WOMEN IN AMERICAN POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT:
CREATING A NICHE IN THE VAUDEVILLIAN ERA, 1890S TO 1930S

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2005

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ABSTRACT

During the vaudevillian era, the professional careers of all women in popular entertainment operated within and reflected the complex social and cultural tensions surrounding ideas about women’s increased participation in public, political, and social life. For the purposes of this study, I bracket the female performers who personified the idealized images of femininity, beauty, and sexuality, and focus instead on the women who performed an oppositional, or transgressive, representation of femininity and American womanhood due to their physical appearance, body size, race, ethnicity, age, overt sexuality, or independent, assertive personalities. Representative women of this case study include a diverse group ranging from May Irwin, Marie Dressler, Eva Tanguay, Ethel Waters, Sophie Tucker, and Fanny Brice to the nearly forgotten Cherry Sisters and Trixie Friganza.

This dissertation is an examination of the methods used by working women in popular entertainment to negotiate for agency and self-definition, as well as a niche for themselves, within a male-dominated business and society. I draw from Michel de Certeau’s theory of strategy and tactics within oppositional power relationships in order to evaluate an entertainer’s career as an organic whole: her performance and public personas, marketing and publicity strategies, development of a niche audience, and relative agency in management of her own career.
My research project is based on the premise that an analysis of women who exemplified nontraditional femininity in their performances, audience relationships, and career management will reflect the prevailing position of women in American society: their subordinate status, the social constraints and cultural ideologies imposed upon them, the necessity of ongoing renegotiations for autonomy and self-definition, and the strategies and tactics used by women to achieve a measure of agency. Because the women crafted their personas and careers in relation to prevailing ideas about idealized female beauty and sexuality, each nontraditional performer found a unique way to manipulate, finesse, or counter the ideal as a means of creating a niche for herself in a business that resisted her presence.
In memory of Paul Mayberry
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Tom Postlewait, for his dedicated teaching and mentorship throughout my doctoral studies and the process of writing this dissertation. I appreciate his support, patience, and kind encouragement every step of the way.

I thank the rest of my committee, Lesley Ferris and Linda Mizejewski, for their involvement, guidance, and support.

I also wish to acknowledge two teachers from my undergraduate years, Susan F. Clark and Helen Horowitz, both of whom helped plant the seeds for this dissertation.

The research librarians in four archives have provided invaluable assistance. I thank Maryann Chach at the Shubert Archive, as well as the librarians at the Iowa Historical Society—Iowa City, the American Jewish Archive, and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

This dissertation was supported by several generous fellowships and grants: The Ohio State University Dissertation Fellowship; the Coca-Cola Critical Difference for Women Dissertation Grant, administered by the Women’s Studies Department at Ohio State; and the American Society of Theatre Research Dissertation Grant.

I am grateful to my family and friends who have supported, encouraged, and cared for me throughout my graduate studies: Jan Hoak, Marsha Shoffstall, and, especially, Fev and Gary Johnson.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Between the 1890s and 1930s, American popular entertainment flourished through vaudeville. While the decades are identified as the vaudevillian era, in actuality many of the popular entertainers enhanced their careers by appearing in commercial theatre, burlesque, musical revues, cabarets, nightclubs, movies, and radio as well as vaudeville. And so, this study of women in American popular entertainment uses vaudeville as the unifying entertainment form for the historical period, but the boundaries are fluid. While all the female performers included in this study appeared in vaudeville at some time during their careers, it was seldom their only venue. Additionally, it is necessary that the temporal boundaries remain flexible, since performers’ long-term careers rarely fit neatly within the confines of the vaudevillian era.

The growth of popular entertainment during the vaudevillian era resulted in three important changes. First, vaudeville led to popular entertainment as a big business, with managers such as B. F. Keith and E. F. Albee creating national entertainment empires in which businessmen controlled the majority of theaters and booking agencies. As a result, popular entertainment proliferated. Even in the late 1920s, when vaudeville had

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begun its decline because of the emergence of film and radio, there were still over 4,000 theatres and 20,000 performers working in the United States and Canada.\textsuperscript{2} Secondly, the audience changed. Earlier variety entertainment in the late nineteenth century often played to predominately working class, male audiences. In contrast, the popular entertainment audience during the vaudevillian era became increasingly middle class, with a large contingent of women attending performances. Keith specifically cultivated middle class and female audiences as a marketing strategy, locating theatres in respectable neighborhoods, often in the midst of shopping districts, and enforcing strict regulations about clean acts to such an extent that his circuit was nicknamed the “Sunday School circuit.”\textsuperscript{3} Thirdly, the rapid growth of popular entertainment, with an increased demand for performers, resulted in new opportunities for women who now had greater access to the stage.

