

## ABOUT THE PLAY

*Our Country's Good* is based on Thomas Keneally's 1987 novel *The Playmaker*. Developed from letters, journals and written accounts, the historical novel tells the story of the first British penal colony in Australia. The play begins in the hold of the ship in 1787 as it arrives in Botany Bay. The convicts, 548 men and 188 women, were shipped to Australia because the English upper and middle classes were frightened by the rising crime rates that came with a growing and largely unemployed underclass. The crimes they committed were often petty, minor offences against property. The 294 military men who also endured the 252 day sea journey were sent, Major Robbie Ross suggested, "because they blame us for losing the war in America." Forty-eight people died in this passage. Governor Arthur Phillip, in a quest for more humane treatment, perhaps rehabilitation, finds an ally in 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ralph Clark, who agrees to direct the prisoners in a production of George Farquahr's bawdy comedy, *The Recruiting Officer*.

As rehearsals progress, floggings, abuse, severe food shortages and mutiny among marines and prisoners threaten to stop the production. The "actors" work to understand Farquahr's world and language and what, if any, relevance it has to their world. Through the process they learn to work together, to behave like their "betters" and to begin to behave like better people. Seeing and speaking from another vantage point has an effect. *Our Country's Good* challenges ideas of class, personality and our assumptions about civilized behavior, as it explores the redemptive qualities of theater. Can people change? Can societies give everyone a chance? What do we lose by not trying? Then there's the native question which subtly frames the entire dialogue. A lone Aboriginal Australian watches the ship arrive at the top of the play, then views the final play within a play from a distance. He is clearly suffering from smallpox. *Our Country's Good* looks at the question of how we decide who we are from a dizzying range of perspectives. This play challenges us, as all good theater does, to remake our world, refine our words and look into the future for better possibilities.