

## STAGING THE ARCTIC 1819-1909 AND 2014

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In 2014, the European Capitals of Culture were the Latvian capital Riga, and Umeå, in the north of Sweden. Umeå won the competition against the university city Lund in the south of Sweden, to a great extent because of the prominent presence of the indigenous Sami population in the planned events. To promote the town before the year as Capital of Culture, a number of organisations participated in the “Caught by [Umeå]” tour of 7 major European cities between 5 September and 26 October 2013, with the aim to “pique people’s curiosity and interest” (“Umeå goes on tour” 2013). Among the participants were the tourist website Visit Sweden (“Visit Sweden” 2013), the tourist attractions Guitars – The Museum (“Guitars” 2013), ICEHOTEL Jukkasjärvi (“ICEHOTEL Jukkasjärvi” 2013) – incidentally located almost 600 kilometres north of Umeå – the food event company Måltidsvision (“Måltidsvision: Storytelling by Food” 2013), the Sámi Handicraft Foundation Sámi Duodji (“Sámi Duodji” 2013), the EU-funded project Designlabland (“Designlabland” 2013), the music and video blog Hammock Sessions (“Hammock sessions” 2013) and Umeå University. Blocks of ice were placed in strategic places in the visited cities, and in a central location, there was a hub in the form of a giant plastic ice cube where there were lectures, food, exhibitions, artist performances etc., all with northern or Sami-related themes. To create an interest in Umeå as the 2014 Capital of Culture, the project participants relied on two of the most long-standing Arctic emblems in Western history: ice and indigenous culture.

Neither feature is particularly prominent in the modern, multicultural town Umeå has become, nor are they representative of the project participants as a group. Their presence in the campaign is instead evidence of a commodification of northern culture and experience, which is in itself a sign of modernity. The fact that the ice cubes were produced together with ICEHOTEL Jukkasjärvi from the material “snice,” a kind of packed snow and ice, is a powerful symbol of the fact that the Arctic can no longer manifest itself in a natural way but needs to be literally manufactured. Like the artificial ice, tourist experience in the North is becoming more and more fictive and less and less connected to the actual ethnographical reality (see Strömberg 2009, 223–236 for a discussion of ICEHOTEL and the commercialisation of the northern landscape). Arctic exploitation is often understood and discussed in terms of geopolitical concerns and resource extraction, but “Caught by [Umeå]” exemplifies a kind of conceptual exploitation, or the tapping of the Arctic as idea. The tour is a matter of staging, where the town and the region are packaged for consumption with the help of familiar Arctic images and constructions. This kind of commodification is a recognised attribute of modernity whose paradoxical consequence is that modernisation processes in real-life communities have to be suspended or imaginatively side-lined. The success of the Arctic as selling point

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depends on its continued identification as mystical, authentic and natural, or in other words, pre-modern.

Arctic packaging as illustrated by “Caught by [Umeå]” is not a new phenomenon, and in what follows I will discuss some ways in which the Arctic was displayed for the benefit of English metropolitan audiences in the long nineteenth century when the polar regions were continually in the public eye. Since I am concerned with the Arctic as commodity, my examples consist of outside representations of the area, in the form of popular, cultural events like theatre performances, panoramic displays, music hall shows, and musical comedy. While these spectacles are initially laudatory of the exploration enterprise, especially when performed on board Arctic expedition ships or in the presence of or supervised by expedition members, they gradually provide space for a counter-discourse that mocks or criticises the colonial efforts by poking fun at Arctic heroes or imagining the Arctic as a pointless prize. This questioning attitude can be connected to such developments in modern thought as a decreasing trust in public authority and a diminishing faith in patriotic heroism. It is an uneven process, however, and it is not accompanied by any recognition of the position, rights or knowledge of Arctic peoples. Although play texts and song lyrics intermittently express a cautious anti-imperialism, there is no parallel sense of a future for an autonomous Arctic in the material as long as imperialism and colonial expansion remain the dominant paradigms.