Women who performed a traditional representation of American womanhood and femininity had access to a large audience in popular entertainment. The period is noted for the idealization of the American Girl, characterized as young, pretty, WASPish, compliant, and alluring yet innocent. Theatrical variations of the idealized image were prominent on the stage, where male managers and impresarios controlled the images of femininity performed by women. Three popular representations of women were the American Girl (beautiful and pure), sexualized female spectacle (alluring and compliant), and the good wife (dependent and submissive).


Ethel Barrymore’s entrance onto the American stage exemplifies the privileged position of the young, pretty American Girl type. After spending a year in a convent school, Barrymore began acting in 1893, at the age of fourteen, due to the family’s financial needs. Her impeccable Drew-Barrymore pedigree lent a degree of legitimacy to her theatrical pursuits. Biographer Margo Peters notes that despite Barrymore’s financial straits, she was immediately embraced by society: “There were explanations. One was that she was a Barrymore touring with the enormously popular [uncle] John Drew.”

Equally important, Barrymore was young, pretty, WASP, and innocent. Throughout her early career, Barrymore’s popularity continued to grow, with public attention on her social life rivaling that of her professional work in commercial theatre. Barrymore’s roles further solidified her image, with her signature performance being Madame Trentoni in Clyde Fitch’s 1901 comedy, *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* (fig. 1.1). Trentoni, a young beauty, “sports false ‘waterfall’ curls, cries buckets, cannot travel without forty-eight pieces of luggage, and is ready to throw away a brilliant career for love.”

The feminine character—beautiful, vain, and emotional—who prefers love and marriage as her destiny represents an idealized version of self-sacrificing womanhood. Throughout her career, Barrymore maintained her iconic status, evolving from an American Girl to an American Woman as she matured, married, and became a mother (fig. 1.2). Barrymore’s strong success as an ideal American woman endured, even after her divorce in 1920.

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5 Peters 62.
Figure 1.1 Ethel Barrymore as Madame Trentoni in *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*, 1901. (Photo courtesy of Boston Public Library, Print Department, James Kotsilibas-Davis Collection.)
Figure 1.2 Ethel Barrymore with her children, 1914. (Photo from the private collection of Peach Pittenger)
Another version of theatrical performance of traditional femininity was sexualized female spectacle, as exhibited in the annual musical revues, such as the *Ziegfeld Follies* and the Shuberts’ *Passing Shows*. The primary requirements for employment as a chorus girl were youth, beauty, and willingness to publicly display one’s body (fig 1.3). Since chorus girls’ duties were typically limited to parading in costumes, posing in tableaus, and serving as scenic components, only minimal talent for singing, acting, or dancing was required (fig. 1.4). Ziegfeld’s chorus girls, known as the Glorified American Girl, were usually WASPish in appearance; young, fair complexioned Irish girls were Ziegfeld favorites. African Americans and recent Jewish immigrants need not apply. This hiring rule established and reinforced an Anglo-Saxon appearance as the standard of American beauty. Despite the fact that Ziegfeld advertised his chorus girls as wholesome American beauties, his *Follies*, like the Shubert revues, regularly featured scenes in which the chorus girls appeared nude or semi-nude, posed in a brief, artistic tableau of nudity or (im)modestly covered by strategically arranged lengths of chiffon. Chorus girls in lavish, stylish, and revealing costumes were an essential element of musical revues. By incorporating the female sexual spectacle into a larger extravaganza of visual spectacle and entertainment, the revue managers made it acceptable for compliant young women to appear in the shows and for respectable, middle class audiences, both male and female, to gaze upon the young female bodies that were displayed under the guise of art.

The third example of a traditional performance of femininity can be found in the male-female comedy teams in vaudeville, where women played the traditional role of the good girl or the good wife. At its height, vaudeville accounted for one-half of the theatre attendance in the country and nearly all shows featured a male-female comedy team.
Figure 1.3  Ziegfeld Girl, Katherine Burke, in elaborate costume. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.)
Figure 1.4  Semi-nude chorus girls as scenic elements in an unidentified Shubert Passing Show revue.  (Photo courtesy of the Shubert Archive.)
Shirley Staples demonstrates that the female characters of these teams served to reinforce the traditional views about women during a period when many women challenged the status quo through reform efforts and women’s suffrage.\(^6\) Audiences found reassurance of the status quo in the popular “dumb Dora” character, made most memorable by Gracie Allen. Allen’s character differed from previous “dumb Doras” in that she forewent the grotesque costumes and slapstick comedy that had become associated with the type. Instead, Allen relied upon “illogical logic” for comic effect and performed as a proper, well-mannered young woman, who dressed conservatively but chicly.\(^7\) Allen had always performed with others, first with her sisters and then as part of several male-female teams before finally partnering with George Burns in 1923. They performed in vaudeville, radio, and television for thirty-six years, until Allen’s retirement in 1958. Initially, they performed as a boy-girl act, but as they aged, married, and had children they lost credibility with their audience. They then transformed their act to a more mature domestic comedy. Nevertheless, in their onstage relationship, Burns’ attitude toward Allen was always lovingly patronizing. Staples makes note that he treated Gracie as a child, instructing her in basic civilities as a part of the act: “Well, Gracie, say hello to everyone” and “Say goodnight, Gracie.”\(^8\) In their offstage relationship, Burns made all the business decisions and arrangements, and Allen trusted him completely. Burns


