

## Libby Purves



### Our Country's Good at the Rose Theatre, Kingston

Theatre review



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#### Libby Purves

Libby Purves is a writer, radio broadcaster and Times chief theatre critic. Her career began on BBC local radio and in 1978 she became the youngest ever presenter of radio 4's today programme for four years. Leaving to pursue print journalism, raise children and write 12 novels, she continues as host of the Midweek programme.

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It opens with a shipboard flogging and a sad ballad of exile fading into the ancient drone of the didgeridoo. Innocently majestic, Seun Shote steps forward as an aboriginal Australian, gazing at the First Fleet of 1788 with its convicts and soldiers. "Is it a dream that has lost its way?" Maybe. It was a brutal thing, this deportation of thousands for trifling thefts, some of them pitifully young or old, some girls who were sold into prostitution in childhood. Those who survived fever, flogging or hanging were to be colonists. A new nation.

Timberlake Wertenbaker's marvellous, passionate play won an Olivier in 1988 at the Royal Court and here gets a full-blooded revival under Alastair Whatley. Imaginative re-creation of history frames a timeless affirmation of the power of dramatic art: of the self-transcending relief of sharing well-patterned words, identities and ideas. The governor frets about the narrow degradation of the convicts, and wishes they had some culture; a 2nd Lieutenant (played with vulnerable seriousness by Christopher Harper) offers to direct Vanbrugh's *The Recruiting Officer*.

The debate among the militia splendidly reflects many modern rows about drama in prisons: some scoff at the waste of time, the apparent indulgence, the danger to discipline, while the Governor champions the usefulness of "refined literate language, well-balanced lines, expressing sentiments they are not used to". Ten actors play 22 parts, doubling and trebling: Adam Best's brutal Major becomes a tormented hangman, Jenny Ogilvie's prissy Captain his convict whore. Rachel Donovan's three parts include a wonderful Dabby, the homesick mouthy Devon girl, and Emma Gregory, as the roughest of the lot, rises to extraordinary dignity in the shadow of the gallows.

The cruelty pulls no punches, but there are moments of great comedy in the quarrelsome rehearsals (especially Jack Lord's impersonations of how a self-absorbed pickpocket reckons Garrick would do it.) The great cavernous space of this theatre, set only with sacks, poles and boxes as befits a wilderness camp, conveys the isolation and loneliness of "this foreign, upside-down desert". If there is a disadvantage it is that more intimate scenes feel drowned, almost inaudible. But its power remains strong. As the Aborigine says, peering at the colonists, they are for us all "a swarm of ancestors, come through unattended cracks in the sky".



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