

WATKIN TENCH,
THE ROYAL CIRCUS &
THE DANCE OF THE
NEW HOLLANDERS



CONVICTS at BOTANY BAY

A unique copy of an early chapbook abridgement of Watkin Tench's first book on New South Wales has a frontispiece captioned "the landing of the convicts at Botany Bay." This precise wording was also used in April 1789 to describe one of the headline attractions of a popular show at the Royal Circus theatre in London. Both works date from an era when smaller publishers and popular theatre borrowed heavily from each other — and from the headlines — so the likelihood is that the engraving relates to this otherwise unknown entr'acte dance, the "New Hollanders," the only contemporary stage-show to explicitly represent the First Fleet.



On 13 April 1789, a few weeks after the first substantial news of the First Fleet had been published in England, the Royal Circus on the south bank of London reopened for its Summer season. One of the headline acts on the night was an entr'acte dance called the “New Hollanders,” newly conceived and staged to capitalise on the interest in the first reports from New South Wales. Dances are the most fugitive of cultural acts, meaning that unlike grander contemporary shows such as Arnould’s *Death of Captain Cook* or Dent’s *Bastille*, details are scant beyond the central fact that it was advertised as showing “the landing of the Convicts at Botany Bay.” Although no original material relating to the dance is extant, there is one likely surviving representation, the engraved frontispiece for an early chapbook edition of Watkin Tench’s first book on the colony, in the Sir William Dixson collection at the State Library of New South Wales, the caption of which uses the precise wording used in the advertisements of the Royal Circus (fig. 1). By any rights this engraving is an important and often overlooked part of the earliest visual history of transportation to Australia, but if the connection to the dance is accepted, it sheds light on how a popular fringe theatre in London staged the story with genuine and sympathetic realism at a time when popular depictions tended to be wildly exaggerated.

The first ships of the First Fleet which returned to England, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Borrowdale*, arrived in late March 1789 carrying a great quantity of letters and dispatches from Sydney Cove. Although a few brief notices had filtered back since the Fleet had left in May 1787, chiefly regarding the voyage out, this was the first substantial news of the initial six months of the settlement itself, creating a minor rush among publishers to print detailed and ‘authentic’ notices of life in Botany Bay, as the new colony was still usually called.¹ A few were excerpted in the newspapers, most notably a letter signed by the officer in the Marines Watkin Tench.² These letters were soon plagiarised by enterprising publishers as the basis for small pamphlets and books, several of which featured fabulously unreliable frontispiece illustrations: such relatively slight publications could be printed with remarkable speed, meaning that together with the newspaper columns on which they of-

1. See John A. Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia* (Canberra: 1975), vol. I, pp. 18–27; Geoffrey Ingleton, *True Patriots All* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952), p. 2; Jonathan Wantrup, *First News from Botany Bay* (Sydney: Hordern House, 1987); Nathan Garvey, “Selling a Penal Colony: The Booksellers and Botany Bay,” *Script & Print*, 31:1 (2007), pp. 20–38; Matthew Fishburn, “The Wreck of the *Borrowdale*,” *The Book Collector* 62: 2 (2013), pp. 229–239; Hannah Doherty Hudson, ““Botany Bay” in British Magazines, 1786–1791,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 54:2 (Winter 2021), pp. 261–284.

2. “Expedition to Botany Bay,” *The World* (28 March 1789), p. 2.

ten relied, they were not only affordable but were effectively the only source of information on the market for the eight or so months before the much grander illustrated quarto accounts of governor Phillip and surgeon White finally appeared in December 1789 and January 1790 respectively. The great success of this first period was Tench's genuine *Narrative of the Expedition*, published on 4 April 1789, a text which dominated this cottage industry for plausible information from Botany Bay.³