\(^8\) Staples 225.
usually spoke for both of them in interviews, even when Allen was present. Burns explained their partnership:

> With us, it’s very simple: Gracie takes the lead on-stage, I take it, off. Gracie’s always been the greater talent; she is the star, but you’d never know it. She has always allowed me to advise her, direct her, and to speak for us.⁹

Allen’s compliant version of femininity, both onstage and off, reflected the era’s cultural notions about male-female relationships in which the good, proper, and submissive wife acquiesced to the man’s leadership. In performance, Allen’s child-like logic and “dizziness” proved charmingly feminine. Guy Lombardo once noted that Gracie Allen could have been “a favorite next door neighbor, sweet, compliant, practical.”¹⁰ And her conventional male-female relationship with Burns resonated with audiences, capturing the “flirtations, the insults and the arguments, the games, and the very real affection that existed between the ordinary couple.”¹¹ Allen’s performance of the good, deferential wife translated into a theatrical version of a recognizable, ordinary, and married femininity (fig 1.5).

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¹⁰ Clements and Weber 27.

¹¹ Staples 247.
Figure 1.5 Gracie Allen and George Burns as a conventional happily married couple, both onstage and offstage. (Photo from the private collection of Peach Pittenger.)
In contrast to the female performers who gained relatively easy access to the stage in one of these three typologies, other women who pursued careers in popular entertainment encountered resistance and difficulties due to their nontraditional performance of femininity. Factors included physical appearance, body image, race, ethnicity, age, overt sexuality, and an independent, assertive personality, which was often perceived as aggressive or unnatural in a woman. Representative women include a diverse group ranging from May Irwin, Marie Dressler, Trixie Friganza, Eva Tanguay, Ethel Waters, Sophie Tucker, and Fanny Brice to the relatively forgotten Cherry Sisters, who performed a novelty act based on a failed femininity at the turn of the century. In each case, the women created and sustained long-term careers in a business and culture that was less than welcoming to nontraditional versions of American femininity.

These performers are the topic of this dissertation, which consists of case studies of representative nontraditional female performers. The focus of my analysis is the methods and strategies that nontraditional women used to craft and sustain their careers despite their inability to conform to the prevailing cultural expectations. And while all of the women included in this study managed to create niche audiences that supported their careers over a long period of time, their success varied widely. Some succeeded while others struggled rather unsuccessfully to find a place in the system.

Some historians, such as Helen Krich Chinoy and Claudia D. Johnson, tend to argue that the modern theatrical profession has offered an unusually egalitarian playing field for women, who could achieve financial and social independence that was rarely available in other professions, based on beauty, talent, and popularity. The star histories have dominated American women’s theatre history, often serving as inspiring examples
of women’s ever-progressive march toward equality. Some feminist historians, such as Susan A. Glenn, place female performers in the vanguard of the American feminist movement, based on their successful careers, relative independence, and, in some cases, political activism. These versions of women’s theatre history offer valuable studies of women’s roles in theatre, but together they create an overly optimistic view of both women’s success in theatre and female performers’ leadership in effecting positive changes in women’s lives. While it is true that many women in popular entertainment reached star status, earning fortunes and attaining fame, the majority experienced more circumscribed and financially precarious careers. Even those who attained relative stardom and a large measure of success did not achieve creative or managerial control over their self-representation or career management. Even they usually remained within the control and influence of male managers and audiences.

The historiographic approach for this dissertation is a history from below that focuses on a group of women whose careers have been ignored or lightly explored in mainstream history. History from below not only facilitates a recovery of a specific area of women’s performance history, but also, according to Jim Sharpe, “opens the possibility of a richer synthesis of historical understanding, of a fusion of the history of the everyday experience of people” and the “more traditional types of history.”

A focus on career development aspects of women who achieved varying degrees of success

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can more accurately reveal the range of social and cultural expectations and constraints exerted upon them as they negotiated for increased agency, independence, and self-expression.

I begin with the assumption that the most successful stars of the era are an anomaly. Female stars, such as Sarah Bernhardt, are not fair representation of the careers or status of the majority of working women in American entertainment. The women in this study engaged in ongoing negotiations, and renegotiations, for control of their images and career management in response to perpetual changes in the industry, popular tastes, and cultural tensions and anxieties. And while all performers, male or female, faced these issues, the complexity of the challenge for working women performers in a male controlled business and society were greater because the women operated from a less powerful position in their relationships with both theatrical managers and popular entertainment audiences.