### Arctic Theatricals

One of many attempts to discover the North-West Passage was the British expedition under the command of William Edward Parry that set off in 1819.<sup>1</sup> The explorers managed to get further west than anyone before, but were eventually frozen in harbour for ten months. Over-wintering off Melville Island, one of Parry’s main problems was how to keep his men occupied. He came up with the idea of putting on theatre performances:

Under circumstances of leisure and inactivity, such as we were now placed in, and with every prospect of its continuance for a very large portion of a year, I was desirous of finding some amusement for the men during this long and tedious interval. I proposed, therefore, to the officers to get up a Play occasionally on board the Hecla, as the readiest means of preserving among our crews that cheerfulness and good-humour which had hitherto subsisted. (Parry 1821, 106)

Lieutenant Frederick William Beechey was the manager of the theatre and the first performance, of the farce *Miss in Her Teens; or The Medley of Lovers* by David Garrick, on 5 November 1819, was followed by Samuel Foote’s *The Mayor of Garratt* and *The Liar*, an adaptation of Corneille’s *Le Menteur*; Arthur Murphy’s *The Citizen*, Susanna Centlivre’s *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* and Garrick’s *Bon Ton*, all of them social comedies or farces (Markham 1875, 4). As Parry comments, the “stock of plays was so scanty, consisting only of one or two volumes, which happened

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<sup>1</sup> Parry was knighted in 1829 and is also known as Sir William Edward Parry.

accidentally to be on board, that it was with difficulty we could find the means of varying the performances sufficiently” (Parry 1821, 127; see also Claustre 1982, 97). Both for the sake of variation and to boost morale, the original, musical entertainment *The North-West Passage, or, Voyage Finished* was written on board the ship and first performed on 23 December 1819. It is the first play known to have been entirely produced during an Arctic winter expedition (Claustre 1982, 95).

*The North-West Passage* was intended to inspire the crew by imagining that the journey had been a success, and the tenor of the play is patriotic and triumphant, in contrast to the social satire typical of the eighteenth-century play collection on board. The last verse and chorus of one of the songs condense the general mood of the piece:

Our Country shall hail our emprise with acclaim,  
 Attempted for ages by Chieftains of fame,  
 For firm Perseverance evinc'd in her Cause  
 And quickly arrive at the land of good cheer  
 Has ever yet met with true Britons' applause  
 Still seeking for glory  
 Famous in story  
 We've gained for old England new rays of renown. (Claustre 1982, 112)

There are five loosely connected scenes set alternatively in the Arctic and in Deptford, where the main characters' sweethearts are awaiting their return. The Arctic sections include a polar bear and an Inuit, as the classic signifiers of northern experience. It is perhaps logical, given the patronising colonial discourse of the time, that the depiction of the Esquimaux is particularly stereotypical, showing the man as happy but uncivilised.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for reiterating other stereotypes are less obvious, unless they are regarded as integral to the genre of Arctic representation. The shorthand references to reindeer, ice floes and a dog sledge to create an Arctic ambience in a play written and performed by a company on Arctic exploration produce a double text that seems to address its immediate recipients in terms more appropriate for a domestic English audience. There is no self-reflection, realism or ironic distance, but a staging of the Arctic, in the Arctic, for members of an expedition who are provided the same images of themselves as those circulated for the benefit of the general public at home. In some measure, the conventional depiction of the setting is simply a matter of unsophisticated writing, but an alternative way of understanding it is as an expression of cultural continuity. As Erika Behrisch Elce suggests in her discussion of shipboard periodicals, domestic, cultural activities reenacted in the Arctic served as reminders of the sailors' national ties (Elce 2013, 359). According to this logic, the on-board performances of the popular eighteenth-century plays forge an imaginative link between the expedition members and actors and audiences at home as celebrations of British culture. In a similar way, the image of the Arctic in *The North-West Passage* becomes a way to reconnect with this national culture on its own terms. This reinforcement of a shared cultural background might have been

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<sup>2</sup> Here and hereafter, the term Esquimaux or Eskimo is given as it appears in the original source.

more important than to represent the unique experience of the explorers. The focus in the play is not where the characters are, but the imperial reasons for their presence. Thus, even for the sailors in situ, whose ice-bound condition ought to suggest otherwise, the Arctic is framed as an available and consumable commodity.

