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Teresa Pyzik

## The Yankee in Poland in 1831

The essay “The Yankee in Poland in 1831” was originally published in *Polish Anglo-Saxon Studies*, Vols. 3—4 (Poznań 1992), edited by Wojciech Lipoński. In this text I am concerned with one of the few American plays written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that deal with Polish issues, and in particular with the attempts of Poles to gain independence during the so-called partitions period in the history of Poland.

Historians of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American theatre recorded several performances of plays dealing with Polish characters and settings. In most cases, however, the texts of the plays are not available as they have never been published; the manuscripts have either been lost, or they cannot be located.

*Kościuszko, or the Fall of Warsaw*, published in Charleston in 1828, in a volume *The Soldier’s Wreath, or the Battle of New Orleans*, seems to be the first American drama dealing with a Polish theme. Its author remains unknown and the play was wrongly attributed to South Carolina actor and playwright Oliver Cromwell.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1830s and 1840s, at least four plays on Polish themes were produced in the theatres of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. *The Annals of the New York Stage* inform of a performance of Paul Clifford’s (pseudonym of Jonas B. Phillips) *The Polish Wife* at Richmond Hill Theatre on November 25, 1831. “The cast included Pearson as Rolofski, Gates as Crocoski, Spencer as Rodolf, Jones as Urelschoff, Miss Waring as Christine and Miss Mestayer as Lowina. If the actors were as humorous as I believe they were, they must have had fun with those names, as indeed comic players have fun with similar appellations in these later years” — the reviewer adds.<sup>2</sup>

*A History of the Philadelphia Theatre 1835—1855* recorded a performance of J.H. Payne’s *Christine of Poland*, “one act comedy,” at the Walnut Street Theatre (or

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Pierce Hill, *American Plays Printed 1714—1830: A Bibliographical Record* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), 19.

<sup>2</sup> George Clinton Densmore Odell, ed., *The Annals of the New York Stage*, Vol. 3 (Columbia University Press: 1928), 588.

American Theatre) on January 23, 1837. The authorship is doubtful, however, as there is no other evidence Payne wrote this play.<sup>3</sup>

There is a record of several performances of *A Graceful Polander*, a play by an unknown author, at the Boston Museum on March 23—31, 1843, as well as of performances of two other “Polish” plays by Silas S. Steele: *The Brazen Drum, or the Yankee in Poland* produced at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia in January 1841 and later in 1842, and *Emilie Plater, or the Polish Heroine* produced in May 1845 at Walnut Street Theatre. The latter play, “a melodrama in two acts”, was written for a well known Philadelphia actress Miss Emma Ince.<sup>4</sup>

*The Brazen Drum* was later produced in Boston (1846) and New York under the title *The Cloud Skiff*, with famous Yankee actor Charles Kemble as Cartwheel. The play was published in 1841 by Turner and Fisher in Philadelphia and New York.<sup>5</sup>

One other play should be mentioned here: *Lodoiska, or Poles and Tartars*, “a musical romance in three acts” of unknown authorship, “translated from French by Kemble.”<sup>6</sup> It was successfully staged at the Drury Lane Theatre, London, in 1794, and at the Covent Garden in 1816. From England, it was imported to America where it enjoyed even greater popularity in Philadelphia at the Walnut Street Theatre in 1835, 1838, 1839, also in New York, under the title *Polanders*.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of Polish themes on the American stage in the 1830s and 1840s seems to be connected with an increased interest in Poland during and after the November Uprising of 1830.

The hatred of tyranny was deep-rooted in America and it expressed itself in open sympathy for the Polish insurrectionists. The cordial attitude toward Poland had also resulted partly from the participation of Kościuszko and Pulaski in America’s War of Independence. A historian observed:

The news of the modern Polish Constitution of the Third of May (1791) and the Kościuszko Insurrection (1794) against the Russian invaders was received with enthusiastic public opinion in the newly born United States, and it was with sincere sorrow that the people of America learned of the defeat of Kościuszko, General Washington’s friend and companion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Wilson, *A History of the Philadelphia Theatre 1835—1855* (New York: University of Pennsylvania Press 1968), 168. It is possible that it was J.B. Phillip’s *The Polish Wife* produced under a different title, as the heroine’s name is Christine and Phillips was connected in those years with the Philadelphian theatres. Payne wrote a play entitled *Christine of Sweden*.

