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The Angel and the Imp: The Duncan Sisters' Performances of Race and Gender

From the 1920s to the 1950s Vivian and Rosetta Duncan performed as the title characters of their Tom Show Topsy and Eva in front of thousands of audiences in the United States and abroad. This essay examines how the Duncan Sisters' appropriation of blackness through their performance of black and white womanhood, and their approach to anarchistic comedy resulted in a particular attitude to age, gender, race, and sexuality that reinforced their privilege as white women, even while it pushed the boundaries of acceptable femininity in the swiftly shifting American culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Packaged as a night of physical, musical, and comedic theatrical entertainment, Topsy and Eva was distinct enough to make the Duncans a part of theatre history by becoming one of the longest running sister acts and Tom Shows of the American stage. Jocelyn L. Buckner is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Pittsburgh. Her current book project foregrounds the sister act phenomenon in U.S. popular entertainment at the turn of the last century as a representative touchstone of American society's increasing acceptance of female subjectivity in public, political, and artistic spheres. She has published extensively in American Studies Journal, Journal of American Drama and Theatre, Theatre History Studies, Theatre Journal, and Theatre Survey, and she is a former managing editor of the Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism.

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*Turn me up and turn me back, first I'm white, and then I'm black.*¹

Topsy-Turvy dolls were popular toys for young children on plantations in the antebellum South.² One end of the doll resembled either an angelic white child wearing her best dress or a beautiful white mistress. When turned upside down, the doll revealed the face and costume of a young black female slave or a Mammy figure. These dolls remained popular into the mid-twentieth century, when patterns for the toy were mass produced by companies

including McCalls, Vogart, Redline, and Butterick. In the 1940s Redline and Vogart began selling patterns for the dolls under a new name: Topsy and Eva, the black slave girl and young white mistress, characters made famous in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.³ Renaming the doll was a nod to the enduring nature of this pair and their conflated ubiquity in American culture. Whether Topsy-Turvy or Topsy and Eva, as Valerie Borey notes, this doll possessed the ability to:

emphasise the differences between the powerful and the powerless. For this reason, it is a doll uniquely able to detect and reflect cultural tensions as they changed with the times and economic conditions . . . the two-headed, reversible, upside-down doll is . . . a symbol of power, of resistance, of secrecy, and of revolution."⁴

Rosetta and Vivian Duncan⁵ were a sister act noted for their long running portrayals of the title characters of the musical comedy *Topsy and Eva*, their spin on the Tom Show tradition.⁶ Like the Topsy and Eva doll, the Duncan Sisters' routine capitalised on America's appetite for racial humour, access to female bodies, and nostalgia for good old-fashioned minstrelsy. The Duncan Sisters have been largely ignored by performance historians, mentioned only in passing in the context of larger studies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or briefly chronicled in histories of vaudeville and popular culture. Yet the sisters are worthy of scholarly attention for the ways they capitalised on Eurocentric ideals about race and gender to leverage social status and power within America's racist, sexist society.

The Duncan Sisters' performances and archive can be confrontational due to their racist and sexist content; however they form an important and under-recognised part of theatre history that continues to influence perceptions of race and gender in performance today. In this essay I examine archival evidence on the Duncans and *Topsy and Eva* to develop a history of their act, which remained popular for nearly forty years. "The black and white Duncans (sisters under the skin),"⁷ created a particular approach to age, gender, race, and sexuality, packaged as a rollicking night of physical, musical, and comedic theatrical entertainment. Their show was distinct enough to make them a part of theatre history by becoming one of the longest running sister acts and Tom Shows in the history of the American stage. This analysis contributes to theatre history by examining a largely forgotten but highly influential female comic pair, thereby expanding our awareness and understanding of the complexities of women's participation in the development of American popular entertainment.

***The Duncan Sisters' Early Career as "Ebullient Babes"*⁸**

The Duncan Sisters made their Broadway debut in *Doing Our Bit* in 1917, followed by featured roles in *Tip Top* (1920).⁹ They debuted *Topsy and Eva* in San Francisco in 1923 and performed in New York's vaudeville seasons between 1923-1931, including performances with Florenz Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic* of 1929. Though a full-length biopic about them was discussed but ultimately never produced, they were nonetheless at the forefront of the development of

Hollywood cinema. They appeared in films including the silent feature *Topsy and Eva* in 1927 (directed by Del Lord with additional scenes by D.W. Griffith). They toured movie houses with the film and performed live before the screenings, which extended the popularity of their alter egos and the longevity of their careers. They were also featured in *It's a Great Life* (1929), an early sound musical with short Technicolor sequences.

The most important development of the Duncans' early career was the creation of what I identify as their "infantile routine." Extending beyond the parameters of a "kid act" in which one or more young performers presented a routine that emphasised their skill and professionalism as remarkable in the light of their youth, the infantile routine was an act that the Duncans maintained throughout their careers, despite their age. In these performances the sisters acted as "youths" in order to gain permission to behave badly, much to the delight of audiences in search of an escape from the confines of everyday social responsibilities and expectations. In figure 1 the twenty-something-year-old sisters are dressed in similar costumes, sporting oversized girlish bows in their similarly styled blonde coifs. They support opposite ends of a flower basket, gazing sweetly over its handle at the camera. They are the perfect picture of childlike innocence and sweetness, belying the mischievous characters, *The Terrible Twins* named *Bad* and *Worse*, that they actually played in *Tip Top*.