### **Victorian Melodrama**

Theatre was immensely popular in the Victorian period and attracted all social classes. In London, as well as in the provinces and the colonies, almost everyone attended theatrical performances, some as frequently as three times a week (Marcus 2012, 441). This obviously created an enormous need for material, which meant that play-writing became to be thought of as a profession rather than an art. As Sharon Marcus notes, “few playwrights developed individual styles; instead, most wrote to order for specific theatres and performers” (Marcus 2012, 439). Plays were ephemeral, and frequently not printed, and the fast turnover made reliance on stereotypes and conventional characterisation a necessity. John Thomas Haines’s (1799?–1843) melodrama *North Pole, or A Tale of the Frozen Regions* from around 1834 is a typical example of this kind of minor Victorian theatre. The action happens to take place in the Arctic but has very little to do with the region except as a suitable setting for dramatic adventure. Most of the thin plot consists of the exploits of the Captain’s wife and some other stowaways after the ship founders and they are stranded in the Arctic. A Spanish ship has been wrecked in the same place and soon there is a struggle between the Spaniards and the English group for the meagre provisions until at the end an enormous polar bear appears and carries off the food. The Spaniards drown and it seems as if the English castaways will also perish when William Parry’s ship *Hecla* – the very ship where the first Arctic performances took place – turns up and saves them at the very last moment.

Most of the first act is an example of low comedy based on cross-dressing and bantering exchanges between lower-class characters. This is the context for Captain Parry’s initial appearance in the play, when he delivers a lofty soliloquy about the glory of risking one’s life in the service of England, in the spirit of the verses in *The North-West Passage*:

Oh, happy England, with thy changing, yet ever genial clime, soon I must quit thee, soon embarked on the broad bosom of the waters – hasten to unknown lands, where icy winter ever sternly reigns, and darkness, with her scowling brow, and robe of jetty hue eternally holds sway. But ’tis for thee, my native land, I dare the perils of the boundless deep – for thee the floating ice-berg and the roaring winds are all defied, and death itself in thy loved service hath, in the sailor’s sight, no look of terror – since glory waits to crown him with a deathless wreath. (Haines 1834?, 68)

The overall tone of proud patriotism connects the two plays, but at least in Haines’s piece, the exalted sentiments are voiced within a framework that makes them verge on the parodic. Although there is no apparent irony in the play, there is also little to support the mode of heroic patriotism outside Parry’s soliloquy. In Foucauldian terms (Foucault 1972, 106), this ideological instability might be understood as an

example of every discursive formation containing its reverse position (Grace 2007, 17). The official discourse of Arctic heroism is in dialogue with alternative discourses where the value of both the Arctic project and heroic masculinity is less stable. Such a counter-discourse governs, for example, Thomas Hood's "Ode to Captain Parry" from 1825, where the North Pole is glossed as "the peg/On which the world is spun" and the North-West Passage goes under the appellation "No Thoroughfare" (Hood 1825, 9), in both cases diminishing the desirability of these objectives by couching them in mundane terms. Janice Cavell describes Hood's verses as "a series of satiric speculations on what Parry might be doing in the distant Arctic" (Cavell 2013, 60), which again diminishes the value of his project. Even so, Parry is only fondly mocked and his very inclusion as addressee suggests that he enjoyed a great deal of popularity and admiration. The edge of the criticism is instead directed at administrators and politicians who only speak about the Arctic from their safe positions at home. In Hood's ode, as in Haines's play, the connection between Arctic experience and patriotic heroism is only temporarily disrupted. Despite the parodic possibilities offered by the overall comic paradigm, in the first half of the nineteenth century at least, the heroic-colonial rhetoric has the highest market value.