<sup>4</sup> James Reese, *The Dramatic Authors of America* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber and CO., 1845), 125.

<sup>5</sup> There is no record when or where *The Brazen Drum* was produced in New York.

<sup>6</sup> John Genest, ed., *Some Accounts of the English Stage*, Vol. 7 (Bath: 1832), 151—152.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *A History of the Philadelphia Theatre*, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Jerzy Jan Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), 14—15.

The November Uprising was an event well known in the United States. Besides the newspaper reports and editorials on the situation in Poland, the activity of the American Polish Committee organized in Paris by J.F. Cooper in 1831 initiated a wide campaign supporting the Polish cause. Meetings were held in many American cities praising the Polish Insurrection in “the birthplace of Kościuszko; from immemorial ages the land of Catholicism and the home of the spirit of freedom.”<sup>9</sup> Some of them were devoted mainly to the problem of sending supplies of arms and money to Poland. A Committee of Help to Poland was established in Boston and New York. Among the members was Mordecai Noah, a well known playwright. Some young enthusiasts volunteered to join the Polish army. The best known of those was young E.A. Poe, who wrote to Colonel Thyer at West Point on March 10, 1831, requesting assistance in obtaining through General Lafayette “an appointment in the Polish Army [...] in the event of the interference of France in behalf of Poland.”<sup>10</sup> The only American who actually did participate in the November Uprising was a renowned surgeon, Dr Paul Fritzsimmmons Eve, of Augusta, Georgia. He was assigned to hospital service in Warsaw.

Remembering how the gallant Pulaski had fallen at the siege of Savannah during the Revolutionary struggle of 1776, he earnestly desired to aid in paying that debt to distressed Poland.<sup>11</sup>

Polish exiles newly arrived in the United States after the fall of the Uprising were delivering lectures in various states and population centers, especially in Boston, Philadelphia and New York — the cities which were also the centers of theatre life. Some of the exiles were hosted by the theatres. *The Annals of the New York Stage* recorded a presentation concerning the November Uprising given on May 26, 1833. “L. Rutkowski and E. Polkowski of the Polish cavalry gave exhibitions of military matters at Peale’s [...] one was full of sympathy in those days with Poles,” commented the author of *The Annals*, adding, that on March 27, 1833 at the “American Museum’ a grand Picturesque and Mechanical Panoramic Exhibition of the Polish Revolution in Warsaw (November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1830), [was] splendidly got up by a Company of Polish Exiles.”<sup>12</sup>

It is important to add that in the 1830s and 1840s several books on Poland and Polish history were published in the U.S.; among them James Fletcher’s *History of Poland* (1831) from the earliest times to “the atrocities of the Grand Duke Constantine,” *Stories from Poland* (1833) by Robin Carver, and *The Life of Countess Emily Plater* (1842) by J.K. Salmonski. It is possible that Emilia Plater’s biography inspired the play written later by Silas S. Steele.

<sup>9</sup> Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America*, 19—20.

<sup>10</sup> John Ward Ostrom, ed., *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Odell, *The Annals of the New York Stage*, 696.

Further discussion of the historical background<sup>13</sup> goes far beyond the scope of this paper, which I would like to limit to a few comments on the two published plays written in that period: *Kościuszko; or the Fall of Warsaw* and *The Brazen Drum; or the Yankee in Poland*.

Neither of the plays can be considered good drama. In order not to dismiss them completely, or consider them as curiosities, one has to view them as products of their times, a period marked by strong nationalism in American literature and theatre.

In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a great demand for plays dramatizing in popular terms the meaning of America, its promise, its ideals, especially those of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, as well as for plays presenting the American national character and emphasizing the heroic qualities of the common man. James Kirke Paulding in his plea for American national drama in 1827 defined it as

[...] not merely a class of dramatic productions written by Americans, but one appealing directly to the national feelings [...] and above all displaying a generous chivalry in the maintenance and vindication of those illustrious peculiarities of situation and character by which we are distinguished from other nations.