Figure 1. Vivian and Rosetta Duncan in *Tip Top* (1920). ©Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Despite the freedom it afforded them, as this image demonstrates, the Duncans' infantile routine did not celebrate independence or womanhood, but rather smothered them in fabricated prepubescent innocence. The sisters' performances conflated women and children, furthering the ideology that women are child-like and frivolous, rather than mature and adult. The sisters' characterisations simultaneously stripped them of any mature sexual appeal and exposed them (physically in ridiculously short, bloomer-bearing costumes and

intellectually in characterisation) as vulnerable objects for the audience's voyeuristic consumption. As one reviewer described their performance, "the Duncan sisters have an ingratiating way with them – a knowing expression, a suggestion of naughtiness beneath innocence that nicely escapes being vulgar."¹⁰ This infantilising mixture continued throughout their careers to the delight of many audiences, and the disdainful observation of at least one London critic who noted "there are obviously many people in the world who find the grotesque little-girl sophistication of the Duncan sisters more amusing and less vulgar than I do."¹¹ This review pinpoints the perversely paedophilic undertones of the Duncans' "naughty little girl" routines in which their adult female sexuality was exposed under the guise of performed infantilisation. Audiences gained access to their innocently displayed bodies, "attired in the cunningest of school girl dresses."¹² The sisters played to audiences' appetites for sexualised performances without suffering the moral stigma attached to the highly sexualised leg or skin shows. In a 1923 review of *Topsy and Eva*, *The Chicago Daily News* also picked up on the juxtaposition of order/disorder and childhood/maturity in the Duncans' offerings, observing that the sisters:

do their usual amount of child-like clowning and Vivian can hardly be tied down to the infant class with her present stretch and muscle of line and weariness of voice. She's a pretty young woman, however, and works smilingly and vivaciously with her more versatile sister, Rose.¹³

This critic recognised the pleasure of watching attractive young women publicly cavorting as children, who continued to be described in 1943, *twenty years later*, as "blonde angel[s] in the brief dress and ruffled panties."¹⁴ Performing mischievous childhood innocence in their infantile routine gained the Duncans the "ebullient babes"¹⁵ status they maintained throughout their careers and would become part of their long-lived *Topsy and Eva* characters.

The Duncan Sisters' rise to fame coincided with the emergence of what vaudeville and film historian Henry Jenkins terms "anarchistic comedy."¹⁶ Popular in the 1920s and 1930s, anarchistic comedy features a clown-like character who "offers the audience an escape from the restraint and control associated with civilization. This identification with the clown corresponds to what sociologists have characterised as a release from the emotional constraints of mass society."¹⁷ Seizing on the popularity of anarchistic comedy, the Duncan Sisters cultivated audiences' and critics' expectations of them as exceptions to female propriety and paved the way for their sensational combination of infantilisation and blackface in *Topsy and Eva*. These methods proved, as the Colonial Theatre Program for the 1925 Boston run of the production declared, to be:

"unlike those employed by any other entertainers of their sex, and the dissimilarity serves to raise them the further in esteem because there is always present the spirit of childish hoydenism that is the soul of humor and captivating in the extreme."¹⁸

Their performances of race and gender, age and sexuality, presented as a light-hearted evening of musical comedy distinguished the Duncans as one of the most popular sister acts and Tom Shows in American theatre history.

Topsy and Eva

T is for Topsy, impish and wild;
 Only sweet Eva can tame this poor child.
O's for Ophelia, a spinster unblest;
 An angel to Eva, to Topsy, a pest.
P is for Platform, where Tom was on sale
 And also where Eva saved Topsy from jail.
S is for Shelby, a gallant young blade,
 Whom Topsy and Eva helped win a fair maid.
Y is for Yore, the old cabin days,
 In Topsy and Eva, the brightest of plays.
E is for Eva, who pined to get back
 Topsy her playmate so ragged and black.
V is for Vivian, whose 'Eva's' the pal,
 For Rosetta's 'Topsy', the 'wickedest gal.'
A's for Amusement, which mounts to a shriek
 In Topsy and Eva arriving next week.¹⁹

First serialised in the antislavery paper *The National Era* and subsequently published as a novel in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist text *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rocked the nation with its sentimental call for white Christian charity towards enslaved blacks. Unrealistic and stereotypical black characters such as the wild pickaninny and the long-suffering, Christian, Uncle Tom combined with sensational aspects of melodrama, making the novel wildly popular and easily adaptable to the stage. Tom Shows sprung up almost overnight and touring productions were mounted quickly and toured widely.²⁰

As young performers struggling to build and maintain the momentum of their earlier successes, the Duncan Sisters adapted the most familiar work in popular culture to suit their comedic talents and feature their relationship as sisters:

'One day in Hollywood, a producer said we ought to do a comedy act in blackface.' That was all the encouragement the Duncan Sisters needed. 'Let's do Uncle Tom's Cabin and call it Topsy and Eva,' Vivian shouted. They did. It made theater history. They opened the show at the Wilkes-Alcazar here. It played 16 weeks. They moved to Los Angeles for four weeks. Then on to Chicago for a year. Finally a long Broadway run. Then London and South Africa.²¹

By refocusing the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the relationship between the impish, young, black, female slave Topsy, and her beautiful, young, white, female mistress Eva, the Duncan Sisters tailored the show to their strengths and

ensured that each sister was needed in order to balance the show. Playwright Catherine Chisholm Cushing²² was commissioned to adapt the story specifically for the sisters while Vivian and Rosetta themselves wrote and composed the musical selections for the piece. As *The Chicago Daily News* reviewer noted, *Topsy and Eva* was an unexpected departure from the original, melodramatic story: "Mrs. Cushing, who can be depended upon to scramble any known plot beyond recognition, has done more to Harriet Beecher Stowe than the fifteenth amendment did to the cotton industry."²³ While music such as spirituals had long been included in Tom Shows, *Topsy and Eva* became the first musical comedy adaptation of the all-American *Uncle Tom's Cabin* myth.²⁴ Updating the story by staging it in the theatre's most popular emerging performance genre of musical theatre renewed its appeal for twentieth-century audiences.

Seventy years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first gripped the American psyche, *Topsy and Eva* opened at the Alcazar Theatre in San Francisco in July 1923 to a standing room only crowd. *The San Francisco Examiner* reported:

Seldom is such a tumult of applause heard in any theater as that with which the two girls were greeted. And the applause was deserved. Vivian is an interesting Little Eva, but not the conventional one of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. No sickly, saintly, going-right-to-heaven sort of Little Eva . . . instead a healthy, happy, romping, somewhat mischievous girl, not trying to 'save' Topsy, but to become like her. As Topsy, Rosetta shows much acting ability. Her makeup has been judiciously thought out. She makes the most of every bit of opportunity, with comedy work that always seems spontaneous and to which there is no letup while she is on the stage. 25

While much of the plot remained focused on the sale of the Shelby plantation and its beloved slave population, Topsy and Eva were the heart of the show. Every moment they spent on stage was full of pranks, songs, dancing, and physical comedy. *The Examiner's* critic predicted with certainty that this was a "production New York will like."²⁶

After its California premiere the show moved to the Selwyn Theatre in Chicago, where it debuted as a holiday special in December 1923 and ran for forty-seven weeks. This allowed for further development of the show, such as improvisation and the addition of a troupe of pickaninnies performed by the London Palace Dancers "especially contracted for the Duncan Sisters in 'Topsy and Eva' direct from the Palace Music Hall, London, England."²⁷ Such improvements increased the level of anarchistic comedy in the show, heightened the professional status of the production, added additional spectacle, and provided the popular variety stars with the cultural cache associated with international performers.

The show moved to New York in 1924, where the combination of jazz rhythms, the sisters' infantile routine, and Rosetta's sensational blackface were immediately noted by reviewers such as *Liberty's* Genevieve Forbes:

Vivian Duncan, cast for the role of Eva, is still the pink and white little girl with the yellow and gold little curls. But she doesn't drip sugary sweetness. Instead, she knows the latest ragtime and she steps the newest steps. Rosetta, as Topsy, is still the little black imp who 'just growed,' but she's 'growed' a lot beyond that Topsy of abolition days. She struts about to the most modern of jazz tunes' and she cracks 1924 wheezes against an 1852 background.²⁸

Unlike previous Tom Shows that attempted to harness authentic Negro spirituals to replicate and create nostalgia for the mythical old plantation home, *Topsy and Eva* was attuned to the tastes of the modern jazz-age audience, and was developed and executed accordingly. Additional reviews of the New York production were mixed. While *The New York Times* described the show as "a reasonably discouraging musical play," *The New York World* heralded it as "a show of marked and agreeable excellence" and the *New York Herald Tribune* generously reported the "musical comedy version of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is made excellent entertainment, almost entirely by the effort of the Duncan Sisters."²⁹ *Topsy and Eva* continued its run in New York and subsequently began to tour in New England, the mid-West, and to the West coast. I have found no record of the show touring farther south than Washington D.C., which is notable given its racist content. The Duncans garnered praise and admiration from critics and audiences from Boston, "last evening's audience expressed hearty enjoyment of everything in the performance with which the sisters in black and white were directly concerned"; from Denver, "a sweet and beautiful play . . . 'Topsy and Eva' will be long remembered by those who see it"; from Philadelphia, "the Duncan Sisters, in 'Topsy and Eva' . . . got off to a flying start."³⁰ Clearly the sisters created an act with broad appeal.

