

O.K. THE MUSICAL (DUTCH COLONIAL)

NOOR KLOOSTERMAN IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTOPHER KLINE

This issue is part of the exhibition by Christopher Kline, *O.K. – The Musical (Dutch Colonial)*, May 26-27 2018, in 1646.

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MAY 17: Noor Kloosterman [NK] to Christopher Kline [CK]
Dear Christopher,

As I was watching the performance documentation of O.K. - The Musical at Tate Liverpool, I came up with this idea of watching the film in pieces, as part of our on-going conversation towards the performances of the 26th and 27th. So now O.K. - The Musical is frozen on my laptop, somewhere after the extinct mammoth on stage left the 'Beginning of the World' - reminding me of my mother talking about her great grandmother nicknamed 'De Mammoet'; 'The Mammoth'. I like to think it was meant to emphasize her solid and stable character.

Back to the Musical: I'm a bit tempted to still watch the rest of the film at once (do you think I should?), but I liked the idea of seeing it in fragments as the musical in itself is always in progress, or so it seems. I scrolled back through your CV, watching the musical pass by 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, times, all indicating various stages: run-through, pre-production, dress rehearsals and performances. Will there be a post-production? An encore?

Curious to hear more about your project, about Kinderhook and growing up there, about this particular Dutch (colonial) setting & The Hague.

My best,

Noor

MAY 17: CK - NK
Dear Noor,

It could make sense to watch the performance in pieces, even out of order. It's a slow burner, and even though I often put scenes in historically chronological order, I feel that in the end I'd love for the project to transcend linear time and become something other than a consecutive timeline of moments. This has been no easy task to figure out, which is maybe part of why I see this as such a long-term project. I need years to get to the essence of what can be conveyed about a place and figure out all of the filters the history has already been through and how to go back in time to before those filters were there. Maybe it'll result in some kind of simultaneous co-existence of all of the moments that have passed on that piece of land. Like a big ghost story, but not just human ghosts, also plants and rocks and water and whatever else has been there.

Yes, here at 1646 in The Hague we're now in the "Dutch Colonial" era of development with the musical, going into the early years

of European contact, mostly between the Dutch and the Mohicans. This has been a challenge because there's been so much erasure of Mohican culture, largely due to a combination of an incredible percentage of indigenous people dying there in the first 20 years of European contact (mostly from disease, many from war), and the cultural hegemony of the Dutch and other Europeans who didn't have the tools to understand the Mohican philosophy and way of life. I'd argue that we still don't, but maybe we're coming closer and closer.

For example, a friend recently told me a theory that one of the big reasons that there's such a historical gap of understanding between Europe and Islam is that the Koran is a non-linear narrative, and so it wasn't until post-modernism that Europe started developing tools to understand the text in its originally intended way. I'm not sure if that's totally true, but I feel that a similar discrepancy probably applies to white people and their interpretations of Native American cultures. It's all about the lens you see other people through, and the lens is always invisible to you. If that sounds obvious, that's also your lens talking.

The scene you mentioned, with the mammoth, starts about 5 billion years ago and goes up to about 20,000 years ago when the first humans arrived in the area. It tries to show (in a very kid-like way) how the landscape formed and maybe hints at why people eventually settled where they did... how geography shapes so much of what humans end up doing. (We won't be touching on mammoths this time at 1646, but we've got a boat, a wigwam, beavers, Dutch Colonial architecture and a lot of trees.)

To answer your other question, overall the musical will continue to move through iterations, dealing with the stages of theatrical production, but also with different focuses on different moments or phenomena in Kinderhook's history. Even though Kinderhook is a small town, there are so many angles to investigate, and doing so mostly from the outside (all iterations of the project have taken place in Europe) also slows down the process a lot, though adds other widely varied vantage points that local histories are almost never afforded.

I'll stop there for now, I can go on and on about Kinderhook, etc. which has been the great thing about this project for me personally, feeling kind of like an authority on one specific thing with so many dimensions... it's been very satisfying as an artist to be able to articulate what I'm doing and why I'm doing it since I started this project 4 years ago. Not that it doesn't often get surreal and abstract, but it feels nice to get rid of a lot of the randomness that art-making can entail.

