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Review

Our Country's Good

Promethean Theatre Ensemble at Athenaeum Theatre (see Fringe & storefront). By Timberlake Wertenbaker. Dir. Stephen F. Murray. With Sam Wootten, Kyla Embry, Dan Granata, Anne Korajczyk, Brian Pastor, Ned Record, Christine Reinhardt.



CON MEN Mark Pracht and Dan Granata perform the prison revue.



In the earliest days of the ultimate penal colony that would become Australia, a progressive governor appoints an idealistic, theater-loving young military officer to direct a group of convicts in a play. The director (Wootten) chooses the Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer*, by Irish playwright George Farquhar, and the company begins to rehearse despite the obstacles thrown up by illiteracy, low rations and the hostility of higher-ranking officers. It might be easier to believe it's the fairy tale it sounds like, but it's based on fact; Farquhar's play, performed by convicts, was Australia's theatrical premiere.

Wertenbaker's adaptation frames the story as a defense of theater ("people who can't pay attention shouldn't go to the theater," her director notes, and we're scarcely ones to argue), but also as a defense of education, of the value of engendering self-worth and of rehabilitation as a loftier goal of penal systems than punishment. It's both backstage comedy and heartrending drama, and with nearly every actor doubling or tripling (throwing red coats over their convicts' rags to play military officers, for instance, echoing the colonists' own playacting), it's an intensely challenging play. Miraculously, Murray and his team rise to the challenge though it's only Promethean's second mainstage production, achieving more than some companies 20 years their senior could. This play explicitly outlines the power of theater without seeming cloying or desperate, and Murray and his excellent young cast have made it a powerful case.—*Kris Vire*