Internalisation and Appropriation

What becomes apparent in reading and comparing reviews of *Topsy and Eva* and photos of the Duncans in character is the striking contrast between Rosetta's Topsy and Vivian's Eva (figure 2). Rosetta is universally acknowledged as the main attraction in the show due to her physical clowning, improvisational humour, and the sheer novelty of her status as a white woman in blackface, a technique almost exclusively practiced by male comedians. "Picks" and "funny ol' gals" were originally portrayed by male minstrels wearing mismatched clothing and oversized shoes, designating the character as both a clown and less-than female.³¹ Rosetta incorporated these performance practices into her creation of Topsy as a drag clown in blackface (figure 3), inviting and encouraging comparisons to contemporary white male blackface stars. For example, in 1926 *The Evening Bulletin* acclaimed not only her blackface technique, but also her comic abilities:

Rosetta Duncan's Topsy is as impish as any audience could desire. She gets the laugh without the slightest seeming effort, and wisecracks and gags of the ancient vintage, when shot across the footlights by Rosetta, are

gobbled up as the brain children of 1926. Last night she sang 'Mammy' songs in the style of Al Jolson, dropped her galoshes much after the fashion of Eddie Cantor and his overshoes . . . Surely nothing more could be asked of a comedienne.³²

And in 1933, ten years after the original premiere of *Topsy and Eva* and six years after its release as a feature film, *The Chicago Tribune* responded to one of what would become several revivals of the stage show by praising Rosetta's ability to refresh Topsy's antics, once again comparing her skills to that of male vaudevillians:

Rosetta's fantastic interpretation of the role of Topsy displays modern comic improvements. With her gift for sly roguishness she has built up the part with wisecracks and grotesque by-play. This is a Topsy developed to meet current taste by the [Ole] Olsen and [Chic] Johnson method. It is a rich specimen of ingenious drollery, without any suggestion that the show is a revival.³³

Rosetta's unusual performance as a highly physical blackface comedian appealed to audiences through its mixture of wildly unleashed female behaviour, nostalgia for the past, and incorporation of modern jazz and comedic themes.



Figure 2. Rosetta and Vivian Duncan as *Topsy and Eva* (c. 1924). Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Figure 3: *The Duncan Sisters* (c. 1924). Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

The lyrics of “I Never Had a Mammy,” one of the most popular tunes from *Topsy and Eva*, captures Topsy’s characterisation as a misfit:

No one ever paid no attention to me,
 And why I "jes growed" I neber could see.
 I longed to hear a mammy crooning sweet lullabies
 [. . .]
 And after Mister sun goes down I always sit and cry:

CHORUS

I never had a mammy a mammy to rock me to sleep
 I've always been so lonely when dark shadows creep
 I never had no one to tuck me in my bed.
 And no one gave a darn just where I laid my head
 I never had a mammy a mammy to rock me to sleep.

I have been unlucky since the day I was born
 And always had to wear clothes that were ragged and torn
 I never even had a home to call all my own
 I wish that I'd been like other children,
 But all those things don't hurt me much
 It's just a memory that no sweet mammy cradled me, or held me on her
 knee.³⁴

In this song and others, such as the nostalgia laced “Remem’bring,” “Do, Re, Mi,” and “Topsy,” the Duncans deployed a potent mixture of deprecating humour,

nostalgia, and close harmony to reinforce their child-like, cross-racial characterisations and sororal relationship. As M. Alison Kibler notes:

through racial dialect and blackface, white women gained comic license and adopted an uninhibited physical style, as men in the minstrel show had, and white women's racial masks also invoked a sentimental vision of the past, similar to the minstrel show's nostalgia.³⁵

In a social era rife with seismic cultural shifts (racial anxieties, suffrage, World War I, and the stock market crash of 1929), the Duncans' anarchistic comic abandon served as an emotional release for viewers, while a longing for a "simpler time" eased white audiences' anxieties about and provided an escape from the uncertainty of the current moment.

Behind the wild abandon of the Duncan's show there may have been deeply personal motivations for the sisters' long held affinity with their alter egos. Vaudeville historian Anthony Slide reports that "Rosetta was a lesbian, a familiar sight at gay hangouts in Hollywood" and suffered "frequent bouts with alcoholism brought on, in part, by the effort of trying to hide her lesbianism."³⁶ Interviews, reviews, and articles all emphasise Vivian's role as wife and mother, while vaguely defining Rosetta as "never married."³⁷ With this knowledge, I consider the possibility that Topsy became a deflection tactic, a literal mask and figurative shield Rosetta used in part to protect *herself* from social criticism. Rosetta certainly used the blackface mask to secure performative and personal freedoms not sanctioned for traditionally feminine performers such as her sister Vivian. In this way, Rosetta diffused potential criticism of her private life by developing a public alter-ego who absorbed social contempt for her non-normative female behaviour. Public perceptions of Topsy as "impish" and as a "harum-scarum little witch," and of Rosetta as "the less beautiful sister"³⁸ all allowed for her onstage antics and perception as a less-than-human, less-than-womanly, less-than-white creature. Diminutive references in the press as "little Rosetta Duncan"³⁹ further reinforced her infantilisation and worked to obscure her personal sexuality in the minds of audiences.