Michel de Certeau’s theory of strategy and tactics within oppositional power relationships serves as a framework for evaluating nontraditional female performers’ compromised ability to exert control over their own careers. Strategy requires operation from a base of power, an insider status, and includes a calculated manipulation of the power relationship. In contrast, tactics represent reactive maneuvers in response to the powerful opposition’s more fully formed strategy. Tactical moves are inherently piecemeal, immediate, survival-mode, and relatively powerless; those employing tactics are playing “on and with a terrain [that is] . . . enemy territory.”\textsuperscript{13} While the oppositional

power dynamic is self-evident in performers’ relationships with theatre managers and employers, it is equally applicable to their relationships with popular entertainment audiences, who acted as the final arbiters of performers’ success. All performers operate from a position of relative weakness, at least until they gain some degree of leverage with stardom. Their ability to develop a career strategy rather than to operate tactically depended, to an extent, on their ability to be perceived as an insider. For women in the vaudevillian era, the challenge was especially difficult due to gender ideologies that tended to keep women in a secondary, dependent position. Their most obvious, and easiest, route was to fulfill the traditional female role onstage and off—to be pretty, nonassertive, and subservient to male authority, as exemplified by chorus girls and female members of male/female comedy teams.

My analysis of nontraditional female performers centers on four related aspects of their careers: a performance persona, a corresponding public persona, the development of a niche audience, and career management. The performance persona is based on the body or physical presence of the performer. It includes physical appearance, content of the act, performance of femininity, and the construct of a stage personality. The public persona supports the onstage persona, usually reinforcing, but sometimes complicating or contradicting the performance persona through deliberate publicity schemes, marketing strategies, and manipulation of the public’s perception of the performer. Drawing from Richard Dyer’s definition of the “star phenomenon,” the public persona can be described as “everything that is publicly available” about the performer, including publicity, public
appearances, interviews, biographies, press coverage about private life, professional criticism, and the use of the performer’s image in other contexts, such as advertising.14 A typical example would be the myriad magazine articles that featured actresses such as Gracie Allen and Trixie Friganza “at home,” showcasing their lifestyles and home decors.

The third analytical aspect is the relationship between the performer and her viewers, both critics and audiences. The nontraditional female performers cultivated and played to niche audiences that specifically responded to a performer’s personas due to cultural ideologies regarding gender roles, race, and/or ethnicity. For example, Sophie Tucker’s niche audience changed during the course of her career. As a second generation Jewish immigrant, she initially played to white, non-Jewish vaudeville audiences as a blackface coon shouter, a standard popular entertainment persona at the time. Once established, Tucker abandoned blackface performance and enjoyed a longterm career as a Jewish performer who played increasingly to a nostalgic Jewish audience that shared her immigrant beginnings and ultimate American success. As illustrated by Tucker, while all of the nontraditional female performers desired widespread acceptance and stardom, their more immediate concern was the development of a faithful following based on a unique persona. This is in contrast to the traditional female performers who were marketed to appeal to a more mainstream audience.

The final analytical aspect is career management, which encompasses both artistic and business concerns. It includes the working woman’s relative success in achieving control of the content and presentation of her act, her personas, publicity and marketing,

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and financial matters, all within the confines of a male-controlled business environment.

While career management can be one indicator of a performer’s overall success and popularity, it can also reveal her tactics for achieving that status. For example, Trixie Friganza carefully managed her performance and public personas through a massive and ongoing publicity campaign, for the express purpose of crafting a viable career that would provide longterm financial security for herself as a single woman.

Popular entertainment often offers a challenge to the prevailing standards and values of a society, but it appeals to a broad audience and, as a result, it is successful because it ultimately reinforces the status quo. Its progressive or avant-garde operation is contained by the values and cultural beliefs of those running the business, as well as the ticket-buying public. Within the framework of strategy and tactics, popular entertainment participated in and reflected the gendered tensions and struggles of the vaudevillian era, with male managers, critics, and audiences attempting to reassert the status quo and nontraditional female performers negotiating, not necessarily for women’s rights, but for a niche within the male-dominated business. Consequently, a close analysis of the working women in popular entertainment will allow for a broader analysis of the status of American women in show business during this era. We gain not only a greater understanding of the challenges they faced and their methods of achieving

15 For example, Ziegfeld’s nude and semi-nude chorus girls pushed the envelope as respects standards of decency; however, they were presented to middle-class audiences under the guise of aesthetic beauty. More importantly, the chorus girl/audience relationship reinforced cultural assumptions about women’s value derived from appearance, sexuality, and acquiescence to male authority.
incremental success through negotiation and compromise but also a deeper knowledge of the complex social and cultural ideologies that exerted oppressive constraints upon women during this era.

