

Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker: *The Love of the Nightingale* at the Women and Memory Forum and *Our Country's Good* at the AUC (1998)

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By Nehad Selaiha**

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Some dramatists ought to be taken in moderate, well-spaced draughts; otherwise they can give you a terrible emotional hangover. Timberlake Wertenbaker (the famous American playwright living Britain) is of this class of writers; and yet, last week, I was persuaded to take two strong doses of her work within two days of each other.

The first dose was administered at the Women and Memo Research Centre, founded and run by self-effacing but extremely energetic Hoda El-Sadda. She had rung earlier in the week to invite me to an open demonstration and discussion of a new project for a theatre production centering on violence against women. The project is the brainchild of Dalia Basiouny, a young feminist director, and the play she has picked out and done in Egyptian Arabic (to bring its horrors nearer home, as she proudly declares) is Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* - a harrowing drama of incest, rape, and physical mutilation. It is based on an old Greek legend about Tereus, son of King Ares of Daulis, who weds Procne, daughter of Pandion, king of Athens, rapes her sister Philomele, and cuts out her tongue, and is duly punished by Procne: she slays their son, Itys, and serves up his flesh to him at the dinner table. The gods, seeing the sisters fleeing with Tereus in hot pursuit, axe in hand, decide that things have gone too far and promptly put an end to this gruesome farce: they transform the trio into birds – a nightingale, a swallow, and a hoopoe (or a hawk in some versions of the legend). In Wertenbaker's play, it is Philomele who kills Itys, while his mother holds him, and the cannibalism is omitted.

Basiouny had taken her project to the Centre hoping for moral and financial support. Of the former, she got plenty; but the Centre, which suffers from a chronic shortage of funds and is already sponsoring research for a feminist production by Caroline Khalil, another young director, could not take on the project. El-Sadda and her partners, however, did not leave Basiouny in the lurch and decided to organize an evening for her at the Centre and invite to it feminists, critics, and prospective sponsors to discuss ways of funding and launching the project. It was up to Basiouny to convince her audience of the potential value of her planned production and of her competence as director.

She did both admirably, giving a thorough-and detailed description of the proposed work, with costume and set sketches, production tables, rehearsal schedules and background research. She also treated us to a

succinct analysis of the play's structure, pointing out its technical merits, powerful dramatic images, and ironical manipulation of different levels of language and modes of speech to expose the power hierarchies and the gender biases underlying human interaction. What impressed me most was Basiouny's perceptive awareness of the play's innate theatricality. She dwelt with relish on Scene 5, which takes place in an Athenian theatre and weaves in scenes from Euripides' *Hippolytus* which form a crucial dramatic thread and a shattering, ironical prophecy; she equally appreciated the stunning use of gigantic puppets (not unlike the ones Peter Schumann used for his Bread and Puppet Theatre in the sixties) in the Bacchae carnival scene in which Philomele stages, with their help, in front of her sister, among the revelers and acrobats, a mute, brutal reenactment of her rape and mutilation.

It was obvious that Basiouny, though a keen feminist, had treated the play as a work of art, not as a feminist tract. If we coughed up the money for the production, she concluded, or persuaded others to do so, she would give us, she promised, an enjoyable and entertaining piece of theatre. I believed her. The two scenes that were read from the Arabic version of the play proved Basiouny to be a competent and sensitive translator. The audience was moved by Philomele's suffering, shocked to laughter by the coarseness of Niobe's ribald comments on the rape of her mistress, and enraged by the brutality of Tereus. That evening, Basiouny gave us a tantalizing taste of what she and her troupe, Sabeel, have been cooking and are ready to serve provided someone foots the bill. I hope that someone turns up soon before the *Nightingale* project gets stale and we lose a production which not only addresses an issue of great urgency for women, but promises also to address it beautifully.