Blackface also allowed Rosetta to (un)consciously play up her privileged race and gender status as a white woman which may in turn have aided in detracting attention from her marginalised sexuality and independence as a professional, unmarried, and child-free woman. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes, the "mask of blackness permitted whites to say things in another voice, to move with a surrogate body, to be released from normal restraints by means of a socially sanctioned form of ritualised abuse."⁴⁰ Blackface signaled absurdity to audiences. Blackface created a space for clowning, physical humour, and grotesque spectacle, all ways in which white women were not expected or respectably permitted to behave publicly. Blackface also pointed to white culture's deep seated fears about the tarnishing effect that miscegenation and blacks could have on white society, especially its most vulnerable members as embodied by the Duncan Sisters: white women and children. In the Duncans'

show after Eva convinces her father to let her “keep” Topsy, what she “bought for nothing with [her] own money,” Topsy instructs the smitten Eva:

Topsy: Follow me, Missy...whatebbah ah dooze, yo dooze...den we’ll be twinses.

Eva: Oh, Topsy. I’d rather be your twin than anything in the world.

Topsy: Den heah’s whah yo’ rea-ma-lise yo’ life’s ambishun!⁴¹

Topsy represents the perceived social freedom white women lacked, and is desirable to Eva as the embodiment of the extreme opposite of her own racial and socio-economic position. As Gottschild observes:

European [white] culture ends up doing the very thing it detests and characterises as Other. It becomes blackenised even though the process may involve a transformation and finessing from the nude, raw Africanist model into one covered in silk and lace.”⁴²

As iterations of *Topsy and Eva* continued from the 1920s until Rosetta’s death in 1959, Rosetta in effect became the embodiment of the black(faced), asexual Auntie (figure 4), trapped and infantilised in a performance of childhood. A Denver critic observed, “blacking up for more than two years has had a psychological effect on Rosetta, and it has grown into a regular idea,” going on to note other blackface projects Rosetta was reportedly working on, including a pickaninny ballet chronicling “the whole story of negro melody from the beginning to the end.”⁴³ While there are no extant records indicating that this project was ever realised, it points to Rosetta’s affinity for blackface and an understanding that, even beyond *Topsy and Eva*, difference was an integral part of her identity.



Figure 4. *The Duncan Sisters with Vivian’s daughter, Evelyn, named for the sisters’ eldest sibling (1933).* ©Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Glimpses of Rosetta's appropriation of blackness and efforts at shielding her private self as separate from her public performances have not only been noted by the press and historians, but also observed by audience members. Prolific literary scholar and ardent Duncan Sisters admirer and acquaintance Edward Wagenknecht noted in his memoirs:

I became better acquainted with the sisters when they came to Seattle . . . in 1928, to play the Pantages circuit . . . [A]lthough Rosetta was never other than charming to me, she had the habit of disappearing into her dressing room between the grueling four-a-day schedule they were playing and leaving her sister to entertain their visitors. It was obvious that Rosetta was a temperamental young lady whose spirits alternated between the heights and the depths, but this is no wonder, for her energy on the stage (and I suspect off it, when she was really interested) was tremendous, and no girl's physique could have entered the strain, which must have been even more psychic than physical, without cooling-off periods in between.⁴⁴

Wagenknecht describes the exhausting schedule the sisters maintained and Rosetta's efforts to segregate her private time behind closed dressing room doors, in comparison to Vivian's more public personal life. This backstage peek into the Duncans' offstage behaviour further supports the idea that Rosetta's personal life existed in the shadow of the darker character she performed, and the social strictures her performances both critiqued and reinforced.

Vivian's approach to her own role as Eva contrasted and complemented Rosetta's appropriation and internalisation of Topsy. While Rosetta's onstage persona masked her private life, Vivian, too, internalised her own role as Eva and maintained a consummate image of white female propriety onstage and off. Vivian's cultivation of hyper-femininity – indeed she was often described as possessing doll-like perfection, “[Vivian] looked like a big, golden-haired doll” and “an unsurpassable blond doll of a girl” – was likely a front for her own personal turmoil.⁴⁵ Vivian's first marriage to Swedish actor Nils Asther ended in divorce after Asther's homosexual affairs became too much for the marriage to withstand.⁴⁶ Vivian's Eva was the angelic foil to Rosetta's demonic Topsy, underscoring and perpetuating cultural associations of whiteness with purity and good, and blackness with filth and evil. Though Vivian was known as the beauty of the pair, she was always mentioned as the lesser performer in reviews, “the white shadow of the tarry Topsy” who “aided and abetted” Rosetta's turn as “a born comedian.”⁴⁷ Her work was seldom acknowledged as crucial to the sisters' routine. Edward Wagenknecht observed:

She always did much less, but what she was, was tremendously important. Even very great actors sometimes do their best work when they seem to be doing nothing, for it is cruelly difficult to do nothing on the stage, and it is even more difficult to make nothing into something. Certainly Rosetta's dynamism gained much from having Vivian's lovely restfulness as a background. ⁴⁸

Vivian's ability to act as a peaceful backdrop to Rosetta's wild performances only bolstered their partnership, reinforced the yin-and-yang nature of their characterisations, and underscored the palatable tension between their appeal to popular culture and their status as social misfits that fueled the chaos of their anarchistic comedy.

