

Our Country's Good
Amateur Players of Sherborne
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Date seen: 8 June 2026
Director: Jane McKenna

At one point in the play the First Governor says to Lieutenant Ralph Clark: 'A play is a world in itself, a kind of colony, and you must manage it'. Managing a production of *Our Country's Good* is a challenge, with the play consisting of so many fragments of various personal stories – a world in themselves - told across many short scenes, but the Director (Jane McKenna), cast and crew managed to bring it all together and allow all of the emotions to come through, including the powerful narration of Warren Clements as Killara, building up to the moving ending with the singing of *Amazing Grace*. It is a powerful play based on fact in which most of the characters were real people, and the Director and actors successfully brought out the various relationships and power-dynamics within the closed colony community. They conveyed well the wide variety of characters and their respective stories, and the cruelty, harshness and injustice of the legal system which had transported the convicts to Australia.

To have managed such a large cast in such a small space, both on stage and backstage, was a huge achievement; bravo to the Director, set design and construction team, and to all those actors and the stage management team. The restrictions of that relatively small space, with so many on stage at the same time, were made a virtue by using them to enhance the feeling of claustrophobia, physical and emotional, on both ship and shore. That atmosphere was created from the moment the audience entered the theatre, with the wooden planking effect and period colonial and First Nation Australian details having been extended around the walls of the auditorium and with some of the welcoming front of house staff in period costume. The opening scene with the convicts and marines on board the ship was superbly staged and acted, including the emotionally harrowing singing and flogging.

The action then moved to Australia where the creativity in staging and direction to make a virtue of the relatively small stage was on show in spades. At one point there was a large number of colonial officials, including the Governor, Reverend Johnson and several uniformed characters, on stage at the same time at what I understood to be a sort of officers' mess. It was staged by having them lined in two rows, one seated and the other standing behind, and this 'huddled' arrangement as they fondly shared memories of England reinforced the sense of them as confined and relying on each other.

In another scene Henry 'Harry' Brewer and Ann (Duckling) Smith were in a rowing boat. This was cleverly, simply and effectively represented by two chests with a loop at the top of each one to act as a rowlock and oars slid through these rowlocks. The staging and acting of the final scene, with John Newton (Jilly Hudson, who also played a marine) introducing the singing by the whole cast – and audience – of *Amazing Grace* by candlelight was itself amazing.

It was a large cast of 15, with most of the actors playing more than one part, and the acting showed great strength. The enlightened Governor (Patrick Knox) displayed an impressive gravitas and his good intentions shone through. Like Ralph and Harry, he was clearly well-meaning despite the harshness of the system in which he officiated. Harry Brewer (Gary Brooks who also played Captain Jeremy Campbell and the engagingly lively convict John Arscott) portrayed very well indeed an awkwardness and hesitancy in his growing relationship with the convict 'Duckling' (Hazel Perrett). This relationship was a crucial element of the play and it really worked. Their scene in the rowing boat in which Harry expressed his feelings while Duckling remained glumly silent, and then she told him how she felt, was a highlight of the play very strong acting by both. Powerful monologues were also given by both during the play, with Harry delivering a guilt-racked reminiscence about the convict he hanged and Duckling pleading in desperation to the sick and unconscious Harry, with the repetition of 'if you live, I will...' – another emotional highlight.

Lieutenant Ralph Clark (Sam Frost) and Mary Brenham (Charlotte Berry) were the other 'star-crossed' lovers breaching the captor/captive line, and this relationship too worked well, especially in the scene where the two rehearse together and become emotionally close. Ralph displayed a touching uncertainty about his situation in the colony and delivered very effectively a monologue in which he writes to his wife Betsy. Mary gave a strong performance as the shy and nervous young convict and the scene in which she rehearsed with Mary (Dabby) Bryant was excellent.