The period between the 1890s and 1930s was a volatile time of rapid social changes. Many women confronted, challenged, and renegotiated gender equity issues. They increasingly insisted upon participation in public life, an arena dominated by men. The ensuing struggle included the women’s suffrage movement, which was initially an unpopular fringe movement in the mid-nineteenth century, but gained momentum and resulted in women’s right to vote in 1920. Additionally, access to higher education and employment resulted in the emergence of the New Woman in the 1890s; this icon of female confidence and independence directly challenged male authority and privilege, resulting in greater gendered tensions and anxieties within society. Access to public life and the vote were followed by women’s increased social and sexual freedoms, as exhibited by the 1920s flapper. The period can be viewed as an ideological battleground for control of women’s place and purpose in American society, with female sexuality being especially problematic. And while political activism was essential for women’s suffrage, many women struggled for incremental changes in their own lives while remaining apolitical, either unaware or uninvolved.

Although women’s sexuality and lack of agency were core issues for nontraditional female performers, race and ethnicity further exacerbated the constraints imposed upon them. Two major changes in American society during the vaudevillian era are germane. The first is the changing social and cultural landscape for African Americans during this era. While the 1890s has been cited as the worst decade in
American history for number of lynchings, the next two decades saw the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, which contributed to the Harlem Renaissance black arts movement. The Harlem Renaissance included both “high” art forms (literature, poetry, and art) and “low” art forms (popular music including the blues, nightclubbing, and black musical revues), all of which had crossover appeal for urban white audiences. Despite the artistic advances of the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans lived and worked under restrictive Jim Crow laws as they negotiated for a place in an American society that still held deeply entrenched racist beliefs. The other significant social change during this era was the second, and larger, wave of European immigration between 1880 and 1915, which resulted in 7.5 million new Americans. The second wave included a large number of Eastern European Jews, who, due to their number and orthodox appearance and customs, faced a difficult assimilation process and discrimination, which was reflected on the popular stage. In this study, I am less concerned with the women who personified the idealized images of American femininity, beauty, and sexuality. Instead, my analysis will focus on women who performed an oppositional, or transgressive, representation of femininity and American womanhood. This includes nontraditional white female performers, as well as black and Jewish female performers who, by virtue of their non-WASP identity, were excluded from the American ideal.

Although the last two decades have seen many excellent studies of popular entertainment and the careers of women in the theatre, much less attention has been given to female popular entertainers. To date, there are only a handful of cultural histories of women in American popular entertainment during this era. Linda Mizejewski’s *Ziegfeld*
*Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* is a cultural study of the Ziegfeld chorus girl as an icon of race, sexuality and class. Her study focuses on the period of *Follies* productions from 1907 to 1931, as well as subsequent movies about Ziegfeld and the *Follies* as late as the 1940s. In *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, M. Alison Kibler examines the feminization of vaudeville by conflating issues of gender and class, in both performance and audience demographics. Kibler argues that with the development of vaudeville and the increased presence of women on the stage and in the audience, a new hierarchy developed in which gendered—i.e. women’s—issues became problematic. Angela J. Latham’s *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s*, is another cultural history of women’s transgressive performance of femininity. Latham expands her analysis to include female identity and femininity as social constructs in daily life as well as theatrical performance. In both cases, her focus is on fashion as a means of individual resistance to cultural demands and constrictions on women’s lives.

In *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Susan A. Glenn argues that women in theatre and popular entertainment were in the vanguard, influencing and contributing to progressive changes in women’s social roles. Her chapter on nontraditional female comedienne, “Mirth and Girth,” is, by necessity, a survey of the nontraditional female performers. Glenn’s analysis is concentrated on stage personas, with less development of public personas, audience niches, and career management strategies. Consequently, my dissertation builds upon Glenn’s chapter through case studies of representative nontraditional performers. Additionally, I offer a more pragmatic reading of the individual performer’s relationship to feminism. With some
noted exceptions, most nontraditional female performers were apolitical or marginally engaged with the women’s rights movement. Most female performers were more concerned about their own individual, immediate circumstances. They devoted their attention and energy to negotiating for improvements in their own careers. And so, my dissertation offers a corrective to the narrative of women’s ever progressive march toward equality.

From a feminist perspective, I wish to accomplish two goals in the dissertation. First, as a feminist theatre historian, I take the position that it is valuable, important work to recover the individual histories of female performers who have been ignored, discounted, or glossed over in the past. In this study, I have specifically attempted to recover or correct the history of Trixie Friganza and the Cherry Sisters, both of whom are in danger of being permanently lost or misrepresented. At the same time, as a cultural historian, I want to place the individual histories of female performers within a broader cultural context. What is the significance of the performer and her career? How did she fit into, complicate, or contradict the cultural norms of her era? What cultural ideology did she represent or defy, and how did audiences respond to her performance?