All the best,
Christopher

MAY 22: NK - CK
Dear Christopher,

To me personally this (both collective and individual)

cultural "lens" is really interesting and can tell us a lot about how our historical narratives and cultural identities take shape. It's a shame to see that the Dutch public debate has hardened so much and has moved away from exactly that, a public debate, into a head-first collision, making it difficult to move forward. But I guess it will indeed take time, years even, to push the conversation about European and Dutch colonial history forward and breach this unwillingness to speak about our footprints in global history.

So I'm curious, how does Kinderhook present its own history to inhabitants and visitors? How much of it is still visible in public and daily life, and how does the town commemorate, celebrate or ignore its past?

MAY 23: CK - NK

Dear Noor,

Since being in the Hague for a while this year I've caught wind of some of the discussions going on about Dutch Colonial history, namely with the proposed renaming of Witte de With. Still, I don't really know much about the nuances of the discussions here. I think that it's never too late to re-evaluate what someone before us tried to inscribe in stone as our history as there have always been egos and agendas at play whenever humans are involved in any era. Today we have our own agendas, and sometimes their origins are obscured even from ourselves.

One interesting facet of American history is the difference between the European settlement of New Netherland and New England. To grossly simplify, while New England was mostly composed of religious groups (Puritans, Pilgrims and other extremely zealous and intolerant Christian sects), New Netherland was basically governed by trade companies and wasn't so interested in creating a utopia as much as having access to commodities like beaver furs (used to make felt top hats back in Europe). So New Amsterdam became more of a place for merchants and as such was settled by a much wider variety of people so that after a short time less than 50% of the population was Dutch. This doesn't mean that everyone got along, but it was a situation of "tolerance" in the name of economic expedience.

The English colonists, which are often remembered fondly in American history were extremely intolerant, banning anyone with a slightly different belief system for fear of retaliation from God. That included Native Americans ("savages") first and foremost. The Puritans of Massachusetts felt a sense of righteousness and moral superiority which is actually the inheritance of the "Liberal" present-day Northeast who since early settlement have felt that they know what is best for everyone. This has had positive and negative effects of course (abolition of slavery, Civil War, and on and on). A lot of people today don't realize that a lot of American progressive ideology has these ultra religious roots because it's been obscured by many generations, but as you walk back through the timeline of history it becomes quite apparent. This secular puritanism also been a major American export,

which has influenced today's zeitgeist of hyper-awareness of what you can and cannot do or say.

As a counter-point, New York City is one of the most diverse cities in the world, but like its predecessor New Amsterdam it's all based around money and tolerance in the interest of wealth and so still very segregated. Donald Trump, for example, is a definite product of New Netherland... basically a laissez-faire merchant or patroon, if an American version at its most vulgar. He has no ideology but wealth accumulation and will either tolerate or destroy anything in its name.

Kinderhook was within New Netherland, but it quickly had a large influx of settlers from other European countries (mostly England, Germany and Sweden) which soon made it culturally more Yankee than Netherlander. For me personally it took a few years of living outside of the U.S. to realize how influenced I was by this subtle undertone of secular Puritanism growing up. Basically it's a Northeastern culture of very strong moral principles (mostly centered around honesty and fairness) mixed with a certain prudeness, a self-repression that Europeans today often notice in Americans (especially if you go to a sauna or somewhere people might be naked).

As a generalization, Kinderhook is quite into its own history, largely because Martin Van Buren, the 8th US President was from Kinderhook. His nickname was Old Kinderhook, which led to the popularization of the word "O.K." during his re-election campaign of 1840. Most local people don't know much about the details of his presidency because he was largely a behind-the-scenes worker (leading to his nicknames "The Little Magician", "The Red Fox" and "The Flying Dutchman"), and very pragmatic. He developed the "spoils system", political machines and founded the Democratic Party, which are three central elements of American politics today, for better or worse. But most of his work was in fiscal policy and negotiations, not exactly exciting areas of interest for most people. But due to his tenure being fairly boring, the atrocities committed during his term have been kind of lost in time, and people barely acknowledge them. I find Van Buren a very interesting politician who needs to be examined in a deeper way locally since his policies of aggressive Indian Removal and his position on slavery definitely deserve some stark reanalysis and repositioning. He can't continue to be our cute little Dutchman town mascot when he was responsible for massive ethnic cleansing operations and for working diligently to retain slavery in states that still allowed it. He was even widely criticized for both at the time.