### **Icebergs on Display**

The representation of the Arctic as a perilous testing ground for heroes continued in indoor displays like Burford's panoramas in 1820, 1834 and 1850, and outdoor exhibitions like the ones in Vauxhall Gardens in 1834, 1838 and 1852.<sup>3</sup> The Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens were located on the south bank of the Thames and constituted one of the most important open-air venues for entertainment in London from the mid-seventeenth century until they were permanently closed in 1859. The site occupied several acres and could provide space for spectacular shows and accommodate enormous crowds. The 1834 exhibition that celebrated the return of John Ross and his men from their four-year absence on an Arctic expedition took up more than 5,000 square metres, with the grounds covered with artificial icebergs, more than twenty metres high ("Vauxhall Gardens" 1834). It included replicas of the expedition ship, groups of polar bears, whales, an Esquimaux village and Captain Ross and his crew, and the finale imitated the Aurora Borealis with the help of "chymical gases" and a display of fireworks (Potter 2010, 29–30). The review in *The Times* was unusually positive and particularly highlighted the realistic depiction of Arctic dangers: "The principal feature of the entertainments of the evening is the representation of the termination of the Polar expedition of Captain Ross and his companions; of the dangers they encountered and overcame; and of the vicissitudes they endured" ("Vauxhall Gardens" 1834). But while the depiction of the perilous Arctic awed and impressed the public, the place of the exhibition indicated that despite all its hazards, the region could be tamed and integrated in the British Empire. The exhibition took place in a layered context that included the represented

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<sup>3</sup> To a great extent, the idea of Arctic heroism and a natural, forbidding and basically empty landscape also informed the exhibition "Arctic," shown at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, 25 September 2013–2 February 2014 as well as the exhibition "Lines in the Ice: Seeking the Northwest Passage," at the British Library 14 November 2014–19 April 2015.

Arctic, the enclosed space of the Vauxhall Gardens and metropolitan London. The display may have shown a sublime landscape but it also functioned as a backdrop to dances, dinners and amorous walks at a city venue. The elevated message of heroic patriotism was transmitted, but also subtly undermined, by being enclosed in a setting where the Arctic was primarily a selling point.

Captain Ross was a consultant for the 1834 Vauxhall display and also helped with the production of the panorama of “Boothia” shown at Robert Burford’s (1791–1861) exhibition rooms at Leicester Square earlier the same year (“Panorama of Boothia” 1834). Apart from being able to paint illusory pictures, Burford had a sense of what the public wanted, and one of the most admired features of the display was the representation of the Arctic sky: “The vast and clear firmament is studded with myriads of stars (whose apparent magnitude and relative position, we are assured, are preserved), of such refulgent brightness, that to the eye of the beholder they actually appear to scintillate” (“Panorama of Boothia” 1834). As Veronica della Dora observes, “the panorama allowed a full three-dimensional bodily experience; it was a landscape the observer gazed upon, but also one he moved through (or around); one that wrapped and deceived him; one able to cause a sense of vertigo or seasickness” (della Dora 2007, 288). The panoramas produced a kind of geographical dislocation that gave the visitor the illusion of being in a different place and as a result, they made foreign places available for aesthetic – and mass – consumption at home. Burford’s first Arctic panorama was exhibited in the 1820s when the subject was still fresh and exciting: “Upwards of 30 years ago, when the Arctic pole was a new theme of discourse, his panorama of Spitzbergen was one of the ‘lions’ of the day” (“Burford’s Panorama” 1855). The 1834 panorama was well-frequented and in 1850, when the region was repeatedly in the news because of the many search expeditions sent out to look for Sir John Franklin and his ships, Burford opened yet another Arctic display. Public interest however waned when it became increasingly clear that Franklin and his crew must have died. The heroic tone of the early panoramas and the Vauxhall shows was no longer appropriate when the Arctic began to be primarily associated with tragedy, and the region’s value as commodity temporarily declined (Potter 2010, 31).

### **The Royal Arctic Theatre**

The plays performed on Parry’s expedition in 1819–20 began a tradition on Royal Navy Arctic expeditions of the nineteenth century called “The Royal Arctic Theatre,” and in the preface to the list of officers who had served on Arctic expeditions between 1773 and 1873, Clements R. Markham wrote:

The most valuable qualifications for Arctic service are aptitude for taking part in those winter amusements which give life to the expedition during the months of forced inaction; and for sledge travelling. Under each officer is therefore given the part he took in the winter amusements, and the work he performed in the spring sledge travelling. (Markham 1875, iii-iv)

The theatre productions did not only occupy those who acted in the plays and their audience, but also decorators, carpenters, managers and writers, all tasks listed in

Markham's roster. Theatre props and costumes began to be part of the basic equipment, and when the British Arctic Expedition set out in 1875, it was taken for granted that the ships would carry equipment for play-acting:

The Admiralty have not made it a condition that the officers should be able to sing a good song or dance a hornpipe, but such like accomplishments are of great importance under the circumstances, and measures will be taken to encourage the histrionic powers of the ships' companies. [...] [I]n furnishing a theatrical wardrobe and appurtenances, the Government are contributing in no mean degree, and, perhaps, to a much greater extent than they suppose, to the success of the Arctic Expedition of 1875. ("The Arctic Expedition" 1875)

The performances could be very cold affairs, especially for actors who played female roles. Markham notes that Captain George Francis Lyon had to go through the last two acts with two of his fingers frost-bitten while performing Dick Dowlas in the comedy *Heir-at-Law* by George Colman the Younger in the early 1820s (Markham 1875, 30; see also Pearson 2004, 51). Elisha Kent Kane describes another cold experience during a play acted on one of the expeditions looking for John Franklin in 1848:

Our Arctic theatre gave us tonight 'The Mysteries and Miseries of New York,' followed by a pantomime. The sitting temperature was -20 degrees; that outside, -36 degrees; behind the scenes, -25 degrees. A flat-iron used by the delicate Miss Jem Smith gave the novel theatrical effect of burning by cold. Poor Jem suffered so much in her bare sleeves and hands, that whenever the iron touched she winced. Cold merriment; but it concluded with hotchpot and songs. (Kane 1915, 248–49)

The gender confusion is particularly obvious in Kane's description where names and pronouns contradict each other. As Mike Pearson concludes, such gender-bending activities trouble the heroic narrative (Pearson 2004, 57). While the theatre activities humanise the Arctic explorers, they also make them more ordinary in the eyes of the public. An illustrative example is that the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–76 was the target for essentially supportive jokes and cartoons in the comic journals before and during the attempt, but when the ships returned in October 1876 without having reached the North Pole, the comments became considerably more biting (Hansson 2012, 79–82). Satire in the liberal, comic periodical *Fun* particularly targeted the play-acting activities: "The Arctic performers have six weeks' leave of absence. Some of them will fill up their leisure by taking engagements at the music-halls and minor theatres" ("Whiffs and Straws" 1877, 34). It is no coincidence that the satirical comment specifies music halls and minor theatres where cross-dressing and sexual innuendo were standard elements in the repertoire. At least the officers were expected to not only be heroes, but also represent a degree of refinement. The ambivalent attitude to theatre as a popular form of entertainment with a doubtful cultural status probably contributed to the criticism, notwithstanding the fact that



Fig. 1: The perceived incongruity of life in the Arctic and marionette theatre inspired a cartoon by George R. Halkett (1855–1915) in the comic periodical *Punch*.

Queen Victoria herself had a taste for low-brow shows (Schoch 2004, xvii-xix).

The idea that theatre is somehow incompatible with Arctic experience is realised in a different way in the news report that an American skipper had given a Punch-and-Judy puppet show to an Eskimo community ("An Arctic Punch and Judy Show" 1897). The story soon appeared as a cartoon in the comic magazine *Punch* where the main source of humour is the perceived discrepancy between even such a common cultural activity as a marionette show and the Arctic environment ("Mr. Punch and the Pole" 1897, 292) (fig. 1). Integral to the idea that the Arctic was up for grabs was that Arctic peoples – like other indigenous groups in the world – were either disregarded altogether or thought of as children. As people that belong to nature, not culture, the Eskimo should not take part in cultural events. The news item and the



*Punch* cartoons illustrate the idea that although theatre *about* the Arctic remains a popular pastime throughout the nineteenth century, theatre *in* the Arctic creates uneasiness. The puppet show disturbs the idea of the region as a pre-modern space, and when an Arctic modernity becomes a real possibility, the market value of the image diminishes.