For those interested in events in the far-off Pacific, by a curious coincidence, the theatrical hit of the season was an adaptation of Arnould's "grand serious-pantomimic-ballet" on the death of Captain Cook. Originally staged in Paris in 1788, it took the form of an elaborate set of stage directions for a South Seas love-story concluding with an "ingenious but unhistorical account of Cook's death," in the neat summation of the collector Sir Maurice Holmes.⁴ The grand London staging of the pantomime at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, with "new scenery, machinery, and other decorations," was much applauded, one reviewer commenting that it was an "added proof, that a tale of sorrow may be told in silent movement with great effect" (and expressing their thanks that the actor Delpini, although accidentally struck with an axe on opening night, was fast recovering).⁵ The reviewer in *The World*, then the most fashionable daily in London, spoke for most when it solemnly noted that the "manner in which the Town receive this *Ballet d'Action*, does honour to the national taste," no indifferent matter at a time when George III was only just beginning to surface from his first debilitating bout of mental illness.⁶

This coincidence of timing, which saw the first news of Botany Bay competing with a stage-show on Captain Cook is presumably why one rare little chapbook, the optimistically-titled *An Authentick Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* includes a frontispiece in which sailors in a small pinnace fight off a determined attack by some South Sea natives straight out of central casting: in the centre of the scene is none other than Cook himself, more than usually far from home (fig. 2). Nothing in the text, which does include a thunderous denunciation of the "unfeeling monsters" who had planned this new settlement, alludes even remotely to the scene, especially as the book seems to

3. "Captain Tench's Narrative," *The World* (4 April 1789), p. 2.

4. [Jean-François Arnould], *The Death of Captain Cook; a Grand Serious-Pantomimic-Ballet* (London: Cadell, 1789); Sir Maurice Holmes, *Captain James Cook, R.N., F.R.S. A bibliographical excursion* (London, Francis Edwards, 1952), p. 65.

5. "Original Strictures on Public Amusements," *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (March 1789), p. 130.

6. [Advertisement], *The World* (3 April 1789), p. 1.

have been printed far too quickly for the spearing of Governor Phillip at Manly in late 1790 to be meant.⁷

Of course, few figures were more bankable than Cook and this was certainly not the first time that audiences had been treated to melodrama based on his adventures. As early as 1771 Joseph Cradock's tragedy *Zobeide*, adapted from a treatment by Voltaire, had featured a new prologue by Oliver Goldsmith which, as the London reviewers noticed, "alludes to the discoveries lately made by Dr. Solander and Mr. Banks," the humour of which was usually said to be the play's saving grace.⁸ The greatest success had been John O'Keeffe's 1785 pantomime *Omai*, famous for its sets by Philip de Louthembourg, who had played up the show's based-on-a-true-story credentials by consulting with one of the artists who had sailed on Cook's third voyage, John Webber. O'Keeffe's show used a series of familiar touchstones (*Omai* himself, who had reached London in 1774 on HMS *Adventure*; the "Queen" Oberea from Tahiti, notorious among the satirists and muck-rakers of the age for her dal-

liance with Sir Joseph Banks; and the death of Cook, an event which transfixed European audiences) to great acclaim. As Bernard Smith has commented, "the pantomime, despite its preposterous plot, occupies an important place in the history of realism in theatrical costume and scenery."⁹ The final scene, in which Cook was shown being winched into the sky in the arms of Britannia was considered one of the greatest of any

contemporary stage designs, later engraved as the 'Apotheosis of Captain Cook.' With demi-gods ascending into the heavens, ships wrecking in wild storms and volcanoes erupting violently, the elaborate *Omai* and Cook pantomimes were two of the most important precursors in the developing trend in the theatres for the "great quasi-melodrama, quasi-ballet spectacles" that dominated the 1790s.¹⁰

7. [Anon.], *An Authentick Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (London: Bassam, n.d. but probably 1789), p. 14.

8. "Theatrical Intelligence," *General Evening Post* (10–12 December 1771), p. 2. See also: "An Account of Zobeide," *Bingley's Journal* (7–14 December 1771), p. 4; "Postscript," *General Evening Post* (14 December 1771), p. 4.

9. Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (Sydney: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 116.

10. Charles Beecher Hogan, *London Stage 1660-1800 ... Part 5: 1776-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), vol. V, pp. lxxxii–lxxxiv.