It is not necessary to be always writing on national subjects, or illustrating our own history and manners. But we do think, that literature of a new country, new in its existence, its institutions, and situation, ought to have a special reference to these circumstances. It is this reference which alone can give it originality, and maintain its claim to a national character.<sup>14</sup>

Playwrights used foreign settings and themes to reinforce the American myth; to emphasize the advantages and opportunities offered by the New World by revealing a lack of such possibilities in the Old World. The liberty-tyranny motif was especially popular; it was very suitable for presentation in melodrama, the favourite genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences, as it allowed to characterize the *dramatis personae* in black and white colors, as villains and heroes. The plays were often based on historical events, as well as current political developments, both at home and abroad, and they reflected the prevailing attitudes, emotional responses and the general public mood towards these events. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of many cities was conducive to the production of such plays.

<sup>13</sup> An excellent examination of American attitudes towards Polish exiles of 1831 can be found in Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America*.

<sup>14</sup> James Kirke Paulding, "American Drama," *American Quarterly Review* 1 (June 1827), 331; "Dramatic Literature," *American Quarterly Review* 8 (September 1830), 152; quoted after: Larry J. Reynolds, *James Kirke Paulding* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 83–84.

*Kościuszko; or the Fall of Warsaw*, set during the Kościuszko Insurrection of 1794, very well illustrates the trends dominating in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American theatre. The structure of this play resembles the structure of some early American dramas about the American Revolution. There is little action; the play consists of monologues and dialogues conveying to the reader some information about the political situation of the time, and the attitudes of Polish patriots and their enemies. The characters are divided into “Poles” and “Russians.” Kościuszko is presented as the epitome of the most noble Polish ideals and attitudes: love of the country, love of freedom, complete commitment to the fight for Poland’s independence. All other Polish characters, generals and officers of the Polish army, are presented as people wholly devoted to the national causes. Their watchword is “to be free or to die”; all their speeches reveal their adherence to the traditional Polish values summed up in the motto “God, Honor, and Motherland.” Their deep patriotism, their nobility, courage and their deep trust in God’s help are stressed throughout the whole play. They will “fight, or nobly die,” trusting in divine justice. Kościuszko’s monologue in Act I very well reflects the tone of all other speeches:

Yes, dearest, noblest spot on earth,  
Land which gave me life and birth,  
To save thee every arm shall strive,  
While Kościuszko breathes and lives.  
Our hope is leant on heaven, our friend,  
Our much loved country to defend,  
And as the patriot bends his knee,  
The holy seraphs hear and see,  
That martial warriors too are given,  
To cast their hopes and thought on heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Poniatowski says in the same scene:

God above  
Will save the land we fondly love;  
Let worst but come — we’ve done our best  
To heaven alone we leave the rest.<sup>16</sup>

The way the Russian generals and officers are presented resembles the manner the English generals were portrayed in some American plays about the American Revolution; they regret that they have to take part in an unjust war.<sup>17</sup> The Russian

<sup>15</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw: A Play in Verse*, in: *The Soldier’s Wreath, or the Battleground of New Orleans and Other Poems* (Charleston: W. Riley, 1828), 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *The Battle of Bunker’s Hill*, in: Montrose J. Moses, ed., *Representative Plays by American Dramatists*, Vol. 1 (London, Benjamin Bloom Inc., 1946).

officers have admiration and respect for Kościuszko and say that even the Empress “should not harm a hair of his head.” They stress the courage of Polish soldiers in spite of their hopeless situation. Their feelings are well illustrated in a conversation between General Suworrow and the commander of the Russian artillery, Ludowski:

Suworrow: But Poland’s might, though small is brave,  
 One sentiment throughout — ‘their land to save.’  
 Whatever can be done by men, they’ll try,  
 To reign triumphant, or as nobly die [...]

Ludowski: Warrior! my mind is troubled, too,  
 I fear we know not what to do;  
 The opinion of the world I find  
 Her weight upon a soldier’s mind;  
 I’d rather much my sword would rust,  
 Than to be drawn against honest men;  
 I’d rather never fight again.