### **Love in a Cold Climate**

Simplifications and generalisations are traditional ingredients in comedy and farce, and a generalised version of the Arctic is staged over and over again when there is topical interest in the region. One of the most popular music hall artists of the late nineteenth century was Dan Leno (1860–1904), also called The King’s Jester. In the 1896 season, when Fridtjof Nansen’s Fram expedition was a recurring item in the news, Leno dressed up as a parody of an Arctic explorer sometimes carrying a fur umbrella, sometimes in a more elaborate costume. Given the star cult of early music hall, it is entirely possible that Leno’s fame for female impersonations or “dames” contributed to the effect, challenging Nansen’s heroic status by implication (Davis 2014, 224–25). The non-heroic character is however typical of comic theatre, and the review in *The Era* was brief but positive: “The stars scintillating in the programme are headed by Mr Dan Leno, who works a grotesque notion as a rival of Dr. Nansen. Daniel has a very remarkable suit, and may be expected to add to his Arctic discoveries as time goes on” (“The London Music Halls” 1896). The act places Eskimos in Iceland and seems to have been based mainly on racial jokes about Arctic primitivism. After his success at home, Leno took the show to the United States in 1897, but the North Pole routine did not receive the same appreciation as in England. After one of the first performances, the reviewer in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote:

The third song was called “The North Pole.” Mr. Leno sang it dressed in a suit of grayish fur. He carried a stuffed seal about with him, and cracked icy jokes about the custom of the Esquimaux, one of which was to the effect that in Iceland nobody ever shaves; they simply let their whiskers sprout, and then break them off. This song ought to be cut out. (Slide 1994, 308)

In Leno’s number, lack of civilisation and the absence of modernity are again represented as defining characteristics of Arctic people. A similar idea is present in the many love songs produced for the music hall stage, although with less heavy-handed attempts at humour.

In the first decade of the twentieth century there was an explosion of material based around exotic peoples or exotic lifestyles, to supply the ever-increasing demand of the music halls, for performances in local pubs and for private use. A typical example is *My Little Laplander* (1904) written by the prolific music hall lyricist Harry Castling (1865–1933) and composed by the equally prolific Clarence Wainwright Murphy (1875–1913). The sheet music was published by the company Francis, Day and Hunter who issued between forty and fifty songs every month in London between 1900 and 1910, which gives a good indication of the market:

In the land of snow,  
 In the long ago,  
 There dwelt a little Eskimo,  
 And ev'ry eve to her snowhut came  
 An ardent lover with his heart a-flame  
 He'd heard she was leaving her country old,  
 For the woosers and the winds were much too cold.  
 And his heart went down to zero  
 As this cry came from our hero,

My little Laplander  
 Nobody could be grander  
 Your bright eyes I can see  
 Wherever I may be  
 My little Laplander  
 Don't say you've to go  
 Ah no!  
 A heart beats true and warm for you  
 In the Land of Snow. (Murphy and Castling 1904, n. p.)

The song is a compendium of Arctic stereotypes where the faraway and the long ago are conflated to indicate a pre-modern lack of civilisation. The sketchy references to snow and cold stand in for an Arctic environment which has no other features. As in Dan Leno's North Pole number, "Eskimo" and "Laplander" are used interchangeably, indicating that the Arctic was thought of as a single entity as late as the first decade of the twentieth century. Songs with similar themes are, for example, *The Jolly Eskimo: An Action Song* (1902), *My Little Eskimo* (1902), *Will You Be My Eskimo?* (1905), *Eskimo Love Song* (1908) and *In My Little Hut of Snow* (1908), where the personal appellations function as terms of endearment that have little or nothing to do with actual life in Arctic regions. Since the indigenous perspective is completely absent, it seems warranted to interpret the songs as evidence of a colonial attitude, but although they certainly reproduce such ideas, the political implications of the song texts may be overstated. An important reason for using exotic settings was that the costumes could be very elaborate to cater for the audiences' taste for the spectacular. What takes precedence is the music, the performer, the act, or simply the music hall as a place of entertainment (Attridge 2003, 28). Success depended on striking the right balance between the exotic and the familiar, and even though the costumes emphasised foreignness, the lyrics are rooted in the value systems of popular music and primarily suggest that love is a universal feeling.

