IDENTITY(IES)
A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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 EXPERIENCING THE IDENTITY(IES) OF THE OTHER(S), FINDING THAT OF ONE’S OWN ON/THROUGH THE STAGE IN Wertenbaker’s Play OUR COUNTRY’S GOOD

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Abstract: Drawing attention to the immense potentialities of cultural, artistic and intellectual engagements and focusing particularly on the transformative and regenerative power of theatre in society, Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play Our Country’s Good (1988) depicts the (hi)story of the noteworthy changes and improvements that a group of underprivileged people experience as they gain access to art. Based on a historical event and set in a colonial environment, the play presents a fictionalized account of the real-life experiences of a group of convicts who, transported from Britain to Australia in 1787 as members of the first Australian Penal Colony, are given the opportunity to be actively involved in a theatrical performance and who, through that involvement, go –both individually and collectively– through a notable process of gaining awareness and self-(re)definition. As these convict-actors/actresses play their roles and experience the identities of socio-culturally, economically and hierarchically very different characters, they

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increasingly recognize the constructedness and, consequently, the questionable, challengeable and changeable nature of identities, social roles and positions. Wertenbaker depicts the production of a play within her play and demonstrates the civilizing, rehabilitating, liberating and equalizing power of cultural and artistic practices. This article, while presenting a detailed critical analysis of the dominant themes of class, cultural, racial, ethnic, gender and environmental discrimination and crucial issues like (in)equality, (in)justice, crime and punishment, displacement and (un)belonging as well as the formation and maintenance of identities within these boundaries, pays special attention to the dual function or the uses and abuses of language, discourse, representation, culture and art in relation to all these crucial subjects. There is a detailed discussion of the role of language and narratives not only as tools of constructing but also of deconstructing and invalidating oppressive and unjust social roles and systems, with a special emphasis on the power and benefits of cultural, intellectual and creative practices.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Literature, Feminist Theatre, Race-Class-Gender, Displacement, Identity Construction, Rewriting

Based on a historical event and set in a colonial environment dominated by racial, ethnic, class, gender and environmental discrimination, exploitation and violence, Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* (1988) presents and problematizes, on the one hand, crucial issues like (in)equality, (in)justice, (in)humaneness, crime and punishment, displacement and (un)belonging as well as the formation and maintenance of “identities” within these boundaries, and, on the other hand, the significant and dual function or the uses...
and abuses of language, narratives, representation, culture and art in relation to these crucial issues. In this context, effectively drawing the audience’s attention to the immense potentialities of cultural, intellectual and artistic engagements and focusing particularly on the transformative and regenerative power of theatre in society, Wertenbaker’s play depicts the (hi)story of the noteworthy changes and improvements that a group of underprivileged people experience as they gain access to art.

The play presents a fictionalized account of the real-life experiences of a group of convicts who, transported from Britain to Australia in 1787 as members of the first Australian Penal Colony established in Sydney Cove in New South Wales, are given the opportunity to be actively involved in a theatrical performance and who, through that involvement, go –both individually and collectively– through a notable process of gaining awareness and self-(re)definition. Under the control of the colonial authorities, the convicts put on stage a play. Wertenbaker depicts the production of a play within her play. This is a demonstration and celebration of the civilizing, rehabilitating, liberating and equalizing power of (especially collective) cultural and artistic practices even under the most oppressive circumstances.

The historical event that the play is based on –the staging of a play by a group of the convicts of the First Fleet in the Australian Penal Colony in New South Wales in 1789– was first recorded as “factual” data in some historical sources like actual journals, letters, and other written accounts about the settlement. Then this historical data was fictionalized in the form of a novel by the Australian novelist Thomas Keneally in his historical novel The Playmaker (1987). Then in 1988, the (hi)story was renarrated by Wertenbaker, this time in the dramatic genre, with the title Our Country’s Good. Thus, from the very beginning of the audience’s/reader’s encounter with Wertenbaker’s play onwards, the narrative concepts of rewriting