Suworrow: Why, speaking as from man to man,  
 I’d rather mine were not in hand.  
 For every Christian scorns the deed,  
 Where fellow Christian’s made to bleed;  
 And more — this Polish land  
 Is guarded by a war-like band,  
 Their cause is righteous and I fear  
 Their arms will make us pay more dear;  
 But ‘tis the command of our liege lord,  
 ‘Gainst it we must not speak one word.<sup>18</sup>

Ludowski’s sense of guilt and injustice increases so much that he gives Suworrow his resignation saying:

Yes, Tell the Emperor that I  
 Fear not and care not when I die;  
 My hopes are laid in heaven, and when  
 My sword is raised ‘gainst Polish men,  
 Oh, may that heaven from me be shut,  
 Nor find on earth one humble hut.<sup>19</sup>

He tells Suworrow “Farewell,” and goes away to live in some retired spot “Forgetting and by all forgot,” as he says.

<sup>18</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw*, 57—60.

<sup>19</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw*, 60.

Kościuszko's army is defeated and he has to surrender. When Poniatowski informs him that

We soldiers then do all agree  
Our country never can be free [...]

Kościuszko answers:

Yes, Poland, thou are doomed to fall,  
But we have done our best, our all —  
Farewell to happiness and thee,  
For while we live we must be free [...]  
My friends, our doom at last is made,  
To see our country lowly laid;  
Oh, heaven, this sight is hard to see,  
A land once happy, firm and free,  
Torn and divided by a ruthless band  
Who act as guided by a daemon's hand.<sup>20</sup>

There is also a love story involved in the plot. Zoe, "a Polish maiden of rank and fortune," is in love with Kościuszko; but personal happiness, love and marriage are secondary to the national causes. Zoe would rather die than interfere in any way with Kościuszko's involvement in the struggle. For the General the matters of the country are also the most important. When the Queen tells him about Zoe's love for him, he answers that his first duty is "to see my land freed from rude invading band."

The play ends with Kościuszko and Zoe leaving for America. Kościuszko says:

Farewell! My country take the last adieu  
Which Kościuszko gives to you.  
I must seek in better climes  
The wish to witness better limes. [...]  
In foreign lands where men are free  
Dear Zoe, I will live with thee;  
America, that land is ours,  
To pass the noon of our hours,  
And when the evening shade is over  
Sink to our rest, be known no more.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Kościuszko or the Fall of Warsaw*, 68—72.

The play is written in doggerel verse, as the passages quoted above indicate. Yet, in spite of all its shortcomings, its unknown author fairly well conveyed to the American audiences some information about the Polish history during the time of the partitions and the Kościuszko Insurrection, as well as of our traditional attitudes and values. He also managed to capture a sense of some “hopeless hope,” that has never left Poles, even in the most difficult times in our history, and which is, perhaps, an important aspect of our national character.

The play is also faithful to some facts from Kościuszko’s biography. After being released from a Russian prison, due to the czar’s intervention, Kościuszko actually did go to the United States, where he was given a hero’s welcome, only to return to Europe a year later, in order to continue his political activity. He never married. His first great love, Ludwika Sosnowska, was married against her will to Józef Lubomirski after her father humiliated Kościuszko and rejected his proposal (in 1775). The character of Zoe in the play may be based on Princess Zofia, a daughter of Countess Izabela Czartoryska, who according to rumours, was in love with Kościuszko and was ready to become his wife.<sup>22</sup> I was unable to establish where and when the play was produced.

*The Brazen Drum, or the Yankee in Poland* is a very different play. It is also a perfect specimen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Yankee theatre”, a good example of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American playwrights’ attempts at defining the national identity and the national character in dramatic terms. These attempts were manifested through presentation of various American types, of which the Yankee was the most popular ever since he had been first introduced on stage by Royall Tyler in *The Contrast* (1787). Whether he was a protagonist or only a secondary persona in the play, he was never an individualized character, but always a stereotype — to a degree of caricature — devoid of any psychological depth. Although with time the type was undergoing various transformations<sup>23</sup> — from a “waiter,” plough-boy, fireman, salesman, sailor to a city boy — his main features were always the same: he was a low-brow, common-sense, practical American, whose innate shrewdness compensated the lack of education. Though devoid of any subtlety and polish, he was always active, vital, optimistic, witty, self-reliant, easily adaptable to new situations. He was always ready to assist others, and helping those in trouble was, in fact, his main stage business. Special stress was put on his patriotism, love of freedom and democracy, his sense of justice, as well as his distaste for tyranny and oppression of any kind. The language he used was an important aspect of his characterization as it was to reflect the American speech of common people.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mirosław Frančić, *Insurekcja Kościuszkowska* (Kraków: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1988), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Hodge, *Yankee Theatre: The Image of America on Stage 1825—1850* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> Some playwrights appended the published editions of their plays with *Glossaries of Yankee Words*, see: Hodge, *The Yankee Theatre*.