Fig. 2. Frontispiece to *An Authentick Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (London: Bassam, no date). Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

This vogue for elaborate spectacle was in large part the result of fierce competition in the 1780s between the two London patent theatres (Drury Lane and Covent Garden) and a number of unrulier places of entertainment, not the least of which was the Royal Circus, opened in 1782 by a small consortium including the playwright Charles Dibdin. Built on the south bank of London, a few miles from Blackfriars Bridge at the major intersection in St. George's Fields (thus, the "Circus"), it was conceived as a sort of combination riding school and equestrian show, not dissimilar to Astley's, and was large enough to include not only a horse-ring but also a full proscenium stage. The first actors were children under the direction of an irascible figure called Charles Hughes, a man of "rather irritable temper" as one of his conferees would later call him.¹¹ Dibdin, who had cause to give the character of his colleague some thought, settled on the more picturesque phrase, a "noxious reptile."¹² A typical evening at the Royal Circus might include a ballet, a musical entertainment, a dance, "various feats of horsemanship" and a pantomime to conclude: it was, in Marius Kwint's helpful characterisation, a type of "mongrel theatre."¹³

Never far from ruin, the early years at the Royal Circus were "stormy ... a catalogue of licences refused, pecuniary embarrassments and acrimonious disputes."¹⁴ Routine complaints against the show, both in the newspapers and the courts, often took the low-class status of the audience as their starting point, even if Dibdin and others were keen to point out some of their grander patrons. Always close to being shuttered, by 1784 it was riven by bitter disputes among the management, leading to a long phase where Hughes had possession of the facilities and continued to operate despite the open protests of his partners. With Hughes in charge, a revolving door of managers tried to turn the fortunes of the Royal Circus around, notably the troubled and violent ballet master Giuseppe Grimaldi (d. 1788); the pantomime actor Carlo Antonio Delpini (1740-1828), newly arrived from his success as the "revengeful savage" Koah in *The Death of Captain Cook* at the Theatre

11. James Decastro, *The Memoirs* (London: Sherwood, Jones & Co., 1824), p. 119.

12. Charles Dibdin, *The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself* (London: 1803), vol. II, p. 109.

13. Marius Kwint, "The Legitimization of the Circus in Late Georgian England," *Past & Present* 174 (2002), p. 84.

14. Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 24.

15. See entries in Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim & Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-1993). On Grimaldi: vol. VI, pp. 388-397. On Delpini: vol. V, pp. 315-319. On "Mr. Read": vol. 12, p. 276.

Royal; and the stage manager Thomas Read, whose tribulations were soon poured out in his *History of the Royal Circus*, a byzantine account of how Hughes had managed to reduce a new entertainment that was "all the *ton*" to a "bear garden."¹⁵ Read's account stretched the truth a little, because the Circus had always been a little rowdy, but it was in this period when Hughes arranged a liquor license and there is reason to believe the stage-manager's description of a pretty rough crowd, ranging from "pettifogging attorneys" to butchers still in their bloody aprons, many of them the worse for drink.¹⁶ Even the actors were said to have occasionally insisted on finishing their pipe before rejoining the stage.¹⁷

Given this reputation, it is not surprising that before the First Fleet sailed in 1787 Hughes was the only impresario to attempt any major show on the subject, putting on "A New Opera, called Botany Bay" which ran for a short season. Sadly, details are more than usually scant. The vague notices of the show, although puffing the Royal Circus as the "most complete and elegant of any Summer theatre," provide little in terms of details or casting, one not unrepresentative notice simply announcing on 24 April 1787 that "the favourite Opera of Botany Bay will be continued a few Evenings."¹⁸ In short, this performance dates from the very lowest point of Hughes's role as proprietor, meaning that the nature of this show is likely to remain more than usually unknown.

It was clearly not a happy time at the theatre. As one contemporary commented, despite its eligible position and the elegance of its structure the Royal Circus had "been cruelly depressed by gross and repeated abuses in the management."¹⁹ It does seem to have been being run into the ground — Read claimed they lost £3500 in 1788 — but the theatre was clearly trying to reestablish itself when it reopened after its winter hiatus on Easter Monday, 13 April 1789. The mood was buoyant, a note to the public printed in the *General Magazine and Impartial Review* announcing that the stage was enlarged, the rooms improved, the company and band ready to entertain.²⁰ On opening night the headline attraction was a 'new musical entertainment' called the *Knight Errant* (a vaguely Iberian romance full of magic and innu-

16. Thomas Read, *The History of the Royal Circus, Introductory to the Case of Mr. Read, late Stage Manager of that Theatre* (London: 1791), pp. 10, 33-34.