As far as Dutch Colonial history in Kinderhook, the main connotation we have locally for the words "Dutch Colonial" would be architectural, referring to the quaint farm houses, especially ones with a gambrel roof and dormer windows. In Kinderhook, as opposed to further south along the Hudson River, the Dutch settlement was relatively peaceful and the Mohicans, who were the Algonquin people who lived in that area, were welcoming to the new settlers so there wasn't as bloody of a take-over as in other regions of the north-east... it was seemingly more of

a process of buying land parcels from sachems and tribes. Of course, we don't know what kind of coercion, pressure and violence might have actually been going on behind the contracts. But because the removal of the Mohicans was more nuanced and complex, again like the Van Buren situation, people basically just forget about it and simplify it out of apathy. It's only been in the last 2 or 3 years that some people locally are starting to dig into some of the more difficult areas of Kinderhook's history with a more self-reflexive and critical eye. For example, there's been recent work to restore and research a "persons of color cemetery" that was previously thought to be a slave cemetery in great disrepair. People from New York tend to think of slavery as a "southern thing", but in 1700 New York City had the highest percentage of slaves in the colonies, second only to Charleston, South Carolina. So there's a lot that's been conveniently forgotten there.

In Kinderhook people have a lot invested in the image of the town and village as an ever-peaceful and idyllic place, but of course American history is full of very dark and destructive twists and turns.

MAY 24: NK - CK
Dear Christopher,

Yes, Witte de With is one of the more recent and highlighted examples. Although I'm not still completely convinced this change of name was inevitable, I do think it was a brave decision. There were several other things happening like the relocation of a bust of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen in the Mauritshuis in The Hague, followed by politicians accusing the museum of falsifying its origins and history. And last February there was the small bible-belt Protestant town of Urk, where the city council unanimously decided to name all streets of a newly built district to Dutch VOC seafarers...

But back to the history of Kinderhook. I think as a small town it's the perfect case study to see how certain historical moments and shifts in civil rights, politics, economics shaped the community, and on a larger scale partially American society I guess. I read something about a penpalship project between children from Kinderhook and The Hague, is that still happening?

Oh and yes, I think one could consider Donald Trump to be the twisted outcome of the historical northeast tolerant - yet economically and not morally driven - attitude over the past centuries. Wealth as the new religion and Trump Tower as its church. Yikes.

Watching the final part of O.K. The Musical tonight...

MAY 24: CK - NK
Dear Noor,

Wow what they did in Urk is very outdated... it's one thing if the place was named after VOC figures at the time, but now? Definitely some reckoning coming.

Yes, by just focusing on Kinderhook, the limited scope allows for going into a certain depth with specifics. And though Kinderhook does have some interesting facets to its history I feel you could probably do the same with almost any small town if you have the patience to dig enough. Certain tendencies become more apparent on a small scale, like the role of folklore and myth. On a macro level it can become hard to delineate the cacophony of stories and voices, but in small towns you can sometimes get closer to the bottom of where legends, tales and even misinformation originate. It can help to emphasize how subjective all levels of history can be.

To answer your other question, indeed I did try to get a penpalship going between a class of 4th graders (~9-10 year olds) in Kinderhook and here in The Hague. It was much harder than I'd anticipated because of privacy concerns that I hadn't foreseen. The school here has a lot expat international students, children of people who perhaps work in government, as diplomats, or maybe for the ICC. So whereas in Kinderhook there wasn't any red tape at all, here we had to have permission slips and several kids weren't allowed to use their real first names and needed aliases. There's been one set of letters from Kinderhook to here, I think the responses to those will go out early next week, and there will hopefully be more later on.

This element of the project isn't visible to the public, except that students from Kinderhook also designed posters for the musical which are on display here at 1646. The real idea was to try to create some kind of connection between the kids, but as usual adult stuff got in the way a bit, through no fault of any individual, just circumstances. I think this might be the last bit of our email correspondence, for print anyway, they're telling me they've gotta send it to the designer today for print tomorrow! The musical premieres on Saturday at 3pm with 4 performances and then 4 more on Sunday. Still a lot to do but we've got a bunch of people here today making it happen!

All the best to you and thanks for writing!

-Christopher
