

## Beat Magazine

Convict 002

Sam Cooney | Sunday Sep 30th, 2007 | [0 comments](#)



What do former Guantanamo Bay detainee 002 David Hicks and fictional convict Rufus Dawes have in common? This production, written and directed by David Mence for White Whale Theatre, which combines two renowned Australian stories of imprisonment to explore issues of societal fear and systems of justice and incarceration.

Convict 002 is an ambitious theatrical adaptation of Marcus Clarke's historic novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Set in the early hours of colonial Australia, this tragic tale is presented using a stark, minimalistic set, relying on the collective imagination of the cast and audience, as well as unobtrusive yet effective stage sound and lighting. We follow Rufus Dawes, a man convicted of high treason, as he is exiled to the ends of the earth, and subsequently tormented beyond belief. Intermixed with the narrative is a line of audacious political comment, drawing parallels between the treatment of convicts in Georgian England and of prisoners in today's political climate.

Adapting Clarke's epic work of fiction to the stage is a mammoth task. The original book is over 500 pages with a myriad of characters and settings working to colour the melodramatic tricks and fantastic coincidences typical of novelists in Victorian times. Then to attempt to interweave current political themes throughout the production, all in fewer than two hours, is almost demanding too much. This is proven in the cast's performances. Solid across the board, with a couple of outstanding individual efforts, the plot leaps are so large that the actors are striving to catch up and arrive in the present. The audience is given slabs of narrative, randomly broken up by forthright political statements meaning the challenge of incorporating an entertaining story with 'a message' is not quite met. Please don't misunderstand me; both the tale and 'the message' are powerful on their own, but rarely find a common ground upon which to flourish.

The most poignant moments occur when the political stabs succeed in paralleling David Hicks with Rufus Dawes. We see Dawes tortured so that he confesses to whatever they ask of him, even if untrue, and we hear one character state "to have law and order, there must be a place outside of law and order" referring to both English colonies and Guantanamo Bay. Dawes is told that "this is a military commission, not a court of law – you have no right to give evidence", to which he responds "spare me this mockery of justice", and Port Arthur prison, with its revolutionary constant supervision, is described as "the future...an all-seeing eye".

The performances of the cast vary. Rufus Dawes (Ananth Gopal) is largely unconvincing, although shines in a couple of monologues that are almost ripped from the pages of the original novel. John Rex (Rob Marshall), Sarah Purfoy (Erin Oliver) and Major Vickers (Nick Masters) remain flat in their supporting roles, and Sylvia Vickers (Brooke Antulov), while extremely bewitching, does not portray the innocence that her character requires. Reverend North (Tom Booth), unseen for a large part, is not allowed much freedom except to join other persons and storylines together. Crow (Morgan Maguire) is a cut above all these, revelling in the volume and inanity of her dim-witted convict.

A very special mention must go to Gabbett (Peter Reid), for his remarkably repulsive interpretation of the snarling, shuffling prisoner. Conjuring up images of Gollum from Lord of the Rings, the audience was truly and delightedly appalled throughout the performance. However, the night was completely stolen by the nauseating and evil Captain Maurice Frere (Shane Lee). Although not immediately prominent, Lee worked himself up into a performance that flaunted both his experience and talent. With the cold eyes of a shark, Captain Frere reduced the human convicts to broken husks, and his wrath and anger emanated throughout the small auditorium. He alone is a massive motivation to see the play.

Convict 002, with its high-reaching aspirations, accurate and fiery dialogue, challenging political thrusts and a couple of exceptional solo performances, succeeds as a theatrical production. Although irregular in pace and slightly too forceful at times leading to a somewhat disjointed dramatic piece, David Wence presents a wonderfully confrontational translation of Marcus Clarke's magnum opus. The hopelessness and utter desperation of a prisoner suffering tragic injustice rings as strongly today as it did all those years ago.