17. [Notice], *The Analytic Review* 12 (1792), p. 534.

18. [Advertisement], *The World* (21 April 1789), p. 1; [Advertisement], *Public Advertiser* (24 April 1787), p. 1.

19. John Dent, *The Bastille: A Musical Entertainment of One Act* (London: Lowndes, 1790), p. vi.

20. "Original Strictures on Public Amusements," *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (April 1789), p. 180.

endo), but almost equal billing was given to the entr'acte, "A new dance (composed by Mr. Holland) called, The New Hollanders. With an exact Representation of the Landing of the Convicts at Botany Bay."²¹ There was presumably some continuity between the 1787 opera and this new dance, but the most obvious point is the canny timing of both, the first put on as the Fleet was readying to sail, the second just after the first news arrived. Such dancing was then at the high watermark of its popularity on the stages of London, which is why the notice in *The World* gives some details of the four principal dancers in a notice that concludes, in a nod to the recent recovery of the King, "Vivant Rex & Regina."²² The four were led by the Drury Lane trained John Holland (fl. 1769-1796), said to be equally adept at dancing on both stage and horse, who had joined the Royal Circus in 1785, beginning a decade in which he would summer there and winter at Covent Garden.²³ It is tempting to speculate that Holland must have been involved in the earlier Botany Bay "opera" of 1787 given his dates, but no notice confirms this, and also to wonder whether he deliberately staged the new dance as a play on his name. He was joined by Mons. Auguste Frédéric Joseph Ferrère (fl. 1782-1794), another habitué of Drury Lane, the lesser-known Mme. Sala (fl. 1782-1790), presumably the wife of Anthony Sala, a dancer at King's Theatre, and lastly Mme. Eleanor Fuozi (fl. 1784-1789) a much in-demand artiste from this era who is said to have come from Bologna with her husband Antonio.²⁴

Getting reviews or notices of such dances is always difficult, but on this occasion the problem was compounded by the ongoing strife in the management, which meant that reviewers soon had a bigger story to tell. It was well-known that Hughes was not happy about the direction the Royal Circus was taking, and on the opening night there was a small ruckus over billing. More disturbances were expected the following night, but few were prepared when a full-scale melee broke out, the audience storming the stage and being beaten back by the actors, ably supported by some of the burlier stage-hands. One actor was said to have needed to be physically restrained from stabbing one of the paying customers with a sword and a man from the audience had his leg so badly broken that his physician claimed to fear for his life. A few pa-

21. See advertisements in both *The World* and *The Times* for 13 April 1789. I have not traced any actual Royal Circus playbill from this period. On the entr'acte see Hogan, *London Stage, 1660-1800*, vol. V, pp. lxxxii-lxxxiii. See also [Anon.], *The Knight Errant, a Comic Musical Piece* (London: 1789).

22. "Royal Circus, St. George's Fields," *The World* (13 April 1789), p. 1.

23. Highfill, Burnim & Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, vol. VII, pp. 375-376.

24. Highfill, Burnim & Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, vol. V, pp. 232-233; vol. XIII, pp. 176-177; vol. V, pp. 424-425.

trons spent the night in the watch-house. As the *Times* had it, the management had suddenly decided to omit Hughes and his horses from the program without notice, replacing the "manly and noble exercises of horsemanship" with "the buffoonery of balancing a ladder and jiggling a hornpipe." Hughes certainly had his supporters, the audience dividing along partisan lines, with a large section chanting "Give us back our money, or let us have the horses" but with the cheap-seats in the gallery remaining "tumultuous for the dancers."²⁵ What reports exist do tend to confirm that the scene was chiefly due to the tensions in management, but it is hard not to visualise the class distinctions being inflamed by the dance itself.