The Yankee was to personify unmistakably American attitudes and the American spirit in the way those were understood by average citizens of the New World. At the same time he possessed features which the immigrants newly-arrived from Europe needed in order to survive, to overcome difficulties, and to become Americans united in one nation.

The popularity of the Yankee type reached its peak in the 1830s and 1840s. The Yankee plays lacked any literary values and were marked by strong anti-intellectualism; yet they had a great appeal for American audiences, who went to the theatre for good and easy entertainment which meant excitement, humor, and seeing a favorite actor playing a particular part.

The early Yankee plays were set in the New World. After the great success of Charles Mathews' play *Jonathan in England* (1824) the stage Yankee often had adventures in other countries, always to stress the superiority of America and Americans. In some plays he was a secondary character and his actions and eccentricities were mere comic interludes; in others, they constituted the basis of the plot structure. The melodramatic pattern permeated all these plays: there had to be a beautiful, faithful, virtuous heroine in trouble, a hero fighting against tyranny and defending the heroine, a villain presented as a threat to the heroine, usually a seducer, but also an enemy of freedom and democracy, and a comic character, the Yankee, who was helping the heroine and the hero to overcome obstacles. Dramatis personae in all plays of that period revealed little psychological insight on the part of the dramatists. The stress was put on action and spectacle; the play's popularity depended upon the violent and spectacular nature of its successive scenes. As *The Brazen Drum* fulfilled all these requirements; the play enjoyed great popularity.

It is a specimen of an escape-and-pursuit melodrama with strong farcical verities. The action, set in "Poland-Russian Outposts" during "the Polish Revolution of 1831," concentrates around the adventures of beautiful, virtuous Rowina, "daughter of a famous Polish rebel" Count Poloski, and her attempts to escape from a Russian fortress, where she is kept prisoner by the governor, villaneous Ruffenhoff, who passionately desires her. Rowina would rather die than "meet the tyrant's embraces."<sup>25</sup> She is in love with Nelson Murdale, "an Englishman found fighting in the Polish ranks," who is trying to rescue her. The young lovers and the Polish patriots are being helped by Calvin Cartwheel, the Yankee, "a Drum Major in the Vermont Militia," "found beating the drum for the Polish rebels." Several times the fugitives are captured by Ruffenhoff and his officers, but each time they are rescued by miraculous intervention of Calvin, who, by cheating on the Russians and playing crude jokes on them, finally not only helps the lovers leave the fortress — hiding Rowina in his drum — but also blows it up. Rowina and Nelson are reunited with the girl's father and some other Polish and English patriots on board of the *Cloud Skiff*, an Ameri-

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<sup>25</sup> Silas S. Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland* (Philadelphia and New York: Turner and Fisher, 1841), 9.

can ship, which is to take them to America, “where the Russian despot dares not seek us, or tyrants trample upon innocence and liberty.”<sup>26</sup>

Calvin Cattwheel, the Yankee, is the principal character of *The Brazen Drum*. He contributes the most to the development of the plot, and provides opportunities for the change of pace and mood. His long speeches and monologues, in which he relates the ways he was trying to help Poles, are filled with crude humor. They serve the presentation of his character and his attitudes which are to be taken as those of an average American. He always stresses his independence, self-reliance, and makes many references to his native “Vermount.” He demands respect from the Russian officers, who try to insult him calling him “slave” and “Yankee savage.” He insults them in return, calling them in their faces “the Russian tyrant’s wolves,” “Russian rusty rats,” “darned Russian Muscovy men bears” etc., and openly praising “Brave Poles” and their struggle for freedom against the “Russian varmints.” He acts calmly, never losing control over the situation, nor optimism, in spite of the seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Calvin often compares the situation in Poland to the American Revolution and Poles’ determination to fight for independence to that of American patriots. When asked by the wife of a Russian officer why he left his country and his sweetheart to join the “Polish rebels,” he answers with simplicity:

Why, you see as how, Ma’am, I was a carpenter, carpenter and a drum-major in the state of Vermont, and was recon’d at trainin’ and the like, a purty considerable of a critterwell — when the news come over that the brave Poles had struck against tyrant Nick, and wanted help, I thought o’Rusciosko [sic] and Pulaski helpin’ us — and thinks I one good turn deserves another, so here goes for Poland. I tell’d Kitty about it — she gnaw’d the end of her apron abit, then wipin’ her eyes with the corner on it, says, “Its rather hard, Calvin, to part — but mammy stood it in old times, so will I now” Well, she served me up a few notions, and down I went to Boston; there I happened to come accross Nelson Murdale, who was a regular pilot, two other Englishmen, and some Boston boys, with a small vessel, all determined to go the hull critter for the brave Poles.<sup>27</sup>

Then he describes how he devised a plan to bring arms to Poland for the insurrectionists and how he managed to convince “Muscovies, hairy as Vermont bears” that the machinery on the ship was for the Russian farmers; he marked the boxes “Patent hemp dressers, for Russia.” As the Russians made Polish prisoners, including “brave old Poloski,” “work at dressing hemp” —

<sup>26</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 34–35.

I give the old chap a wink, says I, "I kal'ate the Muscovies 'llose by this speculation" [...] When [the Poles] seed the boxes was filled with shootin' sticks and the like, darn me if they didn't jump for joy [...] The Poles were free, and the great barn teetotally theirn.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the play the Polish patriots express their gratitude to Calvin; they admire his "brave noble heart," and call him "the faithful American," "brave and noble comrade," "noble fellow," "honest Calvin." When Nelson Murdale offers him a reward for saving Rowina, Calvin rejects it.

Nelson: Honest Calvin. I am too full for words; but trust me, your friendship shall not pass unrewarded — for the present I can only thank you;

Calvin: Thank ye! so am I — do you know now, I kal'ate as how that sort of reward is a darned sight better than any other.

Murdale: Indeed!

Calvin: Yes; for your money only goes into one's pocket; now that 'ere goes right clear into a body's hear — and you're sure o' never loosing it.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin admires the courage of Poles and their determination to fight against oppression. He tells Rowina that she is "jist about as spunky a gal, as my Continental grandmother was in our Yankee Revolution war."<sup>30</sup> He tries to console her and amuse her ridiculing the Russians and telling her how he tricked them.

The Russians are presented in the play as villains, hating "these accursed Poles and their audacious rebellion," "against our most mighty Nicholas." They are also shown as corrupt and stupid, easily cheated by clever Calvin.

Rowina is a typical melodramatic heroine, worried about the safety of her father and lover. When pursued by Ruffenhoff she faces him with a pistol in each hand: "Rowina is no captive while she can grasp a weapon to pierce the heart of a tyrant's minion."<sup>31</sup> She is a great Polish patriot, but she is ready to follow her beloved Nelson to England.

Alas! I have now no country! The tyrant's triumph and Poland is my home no more! [...] Dear, gallant youth, lead on! O'er the earth or ocean I'll follow you!

<sup>28</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 14.

Murdale consoles her: “Yes, Rowina, oppressors may conquer — still does the chainless patriot triumph in his soul!”<sup>32</sup>

In Act II the Polish patriots, Zyrenski, Gabinski and Poloski are presented together with “three American patriots” and “three English patriots,” “one of each three with a small national flag in his hand.” They are awaiting the American ship discussing the situation of Poland, and the necessity of leaving for America.

Poloski: Leave our country, noble Count, our lands?

Poloski: Aye, Zyrenski! “our lands” indeed! no fool of Polish earth is now our own; the tyrants claim it all, and e’en our lives! Then what is left for us to gain or hope for? Have not we in three successive struggles, vainly contended for the ancient rights and liberties of Poland — have we not seen our lands divided and our authorities usurped by the combined despots of Russia, Germany and Prussia? Have we not seen our Constitution trampled to the earth; its sage founders denounced and chained by a female despot, a shameless royal bawd? Have we not seen the streets of Praga strewed, nay, piled with the gory corpses of our fathers, mothers, sisters, and their unoffending offspring — butchered by the fell Suwarrow? In short, have we not seen Rusciosko [sic] leave his country in despair; our dearest relatives yoked like brutes together and drived to dread Siberia? What then has Poland left for us, or we for her? despair and desolation! then why should we remain? our blood would not be a drop on the great sea of gore that our oppressors thirst for! Come, brave friends to our retreat, and patiently await another dawn; till then your good old patriotic songs will cheer and beguile the slow-winged hours. Come, old friend, we soon shall seek a land of peace.