The dissertation is organized as case studies of specific female performers. Some chapters examine a small coterie of women who shared common attributes and other chapters focus on a single performer’s career. The individual performers were chose for several reasons. First, taken together, their careers cover the entire era of vaudeville, from the Cherry Sisters’ active career from 1893 to 1903, to Sophie Tucker and Ethel Waters, whose long-term careers continued well past the 1930s. Their performance of nontraditional femininity and their subsequent development of niche audiences varied
widely, especially as each woman aged. And so, these women provide a means of studying nontraditional female performance in popular entertainment in depth and across time. Additionally, this group of performers worked in nearly every type of popular entertainment during the vaudevillian era, so my study transverses popular entertainment genres and venues. The women acted in commercial theatre, both drama and comedy. They performed monologues, acted, sang, and danced. They appeared in vaudeville, musical revues, nightclubs and cabarets, movies, and radio. All of the women sustained long-term (i.e. at least a decade) careers through their business strategies and tactics. However, their business savvy and success varied greatly, so that, as a group, they represent a full spectrum of working women in popular entertainment, ranging from relative failure to solid success. And finally, each of the women’s careers is exemplary of some important aspects of the analytical framework—a performance persona, public persona, the development of a niche audience, and career management.

In chapter 2, I examine the legend of the Cherry Sisters, who performed a failed femininity in the 1890s, primarily in the Midwest but with one notable appearance at Hammerstein’s Olympic Theatre in New York in 1896. Their onstage persona was that of authentic Midwestern farmwomen, comically out of place on the popular entertainment stage. The three sisters performed a variety show, including skits, songs, moralizing essay recitations, and religious tableaus. Their overly modest appearance, no-nonsense attitude, and deplorably amateurish performance catered to young male variety audiences, who participated in rowdy behavior that sometimes crossed over to outright violence and riots. I argue that the Cherry Sisters opportunistically created their act in response to gender anxieties grounded in the 1890s. By performing an asexual, failed
femininity in combination with an amateurish, bad act, the Cherry Sisters allowed young male audiences to express their misogyny under cover of acceptable theatrical rowdyism. Although the Cherry Sisters initially earned a windfall for their first performances, they chased financial success and security for the remainder of their career. Of all the women included in this dissertation, the Cherry Sisters represent the least successful. They constantly operated from a defensive, tactical position, reacting to immediate problems and roadblocks without a long-term strategy or career management plan. The fact that they sustained their novelty act for a full decade speaks more to their sheer perseverance and opportunism than business savvy.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to an analysis of the types of nontraditional femininity performed by the fat comedienes who appeared around the turn of the century. I focus on three women in particular: Marie Dressler, whose mannish appearance, large body, and strength combined to create a physically agressive femininity; Eva Tanguay, whose wild, defiant persona and limited talent translated to a sexually-charged version of comic femininity; and Trixie Friganza, whose career trajectory ranged from a classic chorus girl to an aging, comic fat comedienne. Friganza is of particular interest, not only due to her changing body image and persona, but also her sophisticated marketing strategy of self-promotion. Her brief foray into the women’s suffrage movement proved to be a dangerous publicity tactic that backfired and required rapid backpedaling in order to salvage her public persona. Additionally, Friganza performed as a fat comedienne but avoided veering into a grotesque performance of femininity. As a result, Friganza retained a sense of integrity and self-worth in her persona and career that played extremely well to the newly developed middle-class female audience.
In Chapter 4, I examine the issue of women and race in American popular entertainment through the career of Ethel Waters. Early in her career, Waters enjoyed success as a blues singer, vaudeville performer on TOBA, the black vaudeville circuit, and a singer in early black musicals. Waters greatest success came from performing to primarily white audiences. I focus on a specific moment in Waters’ career in 1939, when she made the leap from musical performance to dramatic acting in *Mamba’s Daughters* on Broadway. I examine the performance choices available to African American women during the pre-Civil Rights era. I am specifically concerned with the constraints imposed by racial stereotyping and racially-based expectations about black femininity by white audiences.

Chapter 5 is a case study of Sophie Tucker as a representative first-generation Russian Jewish immigrant who created a niche for herself in popular entertainment. Even after Tucker abandoned blackface performance, she continued to “sing black,” specializing in ragtime and jazz. She concealed her Jewish identity until she was firmly established; in fact, she acknowledged it shortly after Fanny Brice achieved success in a *Follies* show as a Jewish comedienne. Tucker’s performance persona was complex, embracing two versions of the “mamma”: a red-hot sexually aggressive and demanding woman and a sentimental, immigrant version of the self-sacrificing Yiddishe Mama, who represented all that was left behind by the first generations of immigrants. Of all the women included in this study, Tucker was the most successful, developing a long-range business plan and employing savvy strategies throughout her career. Tucker adapt her performance styles over time, performed a complex persona that appealed to a large,
mixed variety of niche audiences, and conducted her career as a serious business venture. Tucker seized control of her career in a way that most other working women in popular entertainment failed to do.
CHAPTER 2