My second dose of Wertenbaker was more elaborately prepared, dressed and served by Tori Haring-Smith and the Theatre Group of the AUC, and I consumed it with great relish at the Wallace. Like *The Love of the Nightingale*, *Our Country's Good* (which won both *The Evening Standard* Most Promising Playwright Award, and the Laurence Olivier Play of the Year Award in 1988) features violence, but this time not just against women, but against all the deprived, down-trodden poor, male and female. Rather than a mythical time and place, it is firmly set in a definite historical context and based largely on fact. The story behind the staging of the very first play ever to be put on in Australia was recounted in Thomas Kinneally's novel *The Playmaker* and this provided Wertenbaker with much of her material. The setting is the first convict colony in what later became Sydney, and the events span nearly two years - from the arrival of the First Fleet with its load of prisoners at Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, to the performance of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* by the convicts on 4 June, 1789.

The planned production engages the center of Wertenbaker's play, and becomes the bone of contention between two factions, the matrix of the dramatic conflict and its driving force. It is a play about theatre, not just its artistic side but also the material and political conditions of making it, the stories and memories of the actors, their hang-ups and daily struggle to go on. As the convicts move back and forth between the stage reality of Farquhar's fictional world and the actual reality of their life in the colony, the play changes mood, language and rhythm, swinging from hilarious comedy and even farce to violent tragedy and bleak despair. But it ends on a triumphant note: theatre survives, even though the actors are poor players and wretched convicts doomed to roam the earth or die. Michael Billington described *Our Country's Good* in *The Guardian* as "a moving and affirmative tribute to the transforming power of drama." It is also an affirmation of the healing power of theatre and its effectiveness as a mode of political resistance.

Director Tori Haring-Smith and her crew (Timaree McCormick, set; Hilary Oak, costumes, Sami

Shawky, light, Akram Al-Sharif and Mona Bur, sound; and Hazem Shebl, photography and technical director) composed a beautiful, uncluttered and highly evocative audio-visual context for the actors' performance. This would not have been possible if Haring-Smith had not decided, as soon as she took over as artistic director of the AUC Theatre Group, to dismantle the interior structure of the Wallace. She did away with the traditional picture-frame stage and the fixed seating and created a versatile space that challenges the imagination of directors and scenic designers and can accommodate almost any type of performance (grand musicals excepted).

In this production, the audience was seated in tiers on three sides of the performance space. The fourth side was a wall was covered with what looked like old, ragged sails or curtains. The floor was covered with wooden boards, with thin slits between them to allow for special lighting effects and for clouds of smoke to seep through at one point. There were also two trapdoors, and some rigged-up ropes suggesting the rigging of a vessel of a stage. The image of a bare stage was superimposed on the image of a ship-deck with a hold underneath, and this duality, together with the incongruity of setting realistic scenes supposed to take place on land on board an imaginary ship or stage, transformed the whole set, with the help of the music and sound effects, into a rich, multiple metaphor. At one level it told the audience that the convicts' lot on land was no better than at sea, and constantly reminded us of their dream of sailing back and of their longing for home. But at other levels, it spoke of the lonely and hazardous voyage of life and echoed Shakespeare's "all the world is a stage." This metaphor burst upon us with full force at the very end when, in a magnificent coup de theatre, the sail/curtain covering the fourth wall 'became' the theatre curtain which rose as the actors faced it, to reveal a large mirror, reflecting the audience as well.

The young actors, a large cast of 17, bravely accepted the challenge of this extremely demanding play, and some had the added burden of playing more than one part. They acquitted themselves well on the whole and what they lacked in terms of skill and experience they made up for with their dedication and enthusiasm. Performances that stood out include Karim Hussein's Arscott, Mohamed Dessouky's Sideway, Teymour Hosny's Harry Brewer, Samar Al-Saleh's Mary, Salma Al-Sayed's Liz, Nadine Khadr's Meg, and Suzette Swanson's Dabby.

Going out of the Wallace I can't help but think of Dalia Basiouny, and all our young, struggling directors. I hope they will not have to go to the ends of the earth and put up with flogging and hanging before they can put on their plays.



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