Rolla Rolls On: Kotzebue and Sheridan’s *Pizarro*

Kotzebue Picnic / Picknick
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Research Areas: Theatre & Performance Studies / Critical Indigenous Studies

*Against the Current and Into the Light: Performing Land and History in Coast Salish Territories and Vancouver’s Stanley Park* (2020 MQUP)
Kotzebue & Sheridan

• Sheridan’s adaptation is from Kotzebue’s massive 2 play 10-act extravaganza.

• *Die Sonnenjungfrau* ("The Sunmaiden" in English) the play first one to feature Kotzebue's hero Rolla. First performed 1789, published 1791.

• Sequel - *Die Spanier in Peru oder Rollas Tod* ("The Spanish in Peru, or The death of Rolla") - first performed 1795 and published 1796.

• Kotzebue’s works are (in part) based on a historical novel, *Les Incas* by Jean-Francois Marmontel (trans into English in 1777)
  • ... which had been inspired by Francois Raynal’s *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in East and West Indies* and Scottish historian William Robertson’s *History of America*—in all these historical works, the Spanish Conquistadores appear extremely violent - real target is the Catholic church

• All sources involved the characters of Pizarro and Alonzo. Rolla (the Peruvian warrior) however, was Kotzebue’s addition
Kotzebue-mania – London 1790s

• Contemporary reactions to Kotzebue’s popularity show both an emerging **Romantic aesthetic of originality** and its **nationalistic impetus**.

  • “Sickly and stupid German Tragedies” - Wordsworth Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)
  • London audiences were in the grips of a “cruel disease” that the playwright and satirist Frederic Reynolds called “Kotzebue-mania” - “patients” of this disease were “afflicted with a childish passion for noise, faintings, the startings and ravings of others deeply affected with the same.”
  • The sickness made “women of every rank... divest themselves of a great part of their clothes” and “cut off their hair.” The symptoms of Kotzebue-mania were especially apparent in the theatres where, “the people thronged” and where “the old and the young, the grave and the gay, hastened like insects, to flutter round the flame of licentiousness.”

• Kotzebue-mania is described as an addiction to a false and delusive, but irresistible artistic drug, but these symptoms also hide something far more serious: an **invasion of foreign literary standards**, weakening and conquering the otherwise healthy state of British literary taste such that “crimes were metamorphosed into virtues, and religion and decency were thrown aside like old garments.”
Rolla in *Pizarro* (Kotzebue’s character)
Patriotic
Defending from Invaders
Elvira (adapted for Siddons)

- Moral centre
- Turns on Pizarro for ethical reasons (not out of love for Alonzo – as in Kotzebue)
- Expanded ending – Pizarro’s death

Ambivalence and remorse
Afterlife ...

**British Repertoire**

- Immediately re-performed in London summer theatres, with Rolla winning Cora... Burlesques and parodies

- Rolla's Speech recirculates - 1803 to organize volunteer militia as "Sheridan's Address to the People!"

- "Historically accurate" version in 1856 by Charles Kean - Pizarro doesn't die, animal furs for costumes, ethnographic sources for ceremony

- Rolla considered equal to Shakespearean tragic roles of Brutus, Othello and Richard III

- Charlotte Cushman as Pizarro (cover)
  - Queer Theatre Histories
  - US actor / UK performances
  - Renowned in tragic roles all genders
Circum-Atlantic World *Pizarro* Performances

African / enslaved peoples
"Horizontal" relations with colonized peoples

- Jamaican "Jonkonnu" yuletide performances by enslaved peoples (1830s)
- African Theatre Company in NYC (1st African American company 1821-24) performed 4x
- Ira Aldridge (1st professional African American tragic actor) --> first role was Rolla (~1820s)
India

- 4 versions extent; 2 in Marathi, and one each in Urdu and Guajarati

- Adaptations
  - Elvira Hindu, Pizarro Muslim; Rolla her Hindu lover who rescues her
  - Spain/Peru = Turkey/ India

- Silent film *Blood for Blood* (1920)
Whiteness in US - "Playing Indian"

- In US within months of opening in London, and every season until 1863 Successful marriage of Alonzo and Cora model for hybridity, creole identity

- Edwin Forrest playing Rolla inspired John Augustus to write *Metamora* (1829)

- Rolla’s costume used in Jim Crow blackface minstrel play by T.D. Rice (1837)

- Mormon "national play" (first performed in 1844 to raise funds for legal defense of Joseph Smith) - identified with Indigenous persecuted Peruvians
Ongoing questions ...

• Circulation of Kotzebue’s Peruvian plays in the repertoire in Germany?
• Did Kotzebue write any other plays set in the Americas?
• Spanish invasion on German stages? Also related to anti-Catholic sentiments?
• Connections to Karl May’s Winnetou novels? And contemporary German engagement with the Americas and Indigeneity?