The entertainment industry however caught a different kind of polar fever in September 1909 when first the United States explorer Frederick Cook and then his countryman Robert Peary claimed to have found the North Pole. The music halls immediately responded, and some of the songs written at the time are *How I Climbed the Pole* (1909), *That's How I found the Pole* (1909), *The Polar Bear's Picnic* (1909), *In the Home of the Polar Bear* (1909), *A Yankee Always Gets There First* (1909), *The North North Pole* (1910), *He Went to Find the Pole* (c. 1910) and *Hello*,

*There! Polar Bear* (1911). The main purpose is to make fun of the widely publicised event, and the primary source of humour in the acts is that the polar prize is not particularly desirable after all or has already been claimed, usually by mistake or by a less than heroic character. This is the focus of the monologue “How I Discovered the North Pole,” performed by the music hall comedian Bransby Williams (1870–1961):

Has the North Pole been discovered by Peary or by Cook?  
 Well, that depends, ye see sir, how explorers [sic] tales is took;  
 This tale o’ Peary’s may be true, but then again, it mayn’t;  
 Perhaps Cook’s story is correct... but then perhaps it ain’t.  
 An’ there ye have it! All this fuss about the bloomin’ pole,  
 It sort o’ kind o’ makes me sick! It riles me, bless my soul,  
 I ain’t agoin’ to strut about, an’ flap my wings an’ crow,  
 But I discovered it myself, eleven years ago. (Richards 1912, 13-14)

Apart from mocking the Cook – Peary controversy, the monologue questions the value of Arctic exploration, and by using the persona of a working class man, the noble, heroic image of the explorers. Since music hall shows consist of a series of acts, audience compliance is not required to the same extent as for a sustained narrative. Any provocative content will soon be superseded by a sanitised number or a different kind of provocation. At their best, however, music hall acts may produce a kind of history from below and in the case of the Arctic, a cautious critique of the colonial enterprise and the heroic ideal. Although its radical potential should not be overemphasised, the music hall stage could function as a carnival space where official discourses were occasionally reversed and debunked.

### **Arctic Scenery – the Stage Variety**

The Arctic was constantly in the news, and yet the general public knew very little about the region. This circumstance made it a suitable location for fantasies and projections, as evidenced when the hugely popular musical comedy *The Arcadians* opened in Manchester 1910. The story was written by Mark Ambient and Alexander M. Thompson, with lyrics by Arthur Wimperis and music composed by Lionel Monckton and Howard Talbot. The show premiered on 28 April 1909 at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London where it ran for a total of 809 performances, which makes it one of the top three Edwardian musicals, based on the length of its run (Platt 2004, 33).

The London staging was vaguely Greco-Roman in style, but when the show came to Manchester in February 1910, the scenery had changed: “The mythical land of Arcady would appear to be situated at the North Pole, though the temperature of that region might be imagined to be ill-adapted to the filmy costumes affected by the charming survivals of the age of innocence” (“Theatres and Music Halls” 1910). The temporal distance suggested by the original setting in Greek or Roman antiquity found its correspondence in the geographical distance of the Arctic, both locations understood as untouched or primitive cultures where the demands of modern society are absent. The primary reason for the Arctic location of Arcadia in the Manchester production is obviously its topical value in the 1909–10 season, with additional

reasons the simple décor required to create an illusion of the Arctic, coupled with the fact that the region had a long history of being thought of as the entrance to an alternative world. At least potentially, the choice of setting could also affect the play's message, however, by implicitly redirecting the central question about the relationship between a natural world and progressive modernity from the mythical Arcadia to the real Arctic.

The conflict in the piece is between the natural, friendly Arcadians and the colonial adventurer Jim Smith who sets out to exploit their community after his airship has crashed in Arcadia. The Arcadians manage to transform him with the help of natural magic and then decide to accompany him to London in order to change the entire city into a place of honesty, beauty and simple pleasures. To some extent, then, the production can be taken as an acknowledgement of the fact that the discovery of the North Pole has made the Arctic vulnerable to modern influences. Yet, at the end of the musical, the Arcadians return to their world, having failed to transform London, and it seems as if urban modernity carries the day. The Arctic Arcadia of the Manchester staging remains a pre-modern dreamland. Its potential to revitalise the metropolis is never realised, but neither is modernity permitted to intrude on Arcadian life.

