



Leaving our classrooms for *Our Country's Good*

By Sophie Bush, editor of *Our Country's Good*,
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On the 16th March 2020, as I watched my Twitter feed stack up with the heartbreakingly dignified announcements of theatres taking the gut-wrenchingly difficult decision to close for their country's good, I was poignantly reminded of Ralph's words from the play's final scene:

'The theatre is like a small republic, it requires private sacrifices for the good of the whole'.
(Wertenbaker 2020 140)

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* is a play that has spoken to many moments in time and to many parts of the world; taking on a different relevance each time it is performed, be that by UK prison inmates, Australian Aboriginal actors, or in post-revolutionary Romania. Given this history, it is not surprising that many teachers feel our current situation presents an interesting and fertile context for introducing students to the play. Before I discuss some practical approaches for exploring the play during lockdown, let's think briefly about why the play might resonate so strongly with the concerns and anxieties of our present moment.

Firstly, it is a play about isolation, enforced separation and incarceration. Every character within it yearns for that they no longer have; grieves their distance from loved ones and loved places, as well as their loss of personal liberty. The dislocation they experience may well strike a chord with us today, as we miss – and in the worst cases mourn - friends and family, and struggle with significant restrictions to our daily lives.

Furthermore, it is a play about redemption; about rising above such hardships; about finding solace, friendship, community and purpose in unexpected places; and about the importance of art – and in particular, theatre – in adverse circumstances.

And finally – perhaps most crucially – it is a play that challenges those who engage with it not to let this powerful redemptive spirit obscure the difficult questions it has to ask about personal sacrifice, leadership, patriotism, jingoism and the measures we use to judge the value of a human life.

Don't be afraid to let your discussions about the play be 'derailed' by our current fears, frustrations, anger and compassion; let them find their way through it, like water coursing through a rock.

ACTING AND DIRECTING ACTIVITIES

Fantasy Casting

Imagine you can cast the play with any actors you like. They can be any combination of famous film stars, actors you've seen at your local theatre or your classmates. Justify your choices by explaining how the actors' attributes and qualities link to the requirements of the roles.

Monologues

The play has a number of satisfying and challenging monologues that lend themselves particularly well to solo working. These are found in the following scenes:

- Ralph Clark: 'The Loneliness of Men' (Act 1, Scene 4) or 'Ralph Clark Tries to Kiss His Dear Wife's Picture' (Act 1, Scene 9)
- Robert Sideway: 'An Audition' (Act 1, Scene 5)
- Ketch Freeman: 'Ralph Clark Tries to Kiss His Dear Wife's Picture' (Act 1, Scene 9)
- Liz Morden: 'Visiting Hours' (Act 2, Scene 1)
- Harry Brewer: 'Harry Brewer Sees the Dead' (Act 2, Scene 3)
- Ducking Smith: 'Duckling Makes Vows' (Act 2, Scene 8)

Hot-seating

This can be done live if you can use a video conferencing tool (such as Zoom) or a text-based chat tool (such as Google Hangouts) with your class. If this is not possible, you could collate questions for each character by email and circulate these to those working on each character.

Creative Writing

One of the easiest and most effective ways to develop character whilst working alone is through creative writing exercises.

In the play, we hear extracts from the actual diary of Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark, which Wertenbaker used as research for the play, alongside the journals of other First Fleet officers, including Captain Phillip. You can choose any of the characters from the play and write a series of journal entries (or letters home) based on various points throughout the play, or even points before the play begins or after it ends. Although most of the convicts would have been illiterate, you don't need to let this stop you imagining what they would write if they could. However, try to consider the voice, dialect and vocabulary of the character you are writing for, based on what we know about these things from the text of the play.

Alongside this work, you might want to consider keeping your own journal during this unconventional period in our lives. It might be interesting to compare your thoughts and feelings to those of the characters in the play and to note any common themes or emotions that appear.

Voice work

Because language and debate are so important to the play, several scenes lend themselves particularly well to presentation through an audio only medium, for example, by reimagining them as a radio play. These include (but are not limited to):

- 'Punishment' (Act 1, Scene 3)
- 'The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre' (Act 1, Scene 6)
- 'Harry and Duckling Go Rowing' (Act 1, Scene 7)
- 'Wisecracker and Mary Brenham Exchange Words' (Act 1, Scene 10)
- 'His Excellency Exhorts Ralph' (Act 2, Scene 2)

Think about the acting skills and techniques you need to employ to convey character effectively purely through voice, such as accent, pitch, rhythm, pace, enunciation and emphasis.

Foley Work

If you are transposing a scene for audio-only presentation, you don't just have to rely on actors' voices. You might also consider sound effects, which can be pre-recorded (many are available free online), or created live with the art of 'foley'. Think about how you might create sound effects for key moments in the play, such as the opening scene set on one of the First Fleet ships, or those where Harry is rowing or Wisehammer is moving bricks. How might it be possible to convey these actions with sound alone?

Thinking Forward

The hardest sections of the play to work through during lockdown are the big group rehearsal scenes:

- 'An Audition' (Act 1, Scene 5)
- 'The First Rehearsal' (Act 1, Scene 11)
- 'The Second Rehearsal' (Act 2, Scene 5)
- 'The Meaning of Plays' (Act 2, Scene 7)
- 'Backstage' (Act 2, Scene 11)

Act 2, Scene 6 ('The Science of Hanging') and Scene 10 ('The Question of Liz') are also made difficult for audio-only presentation, due to the centrality of Liz's silence.

However, by discussing *why* these scenes are unsatisfying to work on and present without having actors physically work together in the same space, you are identifying exactly what makes these scenes effective drama, and this will really help you, both with exam questions, and when you do have a chance to stage them.

DESIGN ACTIVITIES

Research past productions

Use the internet to find production photographs from past productions of the play. Consider and discuss the different approaches to set, costume, and lighting. Think about whether the design is naturalistic, representational, minimal or symbolic. How have designers used colour, texture, space and shape? Where are the audience in relation to the stage and what sort of relationship does the design encourage them to have with the production?

Production Sketchbook

For this activity, you will need a sketchbook, scrapbook or pieces of plain paper. Use these for sketching stage designs, floorplans, and the details of stage furniture and costumes, as well as for experimenting with colour palettes and, if you have more extensive art/craft supplies, with textures and material samples.

Model Box

For this, you will need an empty cardboard box and some basic art materials, such as paints or colouring pencils and card. You may also want to use something like clay or plasticine, or some natural materials such as twigs, leaves, stones, earth or sand. Use these to make a three dimensional model of your stage design.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Bush is Acting Head of Stage & Screen at Sheffield Hallam University and has previously taught at the Universities of Sheffield, Huddersfield and Manchester Metropolitan. Her research and teaching interests lie in the history, practice and politics of contemporary British Theatre. Her doctorate, on the work of Timberlake Wertenbaker, was awarded by the University of Sheffield in 2011, and in 2013, her first book *The Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker* was published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.

She is the editor of the new *Methuen Drama Student Edition of Our Country's Good*.