THE CHERRY SISTERS IN EARLY VAUDEVILLE: PERFORMING A FAILED FEMININITY

The Cherry Sisters earned their place in American popular entertainment by virtue of their complete and total lack of talent. They first presented their novelty act—which consisted of original songs, sentimental skits, and moralizing essay recitations—in Marion, Iowa, in 1893. After touring the Midwest for nearly four years, they came to the attention of impresario Oscar Hammerstein, who engaged them for a month-long run at his Olympia Theatre in New York in November 1896. Their appearance reportedly saved Hammerstein from an impending bankruptcy.¹ When the Cherry Sisters returned to the Midwest, they enjoyed a short-lived boost in salary as a result of their New York résumé. After a decade of performing, the Cherry Sisters retired in 1903, the same year that the youngest sister, Jessie, died. Addie and Effie Cherry returned to the stage in 1905 and continued to perform intermittently with a series of nostalgic appearances through 1938.

These are the basic facts of the Cherry Sisters’ career. However, their history—as a struggling, itinerant female variety act at the turn of the century—is buried beneath a theatrical legend of innocent incompetents who muddled along as the “world’s worst

actresses,” succeeding in spite of themselves. The Cherry Sisters entry in the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, which reflects the humorous aspects of the legend, concludes with a commonly held belief of Cherry Sisters’ great financial success: “The peculiar act (‘so bad it was great’) made them a fortune.”

The Cherry Sisters’ career has been relegated to little more than an amusing footnote in American popular entertainment, due to the novelty aspects of their act and their limited success. However, the Cherry Sisters phenomenon was firmly grounded in the theatrical and social conditions of the 1890s, and it is within that historical context that their career gains significance and transcends mere theatrical trivia. In an era noted for popular female performers whose primary assets were youth and beauty rather than talent, the Cherry Sisters—middle-aged, morally righteous, and plain spinsters—performed a satire of theatrical femininity, especially the sexualized female spectacle found in 1890s burlesque. The decade was marked by rapid economic and social changes, including financial depressions and the emergence of the New Woman, which challenged prevailing beliefs about male privilege and superiority. These cultural conditions helped create a niche for the Cherry Sisters, who served as a theatrical scapegoat for all that had gone wrong in contemporary society, as seen from a male point of view. Young men’s frustration, confusion, and anger, and the resulting misogyny that could not be openly expressed in proper society, found release under the guise of audience rowdyism. Hostile male audiences and critics consistently focused on the women’s failed femininity—their appearance and spinster status—characterizing them as

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grotesque freaks. As a result of one particularly brutal newspaper review, Addie Cherry sued for libel and took the case to the Iowa Supreme Court. The landmark decision in 1901, in favor of the newspaper, established the broad standard for a critic’s right to fair comment that stands today. The lawsuit and decision are not only important within the context of American theatre history; they are also indicative of the extreme hostility and harsh reality that the Cherry Sisters faced throughout their career, both of which have been erased by the humorous legend.

The Cherry Sisters mythos that survives today includes both inaccurate and apocryphal stories, all of which can be traced to a single source. In December 1944, just four months after the death of the last sister, *Coronet* magazine published Avery Hale’s lighthearted article “So Bad They Were Good,” which included nearly all of the elements of the Cherry Sisters legend.³ Hale’s article has been reprinted and quoted liberally, with the result that his account has survived as the accepted history of the Cherry Sisters. For instance, Anthony Slide relied almost exclusively on Hale’s popular biography in his three vaudeville reference books. He printed the article in its entirety in *Selected Vaudeville Criticism* and used it as his single source for *The Vaudevillians: A Dictionary of Vaudeville Performers*. In his *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, Slide cited Hale’s article and Michael Gartner’s 1982 article, “Fair Comment,” which summarizes the libel lawsuit.⁴

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In Hale’s account, the artless Cherry Sisters blithely worked their way toward a small fortune. Supposedly they earned as much as $1,000 a week and lived “almost thirty years principally on money they had earned around the turn of the century.” Hale also proclaimed that the Cherry Sisters performed behind a net to protect themselves from the barrage of rotten fruits and vegetables routinely thrown by audiences. Yet despite the assault by audiences, the Cherry Sisters remained oblivious to their lack of talent. They naively believed, Hales reports, that the tossed vegetables were either unrestrained tributes to their talent or acts of jealousy by less talented people. Like most legends, this one serves to mask a much more complex reality. In fact, the records indicate that the Cherry Sisters likely created and perpetuated their comic image of naïveté, often struggled to earn survival wages, and almost certainly never performed behind a net. Additionally, the audience response to their amateur theatrics was more than traditional rowdyism and sometimes developed into virulent attacks and riots. Instead of the idyllic, romanticized life portrayed in Hale’s article, the Cherry Sisters’ career was a long, dangerous, and hardscrabble chase after an elusive dream of financial security.