The sisters' performances were a reflection of white society's perverse preoccupation with and desire to appropriate black culture, or to at least attempt to live vicariously through it. Vivian's Eva was a "healthy, happy, romping, somewhat mischievous girl, not trying to 'save' Topsy, but to become like her."⁴⁹ This is a marked departure from Harriet Beecher Stowe's saintly Eva, who attempts to tame Topsy's wild ways. By acquiring –or appropriating–Topsy, Eva is able to "own" blackness by owning Topsy and appropriating her behaviour. Her attempted transformation is tolerated, for though she learns to "ack rough," her veneer remains that of sweet, white, female innocence and child-like purity:

Topsy: Why, MISSY, Ah didn't know yo' could ack rough!

Eva: Can I, Topsy? Oh, Topsy, I'd rather act rough like you than anything in the world!

Topsy: No! (funny little movement of the hand)

Eva: YES! (mimics Topsy's business)

Topsy: (delighted) Why, yo' li'l debbil! Den right heah's whah Ah stahts yo' on a swif' decline!⁵⁰

This exchange demonstrates the explicit appropriation and feared anarchistic influences enacted along the borders of white and black culture reflected in the Duncans' performances as Topsy and Eva. While they failed to acknowledge its reality explicitly and instead treated interracial relationships as the content of light-hearted musical comedy, the sisters represented the unavoidable, intertwined nature of white and black existence in America. They performed the way, as Gottschild notes:

European Americans have taken on the look, sound, phrasing, and body language of their African American mentors . . . [A]ppropriation is commonplace in popular culture. One route is outright theft. A less blatant path is the circuitous, unconscious process in which the Africanist aesthetic is picked up from the air we breathe."⁵¹

Consciously or not, appropriation was the cornerstone of *Topsy and Eva*. Rosetta once boasted to the *World Telegraph* that the sisters "introduced blues songs."⁵² And Vivian's entire performance as Eva was predicated on attempting to "try on" blackness by imitating a black character who was actually being played by another white woman imitating a black child in a performance tradition established by white men imitating black men and women.

Of course, this "merry-go-round of appropriation"⁵³ spins both ways, albeit unevenly. While Eva's mimicry and admiration of Topsy's wild nature is

celebrated by audiences and patronisingly tolerated by the white adult characters in the show, Topsy's attempts at appropriating whiteness are resisted, mocked, and even viewed as threatening. For example, after Eva's pious Aunt Ophelia discovers Topsy has been stealing (i.e. appropriating) her fine garments and accessories, she declares Topsy in need of a beating, rather than recognizing the neglect that would lead a young, orphaned slave to admire and attempt to acquire material representations of wealth. The severity of the punishment and white on black violence is tempered with slapstick comedy:

Ophelia: Oh, what a pest! Well, what else did you steal?

Topsy: Ah dunno...guess Ah needs a whippin', Ah dooze!

Ophelia: Yes, and you're going to get one! (Gives her a little crack on her head with her fan) Take that! And that! And that!

Topsy: Lawdee! Ise itche! What dat fly buzzin' at? (Glances around)

Ophelia: How's that?

Topsy: (Sweetly...laying head, smilingly against Ophelia's chari) Pat me som mo', Mis' 'Feely...Ah didn' know yo' lub' me so! Ah didn't know nobuddy love niggahs!

Ophelia: (Drawing away) LOVE you? I wasn't patting you...I was whipping you!

Topsy: (Lifting head and staring at her) WHIPPIN' me? Law, Mis' Phelly, dat ain't no way to whip a niggah. Ah'll show yo'! (On knees and about to assassinate Ophelia in her attempt to illustrate the ordeal)

Ophelia: Stop! Don't illustrate...merely explain!⁵⁴

Ophelia's frustration with Topsy's behaviour and attempt to eradicate it (and her), her disdain for Eva's insistence on behaving like Topsy, Eva's desire to own and consume Topsy as a plaything, and the representation of these characters by white women all reflect *bell hooks'* declaration that "[t]he thing about envy is that it is always ready to destroy, erase, take-over, and consume the desired object."⁵⁵ In *Topsy and Eva* the Duncan Sisters appropriated blackness, and revealed white culture's desire to both consume and destroy black culture. The Duncans' twentieth-century manipulation of the residual nostalgia associated with minstrelsy, blackface, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a means to access white audiences' emotional desire to escape to an imagined, if not remembered "simpler time." In doing so the sisters repurposed performance techniques of the past to secure their own personal and professional privileges and freedoms while working through the cultural anxieties of a new era.