The characters of the convicts may have had, like their 'captors', flaws, but the cast playing them didn't have any weak links. The Rev. Richard Johnson (Gilly Savage, who also played a marine) presented a slightly sanctimonious but genuine concern for the moral welfare of the convicts. Liz Morden (Maureen Nethercott) gave a great performance as a convict full of uppity attitude and delivered a riveting monologue about her seedy life in London. 'Shitty' Meg (Rosi Castle who also played Lieutenant William Dawes) was wonderfully defiant with a burning energy and the pickpocket Robert Sideway (Clive Miller who also played the Deputy Judge Advocate) was warmly humorous in recounting to Ralph Clarke his time amid the hustle and bustle of London, with Drury Lane, the coaches, the ladies, and the fancy clothes. His enthusiasm to be involved in the performance of The Recruiting Officer was endearing and his over-the-top, theatrical acting style when rehearsing the part assigned to him, reminiscent of the rude mechanicals in A Midsummer Night's Dream, was delightful.

The hangman, Ketch (James) Freeman (Andrew Holt, who also played Lt. Governor Ross) was played subtly with a wry humour, as when he talked about saying his prayers. This contrasted to great dramatic effect with the gut-wrenching emotional scene in which he weighed and measures Liz Morden for her hanging.

John Caesar (David Pileri) was neatly changed from his actual origin being from Madagascar to being a Sicilian and was very good in the role. The audio narration by Killara (Warren Clements), a First Native, gave a powerful additional dimension to the play and John Wisenhammer (Andrew Middleton who also played Captain Watkin Tench) was superb. He brought a drole, dry humour to the part and the play and his

scene with Mary Brennan, where she is writing a letter and he talks about words and Dr. Johnson's dictionary, was superb.

The stand-out performance among this very strong and admirable cast was, for me, Mary 'Dabby' Bryant (Bev Taylor-Wade, who also played 2nd Lt. William Faddy). The subtlety of the characterisation and naturalism of the performance was very impressive, with just one example being the scene in which some of the convicts watched Wisehammer, Morden and Brennan rehearse. Their reactions to what they were witnessing were fascinating, including Duckling's exhaustion-driven sleep, and 'Dabby' Bryant's attention and emotional responses were riveting. So much of the power of the play lay in subtle touches like that.

The set, both design and construction, was an absolute triumph: both the opening setting of the convict transport ship and then the Australian coast – wonderful creativity and excellent attention to detail. The way in which the wooden planking effect ran around the auditorium, creating an immersive feel, was striking and the set for the ship, with the below decks, upper deck and the suggestion of a mast was expertly achieved, especially the dark, claustrophobic below decks visual effect and atmosphere.

The Australian shore set was also very impressive with its painted backdrop impression of sea, rocks and beach. Pebbles and sea creatures such as starfish had been added in and the effect of having rocks up either side of the stage with green foliage clinging to them was very evocative. The sound effects of chirruping insects and waves lapping on the shore enhanced this further.

The use of music to create atmosphere and underscore the themes, including during scene changes, was a strong and effective element of the production. Specific folk songs such as *Once I Had a Sweetheart* and *the Water is Wide* had been thoughtfully selected and the raw singing of a song in the first act/scene while a convict was being flogged was particularly moving.

Plaudits abound for the Costume Department – what an achievement! The overall effect and colour coordination of the convicts' light green costumes, with the distressed blouses, skirts, shoes and boots worked brilliantly and gave a unity to the group, underscoring their predicament. The lighting for the harsh Australian sun, contrasting with the darker effects for the moodier scenes, also worked wonders in helping depict the colonial settlement and its internal dramas. The Royal Navy and Royal Marines costumes were superb (intriguingly creative use of seat-belt clasps to serve as cross-belt plates for the white webbing?) and all the more impressive for having been made by APS members; so many required and so many costume-changes needed during the performance!

The creativity and evident enthusiasm around the whole production brought the whole thing together, with all of the elements blending. There were many powerful and emotional scenes, sometimes harrowing, but these did not overbalance or overwhelm the performance. They were counterpointed with humour, calm ruminations and considered, thoughtful speeches from both convicts and the governors and 'guards'. Congratulations to all, including the production team for the

excellent programme (Jane McKenna and Mark Lambert) with its background notes about the story of the play and the histories of the real people depicted in it.

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