

Title: The “Stage Central/Eastern European” in American Travel and Expatriate Narrative
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A byproduct of British colonialism in the seventeenth-century was its institution of an insidious, racist literary archetype—or, stock character—known as the “Stage Irishman.” This recurring, racist, two-dimensional cartoon attempted to personify an entire ethnicity with bigoted, exaggerated, and misguided, cultural stereotypes in an effort to both entertain English audiences and establish a bogus, hierarchal differentiation between themselves and the Irish, who were already being promoted by the existing power structures as an inferior people (Duggan). American entertainment hit upon something similar in the nineteenth century with a clichéd, “blackface singer-dancer-comedian” type often referred to as the “Stage Negro” (Dorman 110).

In line with this pattern, late twentieth-century and turn-of-the-millennium era of American literary and film narratives have revealed an emerging, new stereotype that could be categorized as a “Stage Central (and) Eastern European.” The trend seems to have begun as early as the Cold War and continues in prose by American travelers and expatriates who, since the millennium, have begun to publish a growing body of work about their experiences in 1990s post-Communist Europe. Stage post-Communist Europeans are being routinely portrayed by many American writers as either buffoons, connivers, nationalists, crooks, or worse.

For instance, Paul Greenburg’s, *Leaving Katya* (2002), depicted the Russian Katya as an obsessive cheater. Robert Eversz’s *Gypsy Hearts* (1997) painted its antagonist, the Czech Monika, as a seductive, con-artist who swindled unsuspecting American men overseas. John Beckman’s *Winter Zoo* (2002), produced the Polish Zbigniew, an embittered divorcé who murdered an American expat. Better-known are Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) which told the story of Lithuanian Gitanas and his scheme to rip off American investors via the internet from his home country, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) which presented a backward, Ukrainian co-protagonist named “Alex,” a vulgar representation of a perverted and intolerant young post-Communist European who may well have served as the basis for British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s hero of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Uninformed prejudice is one thing, but what should readers make of post-Communist Europeans as represented by Americans who actually live(d) there?

References

Dorman, James H. “The Strange Career of Jim Crow Rice.” *Journal of Social History* 3.2 (Winter 1969-1970): 109-122.

Duggan, George Chester. *The Stage Irishman: A History of the Irish Play and Stage Characters from the Earliest Times*. 1937. New York: B. Blom, 1969.