Topsy-Turvy Sisters

Like the perennial favourite Topsy and Eva doll, Rosetta and Vivian Duncans' "adoption of childlike wildness through racial masquerades"⁵⁶ brought America's preoccupation with miscegenation, the manipulation of female bodies, and changing social roles to life on the stage. The sisters' appropriation and internalisation of their characters' race and gender traits highlighted the topsy-turvy position of women in American society in the early-twentieth century, and

the intertwined but distinctly different realities of black and white women. They represented for audiences, as Edward Wagenknecht states:

a fresh wholesomeness which was not the quality most frequently encountered in the musical comedy stars of their time, but they also had a good deal of tart commentary on hypocrisy and pretension, much of which was no less effective for being implicit rather than explicit.⁵⁷

Wagenknecht hints at subtle social commentaries that could be read deep between the lines of the Duncans' act. Rosetta and Vivian themselves expressed the belief that their show was about personal liberties. Speaking to the press about a World War II-era revival of *Topsy and Eva*, Vivian explained:

our show is based on American freedom . . . Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was a plea for American racial tolerance and freedom from bondage – and we feel it will always have a message for Americans . . . We want to do our utmost to entertain in wartime.⁵⁸

Despite their earnest explanations and press such as *Variety's* 1959 remembrance that “memory does not suggest that there was anything invidious racially”⁵⁹ in the sisters' show, *Topsy and Eva* was in fact undeniably racist. What is fascinating is how the Duncans built their career on the use of race and gender stereotypes, empowering themselves but also reinforcing these same hierarchies of privilege. In realizing their own successes, the sisters diminished women as frivolous children and further marginalised African American artists and citizens whose experiences and histories they appropriated, warped, and refashioned in performance and in service of their own social privilege. Recognising their accomplishments as pioneering female entertainers *as well as* the damaging impact of their racist, sexist performances reveals the particular dichotomy of their careers and the need for additional scholarship about women's performance histories. Ironically, while the audacity of their act originally made them popular, their brazen performances of race and gender stereotypes may be the reason for the Duncan Sisters' near anonymity in performance histories today.⁶⁰ But the instinct to shamefully look away from their excessive performances is all the more reason to refocus our gaze on their spectacle of appropriation and internalisation. In doing so we acknowledge this history and begin to better understand the enduring legacy of racism and sexism in women's early attempts to negotiate the complicated terrain of identity politics in American popular entertainment.

¹ Collector Jamila Jones is quoted as describing the slogan for a 1901 Topsy-Turvy doll in Valerie Borey, “Two Headed American Storytelling,” suite101.com, February 29, 2004, http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/topics_in_anthropology/106949 (accessed July 10, 2011).

² See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty:*

Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 33-38.

³ Historical Folk Toys, LLC, <http://www.historicalfolktoys.com/catcont/4716.html> (accessed July 10, 2011).

⁴ Borey. Today's Topsy-Turvy dolls feature popular children's story characters such as Cinderella/Wicked Stepmother and Little Red Riding Hood/Big Bad Wolf.

⁵ Rosetta Duncan (1897-1959) and Vivian Duncan (1899-1986).

⁶ Tom Shows were performances based on or inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's sensationally popular 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

⁷ *New York Sun*, "'Topsy and Eva': 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Set to Music at the Sam Harris," December 24, 1924. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter: BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁸ E.H., "Amusements in the News Duncan Sisters: Topsy, Eva Starring on Mason," *San Francisco News*, November 8, 1956. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁹ *Doing our Bit* was a 1917 musical with book and lyrics by Harold Atteridge and *Tip Top* a 1920 slapstick family comedy with book and lyrics by Anne Caldwell and R. H. Burnside. Both were large cast Broadway productions. In *Doing our Bit* the Duncan sisters were part of the ensemble; in *Tip Top* they were featured as "The Terrible Twins, Bad and Worse."

¹⁰ The Highbrow, "'She's a Good Fellow' at the Globe Theatre," *Tour Topics*, May 8, 1919. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

¹¹ Charles Morgan, Review of vaudeville performances by Rosetta and Vivian Duncan, Gaiety Theatre, London, October 4, 1928. *New York Times Theatre Reviews 1920-1970 vol. 2, 1927-1934*, IX: 1:3.

¹² *Philadelphia Record*, "Dillingham Show on Forrest Stage: 'She's a Good Fellow': Has Jerome Kern Music – Joseph Santley Featured," September 16, 1919. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

¹³ Amy Leslie, "California Girls Insure Play Success: 'Topsy and Eva,' with Duncan Sisters, Brings Crop of Pacific Coast Beauties," *Chicago Daily News*, December 31, 1923. *Topsy and Eva Homepage*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

¹⁴ Carol Fink, "Duncan Sisters as Diverting as Always," clipping from unknown newspaper, 1943. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

¹⁵ E.H. "Amusements" above.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 221-222.

¹⁷ M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 63.

¹⁸ Playbill, "Topsy and Eva," Colonial Theatre, Boston, 1925. *Topsy and Eva Homepage*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

¹⁹ Throwaway card advertisement reprinted in Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S.F. Vanni, 1947), 392.

²⁰ For a detailed history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on stage see Birdoff and Charles Johnson, Introduction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²¹ E.H. "Amusements" above.

²² Catherine Cushing (1874-1952) was an American playwright and lyricist. Beside *Topsy and Eva* her credits include *Widow by Proxy* (1913), starring vaudeville star May Irwin, *Kitty Mackay* (1914) and *Lassie* (1920) and *Pollyanna* (1916), based on the novel by Eleanor H. Porter.

²³ Leslie.

