



# The Conditions of Speech: Voice, Power, and Authorship in the Plays of Timberlake Wertenbaker

**By Jill Szoo Wilson**  
[www.jillszoowilson.com](http://www.jillszoowilson.com)

Timberlake Wertenbaker's dramaturgy resists the illusion that history presents itself as stable, inherited, or complete, unfolding instead across her plays as a contested field of voices, omissions, and revisions in which narration becomes inseparable from the structures of power that determine who may speak and how meaning takes shape over time.

Where Harold Pinter locates meaning in silence, allowing absence to carry emotional and psychological weight, Wertenbaker locates it within narration itself, in the act of telling and retelling, so that her theatre turns toward the question of authorship. Wertenbaker often asks who is permitted to say what happened and under what conditions that permission is granted.

In, the stage becomes a site of layered authorship in which historical reality, imposed cultural structure, and emergent subjectivity exist simultaneously. A group of transported convicts, situated within a British penal colony in Australia, rehearse and ultimately perform *The Recruiting Officer* (the play within the play), a text written in another century, under another regime, and for another audience. The story enters this new context as both an instrument of discipline and a potential tool of transformation.

The theatrical event, as Wertenbaker constructs it, unfolds across these overlapping frames, and the language the convicts are asked to speak carries the imprint of authority, shaped in advance by a system that has positioned them as subjects rather than speakers. In the process of rehearsal, that condition begins to shift, as the repetition of borrowed lines gives way to a more unstable and revealing dynamic in which language, though still external, becomes something that can be inhabited.

The tension of the play resides within this movement between recitation and recognition, where the act of speaking becomes a negotiation with the terms under which speech is made available. Within this structure, Liz Morden's trajectory acquires its force as her initial refusal to speak in her own defense gives way, later in the play, to a performance of startling clarity and precision.

This shift unfolds as an acquisition of voice within a system that has persistently denied her access to it.

What changes in this moment extends beyond interior feeling and into her relationship to language itself. At the beginning of the play, that language circulates around her as accusation and judgment, forming a structure in which she holds no standing, so that her silence registers as the visible consequence of exclusion.

When she takes on the language of The Recruiting Officer, the shift occurs with precision, as the words present themselves as structure, held, tested, and measured, allowing the audience to perceive their continued externality even within the act of speaking, where a reorganization begins to take place and repetition starts to function as access.

The moment derives its power from its lack of resolution. Liz occupies language provisionally, aware of its instability and its dependence upon the conditions that permit its use. Wertebaker presents voice as something granted, shaped, and always subject to withdrawal, and the theatre becomes a space that exposes the conditions under which speech becomes possible. Wertebaker's use of doubling intensifies this instability, as actors move between the roles of convicts and the characters within Farquhar's play, collapsing distinctions between past and present, fiction and history in a way that complicates identity and requires the audience to hold multiple realities at once while witnessing how narrative is constructed, borrowed, and reframed. Through this structure, authorship reveals its dependence upon prior language, as no voice emerges in isolation and each articulation carries the imprint of what has preceded it, reinforcing the play's central concern with the contingent nature of speech.

This concern with narrative authority deepens in, where Wertebaker turns to the myth of Philomela, approaching it as a structure to be interrogated rather than preserved, within which the violence at the center of the narrative—Tereus's assault and Philomele's subsequent mutilation—renders the relationship between language and power brutally visible, as the removal of speech becomes literal and embodied. Within this framework, voice emerges as something that can be stripped away at the level of the body itself.

Wertebaker extends the narrative beyond that moment of rupture by introducing, through Philomele's act of weaving her story into a tapestry, an alternative form of authorship in which image and texture assume narrative function and meaning persists within the conditions that attempt its erasure.

Procne's position further complicates the structure of knowledge and control, as her status as both sister and queen situates her within a system of partial authority, while her understanding of events unfolds through fragments shaped by what is disclosed and what remains concealed. The emergence of truth takes the form of reconstruction rather than revelation, requiring assembly, interpretation, and response. Meaning accumulates through time, shaped by the pressures of concealment and disclosure, reinforcing Wertebaker's broader exploration of

how narrative authority operates under constraint.