In the event, only two nights were lost, and although Read would call it a "sad reverse" which led to the Royal Circus being "thinly attended" for a period it does appear that the New Hollander dance had found its audience, running for a month, riots notwithstanding.²⁶ The characters were distinctive enough to become one of the most acclaimed costumes at the annual Pantheon Masquerade, the fancy-dress party which would regularly host 2000 guests or more, often including a sprinkling of Royal Princes. The press notices dwelt on the costumes, which ranged from witches to Morris dancers, Turks, "Otaheiteans" and an Imperial Nabob, but most commentators singled out a "group of returned Felons from Botany Bay" for their "characteristic humour," describing them variously as "some pleasant *blackguards* from *Botany Bay*," "some Botany Bay boys," or "four good masques in rags from Botany Bay."²⁷ A follow-up a week later, surely penned by a publicist at the theatre, confirmed that the "celebrated *groupe* from *Botany Bay*, which excited so much laughter and merriment at the late Masquerade, evidently borrowed their idea from the charming little Ballet of the *New Hollanders*, or *landing at Botany Bay*, which attracts such universal notice every evening, at that scene of summer recreation, the Royal Circus."²⁸

No original designs or sketches from the show survive, but there is a very probable connection with a chapbook in the Dixson collection, which is only stated on the title-page as being written by "an Officer of the Marines" but is clearly abridged from Tench's *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*. It must be an out-and-out piracy or Tench's name would surely have been promi-

25. "Riot at the Circus," *The Times* (16 April 1789), p. 3. See also editorial, *The Times* (15 April 1789), p. 3.

26. Read, *The History of the Royal Circus*, pp. 61-62, 68. The last show appears to have been on 15 May 1789.

27. Notices, respectively, in *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (6 May 1789), p. 2; *Morning Post* (6 May 1789), p. 3; *The Times* (6 May 1789), p. 3; *London Chronicle* (5-7 May 1789), p. 434.

28. Editorial, *Morning Star* (12 May 1789), p. 3.

ment.²⁹ That such a work would have appeared is hardly surprising, given the book was a well-paced account of the settlement, in the stores within a fortnight of the first ship reaching England. Tench's writing was fresh, immediate and cultured, with most readers apparently agreeing with the *Monthly Review*, which called it "very satisfactory ... an interesting narrative."³⁰ The book was very popular, the publisher Debrett running to a third edition by August 1789, quite apart from a Dublin piracy and an American reprint the same year, as well as French, German and Dutch translations.

The unique copy of Tench in the Dixson collection has been curiously overlooked, partly because of the mystery of when and by whom it was published: an early owner or, more likely, an early bookseller, has cut the imprint from the bottom of the title-page. The dimensions and collation of the piracy differ dramatically from the Debrett edition (64 vs. 146 pp.), and nor is

it, despite superficial similarities in size, layout and page-count, the same as the rare American edition, which has a markedly different setting throughout.³¹ The precise date of publication is not known, but it most likely predates Debrett's third edition of August 1789, because it makes no reference to a new letter from Tench in Sydney which that edition included as an important postscript.

The greater mystery is the frontispiece. This is the only known illustrated edition of Tench's first book (although one early French edition did include a rough sketch map, loosely based on Cook's voyages). More, the image has a verisimilitude completely lacking from any of the views included in the other cheap popular accounts, and is certainly much more apropos than a scene showing the death of Captain

Cook, for example, let alone some of the wilder published images, which range from fanciful depictions of the First Fleet ships *Sirius* and *Supply* at anchor to woodcut-illustrated broadsides announcing news of the "Wild Man"

29. An Officer of the Marines, *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay, as performed by Commodore Phillip* (SLNSW, Dixson Safe 78/70). The summary in the Library catalogue states accurately that the "first sentence of Tench's part is rewritten, and thence the work is copied directly with numerous omissions, to the end." See also Warwick Hirst (ed.), *On the Run* [exhibition catalogue] (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 2006), unpaginated.

30. "Miscellaneous," *Monthly Review* 80 (April 1789), p. 362.