### **Staging the Arctic**

At first glance, it would seem that there has been little development regarding the Arctic on stage in the past two hundred years. Such a conclusion however needs to be qualified by the theoretical and political contexts that inform the events. The engagement with the Arctic on the Victorian and Edwardian stage constitutes an attempt to master the region through performance, framing and containment. The main signifiers are ice, wildlife and indigenous culture but social or progressive dimensions are largely absent. As the “Caught by [Umeå]” tour demonstrates, the emblems appear to be constant, although today, there is increasing debate about their representative value. In an article in the Swedish national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Malin Ullgren discusses the idea of the “unique selling point” of Umeå as European Capital of Culture, suggesting that a competition of European Union money requires a foreignising gaze that attempts to imagine what the outside world might expect, rather than what might have significance from the inside (Ullgren 2014). The opening event of Umeå 2014 exemplifies this principle. Produced by the Berlin-based company Phase 7 and choreographed by its artistic director Sven Sören Beyer, the spectacular show “Burning Snow” on the ice of the Umeå river on 1 February 2014 centred on snow, ice and Sami culture, projections of exotic northernness as seen from the south, but far from representative of the modern, multicultural university town that Umeå has become in the twenty-first century (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> The estimated audience of 55,000 were mostly local people, and for many of them, the perceived identification with nature and traditional culture jarred. The commentary in

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<sup>4</sup> The closing event of Umeå's year as European Capital of Culture, “Northern Light” on 13 December 2014, was much more varied, with modern music acts and the northern lights manifested not as an illusion of the natural phenomenon but a spectacular light show projecting a range of environments and experiences onto the façade of Umeå Town Hall.



Fig. 2: Reindeer horns arranged to emphasise Sami culture and life-style in Umeå town square at the opening event of Umeå's year as European Capital of Culture 2014.

Photo: Fredrik Larsson

the local newspaper *Västerbottens-Kuriren* characterised the event as a PR-movie, staged for the outside and neither about Umeå nor intended for the locals (Burström 2014). A post-colonial point of view adds yet another layer of meaning, however, that loops back to and at least partly rehabilitates the exoticisation as a case of retrieval and an acknowledgement of a cultural, indigenous heritage that has been suppressed for centuries, as noted in another of the Swedish national newspapers, *Svenska Dagbladet* (Poellinger 2014). In both cases, the majority Umeå audience was alienated, but with politically opposite implications, as patronised by an outside gaze that integrates the modern population in a fundamentally pre-modern paradigm or as excluded by a new, celebratory indigenous culture.

The continued appeal of the iconic signs does consequently not mean that their meanings are stable or that they always transmit the same attitudes. At a time of environmental crisis, finally and perhaps speculatively, the stability of the images as representations of reality is endangered, which paradoxically confers a new kind of value on them as symbols of a desired future where the impending climate change is halted. What was staged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was primarily an image that legitimated imperial expansion into the Arctic and pitted the idea of urban modernity against the uncivilised character of the north. What is staged today might increasingly be a kind of nostalgia or utopian hope that contrasts a corrupt and exploitative modernity with a pure and noble Arctic environment. For rather different reasons, this makes modernity an unwanted facet of the Arctic. The end result is that regardless of their ultimate function and intended meaning, conventional images continue to dominate when the region is staged for a metropolitan audience. While this partially looks forward to a new model where the Arctic is valorised, it also has

some problematic effects for Arctic communities who are imaginatively trapped in the past.

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### Summary

Throughout the long nineteenth century and beyond, outside representations of the Arctic on stage have circulated a stereotypical image of the region. The two most long-standing emblems are ice and indigenous culture, and as commodity, the Arctic is identified as mystical, authentic, natural and pre-modern. These images are circulated in popular, cultural events like theatre performances, panoramic displays, music hall shows, and musical comedy but their presence in a popular cultural context also contributes to destabilise the signifiers. At the best, theatre productions about the Arctic may produce a kind of history from below, including a cautious critique of the colonial project and the ideal of heroic masculinity. Their radical potential should not be overstated, however, since the historical meanings of the stereotypes even when they are being debunked. At least on stage, conventional images of the Arctic continue to dominate.

### Keywords

Arctic, Royal Arctic Theatre, music hall, musical comedy, commodification, long nineteenth century, heroic ideal