In *After Darwin*, the instability of voice takes on a distinctly intellectual form, as Wertebaker shifts from the contested terrain of history and myth into the equally fraught domain of scientific authorship, where the question concerns how knowledge is produced, circulated, and revised across time. By situating Charles Darwin within an ongoing field of discourse, rather than presenting him as a singular origin point, the play reveals the extent to which even foundational ideas depend upon their reception, as each articulation of Darwin's theory encounters response, reinterpretation, and gradual transformation through use.

This process becomes legible within the exchanges where Darwin's language, often treated as definitive, begins to shift under the pressure of those who engage with it, so that what initially presents itself as explanation gradually registers as argument, and what carries the weight of discovery acquires a provisional quality, contingent upon the listener, the context, and the moment of its reception. Wertebaker allows authority to disperse across the voices that surround it, revealing that knowledge emerges through sustained interaction, as statements gain or lose stability depending on how they are taken up, challenged, or extended.

The structure of the play mirrors the process it describes, as language undergoes a form of theatrical evolution shaped by variation, response, and adaptation, so that ideas, once articulated, shift in meaning as they pass between speakers. In this way, authorship relocates from the origin of the idea to its ongoing negotiation, revealing that what we recognize as knowledge depends upon the conditions under which it circulates.

Across these plays, Wertebaker constructs a theatre of inquiry in which characters navigate systems of language that both constrain and enable them, and where meaning emerges through negotiation, so that voice remains contingent, shaped by the structures that permit or deny its expression.

If Wertebaker's theatre is structured around the instability of voice, then the actor's task extends beyond the revelation of character into the precise tracking of how character forms through language, as speech is acquired, borrowed, resisted, or withheld within conditions that precede and shape the self.

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## Acting Wertebaker: Language, Authorship, and the Performed Self

To perform Timberlake Wertebaker is to enter a dramaturgical field in which character and language remain inseparable, requiring the actor to sustain psychological truth while attending to the shifting conditions through which that truth becomes expressible, so that identity emerges through speech. In *Our Country's Good*, the actor must hold simultaneously the position of the convict and the role the convict learns to play, not as a static doubling but as an ongoing negotiation in which the language of The Recruiting Officer resists immediate ease in

the body and must be tested, repeated, and gradually brought into use.

A Meisner-based approach grounds this process in truthful response, as the actor begins with the difficulty of speaking the text, allowing friction to remain present in rehearsal so that the formality or distance of the language becomes playable, shaping the rhythm of interaction and gradually shifting, through repetition, from imitation toward use, until the moment at which the language begins to land on the partner and the scene acquires immediacy. From a Uta Hagen perspective, the actor locates the stakes within the act of speaking itself, asking what it means to articulate words that determine one's standing within a system, so that the objective centers on securing footing, maintaining presence, and holding position, with language functioning as the instrument through which that effort is enacted.

Liz Morden's trajectory sharpens this problem, as her early silence operates as active engagement structured through attention, registration, and withholding. When she speaks, the actor sustains containment, allowing each word to carry weight through its placement, as the objective remains fixed on claiming space within a system that governs access and produces language that feels earned through its relation to circumstance.

In *The Love of the Nightingale*, the removal of speech reorganizes technique, requiring the actor to shift toward physical action, where response continues through attention to partner and environment and where intention becomes legible through gesture and stillness grounded in specific, repeatable actions. In *After Darwin*, the actor navigates intellectual language through objective-driven action, ensuring that each idea operates as an attempt to persuade, challenge, or defend, so that thought registers as behavior within the scene.

Across Wertebaker's plays, the actor tracks shifts in language as they move between borrowed, discovered, and withheld forms, with each state registering physically through changes in timing, breath, and relational focus, allowing the audience to perceive the conditions under which speech occurs. Wertebaker's dramaturgy presents the self as something formed, challenged, and revised through these conditions, so that performance becomes an act of sustained attention to the interplay between language and power.

Where Pinter's silences create space for what remains unspoken, Wertebaker's structures reveal the mechanisms that determine who speaks, directing attention toward the conditions that make speech possible and extending theatre's capacity to render visible the processes through which meaning, identity, and authority emerge.