Zyrenski: I still will follow you; and yet to be a wandering exile in my years.

Poloski: When hope of liberty is gone in his native land, the patriot becomes worse than an exile — the slave of his oppressors.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of the play, as “part of the fortress blows up with a terrific explosion,” Calvin sings to cheer up his Polish friends:

Hail Columby! happy land,  
The Russian hogs may all be d—d.

Then “The flags are raised and the skiff moves off to a National air, as the curtain quickly descends.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 24—25.

<sup>34</sup> Steele, *The Brazen Drum or Yankee in Poland*, 42.

The popularity of *The Brazen Drum* on the American stage should be partly attributed to the fact that in Philadelphia, Boston and New York the best “Yankee” actors, E.L. Davenport, T.D. Kemble, C.H. Saunders, played the part of Calvin Cartwheel. The play was considered one of the best works of Silas S. Steele (born 1812), a prolific Philadelphia writer, the author of over thirty six plays, tragedies, comedies, farces, melodramas, operas, burlesques, as well as several stage adaptations of stories and novels.<sup>35</sup> Steele was fairly well-known and respected in his times; he was praised by J.F. Cooper, F.C. Wemyss and James Reese.<sup>36</sup> A great enthusiast of the theatre, both professional and amateur, in 1859 he published *Book of Plays: for Home Amusement*<sup>37</sup> with an introductory essay emphasizing the instructive and entertaining value of “home theatricals.”

James Reese, in his *The Dramatic Authors of America* (1845), wrote of Steele:

Mr Steele has no equal in the United States. His subjects are as varied as his style. [...] [in his plays] we notice that peculiar vein of quiet humour, play upon words, and true, genuine wit, blended as they are with the scientific arrangements of all our most popular airs, which readily accounts for the success which attends their representation. Mr Steele can claim originality which in England would have made his fortune, will here it simply adds to the literary dramatic character of our country, without benefiting the author beyond the few hours of short-lived glory he basks in, during the performance of his pieces. This is fame. [...] In England at the present day there is no writer to contend with him.<sup>38</sup>

A more objective opinion has been expressed by a contemporary historian of the American theatre, Walter Meserve, who rightly observes that Steele’s plays “from the stiff language to the obvious moral bear the weight of a heavy hand,” but, “they are notable for the manner in which all characters are individually conceived and contribute to the plot.” Steele’s work, continues Meserve, “clearly illustrates the efforts of a journeyman playwright to catch a current topic of conversation and to dramatize the daily interests of the American public.”<sup>39</sup>

A contemporary Polish reader of *The Brazen Drum*, used to a very different dramatic treatment of the November Insurrection in such plays as J. Słowacki’s

<sup>35</sup> Only two plays by S.S. Steele were published: *The Brazen Drum* and *The Crock of Gold, or the Poiler’s Trails*. The later was published in: Eugene R.K., ed., *America’s Lost Plays*, Vol. 14 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941).

<sup>36</sup> F. C. Wemyss, *Chronology of the American Stage from 1752 to 1852* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1853); Reese, *The Dramatic Authors of America*.

<sup>37</sup> Silas S. Steele, *Book of Plays for Home Amusement* (Philadelphia: George G. Evans Publisher, 1859).

<sup>38</sup> Reese, *The Dramatic Authors of America*, 126.

<sup>39</sup> Walter J. Meserve, *Heralds of Promise* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 170–171.

*Kordian* (1834), S. Wyspiański's *Warszawianka* (1898) and *Noc Listopadowa* (1904) may be amused by the simplified, satirical and rather shallow treatment of the subject, as well as by suggesting emigration to America as the only solution for oppressed Poles. Studying the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American theatre and American culture of that period he may find an explanation for this manner of writing, yet he may still regret that the American theatre audiences have never had a chance to become acquainted with the Polish plays about our struggle for independence; unfortunately, they have not been translated into English.

#### Source

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