31. The New York edition was published by T. and J. Swords in 1789.

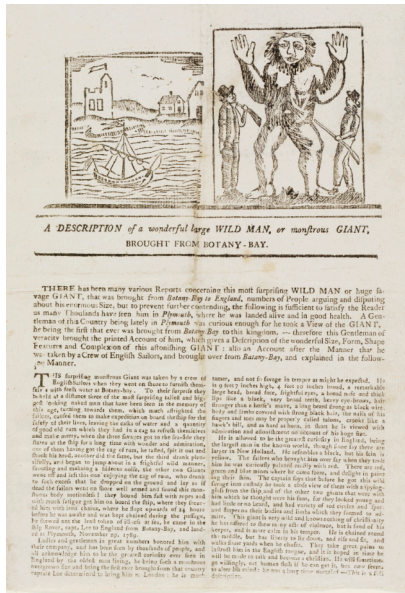


Fig. 3. A Description of a wonderful large Wild Man, or monstrous Giant, brought from Botany Bay (no imprint). SLNSW. <https://collection.slnsw.gov.au/record/n881Z58n/EdkMKlgAv87BP>

of Botany Bay (fig. 3).³² Here, while the details of the landscape, with its mountainous shoreline and roughly-drawn fir trees, have little pretence to accuracy, taken together the scene does have a crude but lively reality: the rough but not caricatured faces of the chain-gang, the supercilious officers, the long row of tents, some women stepping ashore from the small ship's boat in the background. In style it is quite like the well-known cartoons of the era, none more so than Robert Dighton's image of 'A Fleet of Transports under Convoy' (1781) (fig. 4) or the small figures included in some of the contemporary engravings of the hulks.

This would be significant given that any illustration of the actual convicts is rare enough (the grand quarto First Fleet books all draw a veil over the subject), but the caption is also tellingly specific, describing 'The Landing of the Convicts at Botany Bay,' the identical wording from the newspaper advertise-

ments of the dance at the Royal Circus. One can only speculate, but it is easy to imagine that the frontispiece may have been based on the theatrical backdrop (is this why the redcoats are carrying pikes?). Such details are not explicitly mentioned in any of the reviews, but a sense of the staging is surely alluded to in one reviewer's description of the dance as "a well-imagined and picturesque representation of the landing of the convicts at Botany Bay."³³

Most likely any backdrop would have been reused or refashioned from the opera of April 1787, perhaps with the help of William Capon (1757-1827), the great scene-painter who in 1789 had just begun working at the Royal Circus. Capon was



renowned for his obsession with historical accuracy and for working in the tradition of "romantic scene design which had begun with de Louthembourg," a description that does broadly match the frontispiece engraving.³⁴ Given that Capon definitely painted sets for one of the shows that routinely

32. See *An Authentic and Interesting Narrative of the Late Expedition to Botany Bay* (London: Lemoine & Parsons, 1789) and *A Description of a wonderful large Wild Man, or monstrous Giant, brought from Botany Bay* (no imprint, c.1789).

33. "Original Strictures on Public Amusements," *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (April 1789), p. 180.

34. Highfill, Burnim & Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, vol. III, pp. 45–49

Fig. 4. Robert Dighton (after), A Fleet of Transports under Convoy (London: Carrington & Bowles, 9 November 1781. NLA, Nan Kivell Collectoin. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135886548>

shared a bill with the New Hollanders, providing “entirely new scenery” for *The Generous Hermit, or Harlequin Fisherman*, it is surely possible that he dashed off something for Mr. Holland and his dancers.³⁵ After all, it is worth remembering that the busy playwrights of London were not terribly accurate geographers: there is a telling postscript in the memoirs of Dibdin’s mostly estranged son, the writer and scene painter Thomas John Dibdin, who recorded how in 1791, in Liverpool, he helped put on a benefit for Mrs. [Sarah] Ward of Drury Lane, writing “her a *petite pièce* on the subject of ‘Botany Bay,’ at that time a new and interesting colony,” making the throw-away comment that he simply “selected music, and painted some scenery for it from designs in Cook’s Voyages.”³⁶

The New Hollanders dance faded from view, although it did have one revival when the Royal Circus once again went under new management at mid-year, being taken over by John Palmer (1744-1798), called by his numerous friends “Plausible Jack.” A roistering figure, Palmer is now most famous for being part of the macabre club of actors who have literally died on stage, collapsing during a performance of Kotzebue’s *The Stranger* on 2 August 1798.³⁷ The impresario, on any reckoning, was skirting closer to illegality – and indeed fraud – than most of his peers, and was actually on his recognisance at the King’s Bench (thankfully much less than the statutory three miles away from the theatre) when he first took over on the night of 28 July, performing an “Olio” he had previously given at the Lyceum in the Strand.³⁸ On this first night the run-sheet for the evening definitely included the New Hollanders dance, part of a jumble of shows staged that week in the bustle to get ready for the most successful show ever staged at the Royal Circus, John Dent’s *The Bastille*, which opened on 5 August 1789 with sets designed by Capon and with the dancer Mr. Holland playing the Marquis de la Fayette.³⁹

Dent’s pantomime, rushed onto the stage in the weeks after 14 July, pitched the events in Paris — as was fairly common at this early date — not as the work of raving and dangerous Jacobins but a brave step towards greater

35. “Royal Circus,” *The World* (11 May 1789), p. 1.