²⁴ Thomas Nunan, "Brilliant Opening Night at the Alcazar," *San Francisco Examiner*, July 9, 1923. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed 3 September 2009).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Playbill, "Topsy and Eva," The Selwyn Theatre, Chicago, week of October 12, 1924. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

²⁸ Genevieve Forbes, "Uncle Tom's Cabin is Rented Again," *Liberty*, July 26, 1924. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009), Interestingly, Forbes notes the comedy is not only anarchistic, but also anachronistic.

²⁹ *New York Times*, "'Topsy and Eva' Appear: Duncan Sisters in Musical Play suggested by 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" December 24, 1924. W.R., "At the Sam H. Harris Theatre. The Duncan Sisters in 'Topsy and Eva,'" *New York World*, December 24, 1924. R.W., "Duncan Sister Score in 'Topsy and Eva': Musical Comedy Version of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Opens at Sam Harris Theater," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 24, 1924. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

³⁰ *Boston Globe*, "Duncan Sisters at the Colonial: They Sing and Caper Gayly in the Black and White Roles of Topsy and Eva," May 12, 1925. *Denver Post*, "Duncan Sisters A Real Hit in 'Topsy and Eva,'" April 13, 1926. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, "'Topsy and Eva,'" January 5, 1926. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

³¹ "Picks" or picaninnyes and "funny ol'gals" were low stock characters of minstrelsy. The picaninny character was a wild and unkempt young black child. Film historian Donald Bogle cites Topsy as the quintessential picaninny in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: an interpretive history of Blacks in American films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 7. The "funny ol'gal" was an extension of the wench figure: a grotesque, clownish, and sexually undesirable black female figure. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 159-168.

³² *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, "'Topsy and Eva,'" January 5, 1926. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

³³ Charles Collins, "Duncan Sisters in New Staging of 'Topsy and Eva,'" *Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 1933. *Topsy and Eva Homepage*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

³⁴ Vivian and Rosetta Duncan, "I Never Had a Mammy," *Topsy and Eva*. New York: Irving Berlin, Inc., 1923. *Topsy and Eva Homepage*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/songs/duncanmammyf.html> (accessed August 15 2011).

³⁵ Kibler, 112.

³⁶ Anthony Slide, *Eccentrics of Comedy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 56, and Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 144. See also Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly.

³⁷ E.H. and *Variety*, "Rosetta Duncan, 58; Made Topsy Household Word," December 9, 1959. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

³⁸ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, "'Topsy and Eva,'" January 5, 1926. *Denver Post*, "Duncan Sisters A Real Hit in 'Topsy and Eva,'" 13 April 1926. Harriett Underhill, "Duncan Sisters Are Amusing in Their New Film 'Topsy and Eva' - Rivoli," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 9, 1927. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

³⁹ *Boston Sunday Advertiser*, "Rosetta Bathes Herself in Black," May 31, 1925. *Topsy and Eva Homepage*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

⁴⁰ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 88.

⁴¹ Catherine Chisholm Cushing, *Topsy and Eva: A Comedy with Music*, playscript, 1923, I, p. 26, Library of Congress. This script was submitted for copyright by Cushing early in the production's history. Due to numerous changes made during various revivals, there is no definitive, published script of the play. Nevertheless, this copyrights manuscript provides insight into the play's plot, characterisations, comedy, and musical numbers.

⁴² Dixon Gottschild, 36-37.

⁴³ "Duncan Sisters to Appear in Musical Classic at Broadway Week of April 12," *Rocky Mountain News*, April 1, 1926. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

⁴⁴ Edward Wagenknecht, *As Far As Yesterday: Memories and Reflections* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 122.

⁴⁵ *The Boston Globe*, "Duncan Sisters at the Colonial: They Sind and Caper Gayly in the Black and White Roles of Topsy and Eva," May 12, 1925 and *The Denver Post*, "Duncan Sisters a Real Hit in

‘Topsy and Eva,’ April 13, 1926. *Topsy and Eva Homepage* <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/duncanhp.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

⁴⁶ See William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001) and Slide, *Eccentrics of Comedy*, 56. Vivian Duncan’s second marriage in 1948 to San Francisco businessman Frank Herman was a happy one.

⁴⁷ *New York Sun*, “‘Topsy and Eva’: ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ Set to Music at the Sam Harris,” December 24, 1924. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁴⁸ Wagenknecht, 124.

⁴⁹ Nunan.

⁵⁰ Cushing, III, p. 38.

⁵¹ Dixon Gottschild, 24.

⁵² John Ferris, “Duncan Sisters Relive Triumphs,” *New York World Telegraph*, April 9, 1957. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁵³ Dixon Gottschild, 26.

⁵⁴ Cushing, II, p. 14-15.

⁵⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 157.

⁵⁶ Kibler, 113.

⁵⁷ Wagenknecht, 124.

⁵⁸ “Duncans Ready to do ‘Topsy’ Again,” clipping from unknown newspaper, undated. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁵⁹ *Variety*, “Rosetta Duncan, 58; Made Topsy Household Word,” December 9, 1959. (BRTD/NYPLPA).

⁶⁰ The Duncans’ act ended in 1959 when Rosetta was killed in a car accident. See *New York Herald Tribune*, “Rosetta Duncan Dies; Of Vaudeville Sisters,” December 5, 1959. (BRTD/NYPLPA).