at the brevity of the part of the Aboriginal, Sydney reviewers, in general, did not find the character 'token';⁵⁹ nor complain that 'Kenneally's scenes of aboriginal culture clashing with colonial forces dwindle into the figure of a single native in body paint who just utters three or four sentences'.⁶⁰ Of course, it is in the casting of what the dramatis personae of *Our Country's Good* describes as 'an Aboriginal Australian' that the Royal Court's intercultural status in Sydney was most apparent: a London based company

55. Geoffrey Milne, *Herald* (7 June 1989).

56. *The Age* (8 June 1989).

57. *The Australian* (8 June 1989).

58. See Dymkowski, 'The Play's the Thing', for an argument that this casting undercut the racism of characters such as Tench. Dymkowski, however, is discussing the production in its British context.

59. *City Limits* (15 September 1988).

60. *Independent* (12 September 1988).

61. Gilbert, 'Monumental moments', p. 40.

62. Headline in the *SMH* (30 May 1989).

63. *Sydney Review* (July 1989).

could not be expected to muster an Aboriginal actor easily in 1989. However, for an Australian company to cast a non-Aboriginal in the role would have been offensive. For me, the Sydney reviewers seem to have been according the Royal Court intercultural status, which let them off the hook in terms of race politics.

Helen Gilbert's analysis of Australia's theatrical negotiations of the Bicentenary emphasises the need some reviewers felt for something monumental, a need which was generally disappointed. She identifies:

an anxiety about the 'maturity' of Australian theatre itself: if a monumental moment could not be found in 1988 to demonstrate that it deserved to be recorded in the annals of the Bicentenary, then Australian theatre could be (mis)construed as still locked in some Oedipal struggle and therefore not firmly inserted into post-independence culture or history.⁶¹

In many ways the Royal Court visit to Sydney offered the chance of a more monumental piece of theatre than the events Gilbert analyses, and indeed the *Sydney Morning Herald* billed the Royal Court visit as 'The ultimate post-Bicentenary event'.⁶² However, *pace* the *Sydney Review* and its prohibition on discussions of 'cultural cringe', the entire theatrical exchange seems to beg for an anti-colonial critique, and to remind us that left-wing politics like the Royal Court's are almost as easily implicated in colonial gestures as the right-wing politics more usually associated with the imperial project.⁶³

The question 'Whose Country's Good?' remains problematic as far as the Bicentennial theatrical exchange is concerned. If Sydney could welcome the Royal Court performing Aboriginality, in a play about Thatcher's Britain, dressed up in period costume and almost incidentally located in Australia, then the cultural cringe seems to have been alive and kicking in that city in 1989. Meanwhile if London is most receptive to Aboriginal-centred Australian drama, then the dynamics of exoticism may be in play. However, while *Our Country's Good*, was the clear winner in the Bicentennial exchange stakes when measured by critical acclaim, ticket sales or book sales, yet, the Bicentennial onslaught on London theatre in 1988 does seem to have had a long term effect. Productions of Australian drama in London are not as rare as they used to be and by the time of the London Heads Up season of 2001, celebrating the centenary of Australian Federation, Australian drama and Australian productions were generally well attended and respectfully reviewed. The successful tours of Neil Armfield's production of *Cloudstreet*, although controversial in terms of Aboriginal identity politics, have also established for the London audiences that Australians can create masterly theatre even at the heart of Empire, that is the National Theatre Olivier stage. However, one 'good' to be derived from the hits and misses of the Bicentennial theatrical exchange is the acknowledgement that both Australian and UK theatre, when on tour, benefit from persuading reviewers and audiences to accept them as intercultural, and not to falsely recognise what may seem familiar, but what is actually culturally displaced and relocated 12,000 miles away from home.

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