36. Thomas Dibdin, *The reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin* (London: Henry Colburn, 1827), vol. I, pp. 113–114.

37. On Palmer, see Highfill, Burnim & Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 11, pp. 161–177; [Anon.], *A Sketch of the Theatrical life of the late Mr. John Palmer* (London: Symonds, 1798).

38. The Royal Circus show surely took the same shape as the earlier Lyceum gig, a June 1789 playbill for which in the British Library records Palmer performed excerpts of everything from Falstaff to “a drunken Buck.” Read, *The History of the Royal Circus*, p. 76; “As You Like It. For the Benefit of Mr. Cartwright. To-morrow, Thursday, June 25, 1789,” (no imprint; accessed via Gale).

39. [Advertisement], *The World* (5 August 1789), p. 1. See also “Anecdotes of Mr. W. Capon,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* 98 (1828), p. 106.

French liberty *a la Anglaise*, with much on the “blessings of liberty” and a final scene featuring an image of Britannia flanked by portraits of King George and Queen Charlotte.⁴⁰ One particular scene in which a silver-headed and emaciated old man was released after years immured in the dungeon was much enjoyed, one actor later recalling that this “the audience were fired at, and the feelings of a liberal, enlightened, and public-spirited nation displayed its love of freedom with involuntary bursts of enthusiastic and electric applause.”⁴¹ Given this wild acclaim for liberty one wonders exactly what the reaction to the New Hollanders dance had been four months earlier: if nothing else Palmer must have had strong feelings on the subject, as he and his successor had both just spent part of July back in the Bridewell, accused of infringing on the rights of the patent theatres for including spoken dialogue on the stage of the Royal Circus.⁴²

Stage references to Botany Bay were soon to be quite out of fashion, eclipsed by events closer to home: the health of the King, the Terror in France, the threat of invasion, the mutiny at the Nore. Even entr’acte dancing itself started to go out, most commonly replaced with loyal songs.⁴³ By the end of 1789 audiences were again flocking to the blockbuster show on Captain Cook which then toured the country, definitely showing in Halifax in January 1790, York in March, Richmond in July, Bury in October, and back in Halifax by the end of the year.⁴⁴ By the time of this last performance the part of Koah, the “Revengeful Savage,” was played by the versatile Mr. Holland. The Royal Circus was soon embroiled in more protracted legal fights between Hughes and the other proprietors which were not solved even when the horseman bolted for Russia to take up a sinecure under Count Orlov, the favourite of Catherine the Great. The theatre burned down in 1799, was rebuilt, totally lost to fire a second time in 1805, only to emerge from the ashes as the Surrey Theatre, famous as the home of sensational melodrama and for evading the laws in favour of the patent theatres by putting ballet interludes into every production, including *Macbeth*.

40. Dent, *The Bastille*, p. 22.

41. Decastro, *The Memoirs*, p. 123.

42. The Royal Circus staged a benefit for the latter, Giles Linnett Barrett (1744–1809), on 5 July 1790, issuing a playbill by Barrett himself, complaining of how he had been “prosecuted by the proprietors of the Winter Theatres for endeavouring to earn a livelihood.” See “Mr. Barrett’s Night, Monday next, July 5, 1790,” [playbill, no imprint, British Library via Gale].

43. Hogan, *London Stage, 1660-1800*, vol. V, pp. lxxxix–lxxxiii.

44. Playbills: “For the Benefit of Mr. Fawcett... The Death of Captain Cook,” [dated 26 January 1790], illustrated in Hordern House, *Captain James Cook ... the Robert and Mary Anne Parks collection* (Sydney: 2008), no. 121; 26 March 1790 [State Library of New South Wales]; 12 July 1790 [SLNSW]; 18 October 1790 [Princeton University Library]; 19 November 1790 [SLNSW].

It can surely not be a coincidence that the buffeted Royal Circus, marketing itself to the fringe of society, was the only house to stage any popular show which directly referenced the First Fleet, nor, for that matter, that their greatest triumph from later the same year was one in which the storming of a prison was the centrepiece of a wildly successful show. One can only hope that a complete copy of the Tench piracy will yet turn up to confirm whether the frontispiece can more firmly be tied to the staging of this popular dance at the Royal Circus. The ‘Dance of the New Hollanders’ was the only occasion when any London theatre tried to portray the story of the First Fleet, its brief but not insignificant run tending to confirm that there was a meaningful audience for such a performance, at least among those not indifferent to the real impact of prisons and transportation. Both the chapbook Tench and

the Royal Circus show, that is, were consciously designed to appeal to an audience drawn from the poorer and working classes of the city, the social milieu most represented among the convicts of the First Fleet.

The corporate memory of this small success may also have encouraged the Royal Circus to mount a slightly better recorded show a decade later. In 1795 the Royal Circus had been taken over by James and George Jones (not apparently related). It was chiefly James who was responsible for making it a successful venue for the ensuing two decades, before he left to become one of the partners behind the successful launch of the Royal Coburg Theatre – the Old Vic – in 1818.⁴⁵ In July 1798 the Royal Circus, still under the relatively new management of Jones, staged an elaborate show called *New South Wales; Or, Love in Botany Bay* (fig. 5).⁴⁶ A playbill from the show held in the SLNSW includes a lengthy description which shows that

this was an elaborate fantasy roughly based on the life of Bennelong, but with a major sub-plot in which a Chinese merchant called Tien-Sing lands in New South Wales to search for his daughter who had wrecked on the Aus-

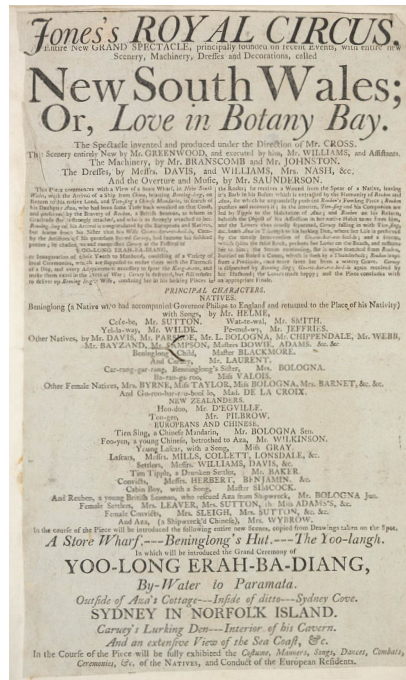


Fig. 5. Playbill for ‘New South Wales; Or, Love in Botany Bay,’ staged at the Royal Circus during the period it was being managed by James Jones. <https://collection.slnsw.gov.au/record/Y78Rb3dn/aZERWkqMVDxdK>

tralian coast. The mise-en-scène, that is, was more muddled than most, but the central point is that all of the Australian stage machinery was evidently based on a reading of David Collins’s *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, published the same year, which had evidently provided the cue for the show’s creator, John Cartwright Cross. Not only do many in the very large cast clearly borrow names and histories from that book, but one of the great set-pieces is described as the elaborate ceremonial dance ‘Yoo-long Erah-ba-diang,’ the precise spelling used on an important series of ethnographic plates in Collins’s book. Once again, it was the Royal Circus which was the only major London theatre staging any major work relating to the settlement, evidence that a broader popular audience for news from Botany Bay, however fanciful, still existed, and that the authentic voices of authors like Tench and Collins were being adapted and repurposed for the London theatre.

45. Kim Baston, ‘Transatlantic Journeys: John Bill Ricketts and the Edinburgh Equestrian Circus,’ *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 4:2 (2013), pp. 5–6, 11–12.

46. The success of this later play is discussed in Ruth Scobie, *Celebrity Culture and the Myth of Oceania in Britain* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2019), pp. 144–146.



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