The Cherry Sisters made their first public appearance at Daniel’s Opera House in their hometown of Marion on January 20, 1893, supposedly for the purpose of raising money for a trip to the Chicago World’s Fair later that year. The show was a hodgepodge variety act, with Jessie singing “Why Did They Dig Ma’s Grave So Deep?” and Ella, in

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5 Hale 94-5.
blackface and male drag, performing an original song titled “Old Sam Patch.”

According to local newspapers, the women earned about $100 for the single performance. These figures are in line with Effie Cherry’s report of gross box office receipts of “close to Two Hundred Dollars,” if we assume that the theatre took a substantial cut of the proceeds. In 1893, $100 would have been an astounding windfall for the Cherry Sisters, who were unskilled farmwomen. In one performance, the group earned nearly 10% of a teacher’s annual salary, which was estimated as $1,146 in 1896. A more germane comparison comes from an 1892 article in Household, a farmwoman’s magazine that encouraged young women to earn money by poultry raising, beekeeping, dairy work, or sewing, all of which paid between $5.00 and $7.50 per week. In fact, Effie Cherry noted that they had already tried poultry raising and dairy work. Obviously, show business paid much better and the women must have been financially motivated from the beginning.

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6 Effie Cherry, unpublished autobiography, 12, Rennie 2:14. My primary sources come from the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, Ms. 178, Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, IA. The collection includes Effie Cherry’s unpublished autobiography (circa 1930), playbills, programs, publicity photos, songbooks, personal correspondence, diary fragment, scrapbooks, contemporary newspaper articles, and Winifred Van Etten’s unpublished 1940s biography, “The Queens of Corn.” All notes for sources from the collection include the box and folder of the material (i. e. 2:14).

7 Marion Sentinel 26 Jan. 1893 and Marion Pilot 26 Jan. 1893, Rennie 1:12. Newspaper articles from the Cherry Sisters’ scrapbook are identified by newspaper and/or publication date as available, followed by location in the Rennie collection. Also see Effie Cherry 12, Rennie 2:14. All income figures represent group income, not income per member.

The Cherry Sisters were the five surviving daughters in a family of eight children. They were Ella, born 1854; Elizabeth (Lizzie) born 1857; Addie, born 1859; Effie, born 1867; and Jessie, born 1871. The parents owned a small, isolated twenty-acre farm outside of Marion, Iowa. The mother died in 1876 and the father died in 1888, leaving the farm to the unmarried sisters. Effie wrote that the “five girls were left orphans to battle [their] way through life alone” after their father’s death, even though they ranged in age from 17 to 34 at the time.\(^9\) As unmarried, unskilled rural women in the late nineteenth century, their options were limited and performing offered an irresistible opportunity for financial security.

Consequently, immediately after their hometown success, the Cherry Sisters booked themselves into Greene’s Opera House in nearby Cedar Rapids, where they were subjected to scathing critical and audience responses. A reporter for the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* wrote, “They couldn’t sing, speak or act…Possibly the most ridiculous thing of the entire performance was an essay—think of it—an essay—read by one of the poor girls.” Claiming that the audience was filled with “the best people of the city,” the reporter nevertheless noted:

> [N]othing could drive [the Cherry Sisters] away and no combination of yells, whistles, barks and howls could subdue them. …Cigars, cigarettes, rubbers, everything was thrown at them, yet they stood there, awkwardly bowing their acknowledgments and singing on.\(^10\)

So, from the beginning the Cherry Sisters encountered extremely negative responses to their show. The fact that they carefully clipped and pasted this review, along with myriad

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\(^10\) *Cedar Rapids Gazette* 18 Feb. 1983, Rennie 1:12.
other critical articles, into a scrapbook confirms that they could not have remained oblivious to the negative criticism.

Throughout their career, the Cherry Sisters publicly maintained a persona of innocents abroad in the alien world of theatre. However, at the same time, they exhibited a savvy talent for self-promotion through adversarial relationships with newspaper reporters, which often included attention-grabbing squabbles and lawsuits. The first of these “publicity lawsuits” occurred as a result of the coverage for their Cedar Rapids appearance. The Cherry Sisters filed a libel suit against the *Gazette* and newsman Fred P. Davis, but were then “persuaded” by their lawyer and the *Gazette* to settle for a mock trial of Mr. Davis during an encore performance at Greene’s Opera House on March 14, 1893, thus insuring that they would earn one more tidy sum for themselves. Effie claimed that they agreed to the mock trial on the advice of their attorney: “[S]ince we were mere schoolgirls and knew nothing whatever about court business…we concluded to do as the lawyer suggested and try the case at the opera house.”

The “mere schoolgirls” were 22 to 39 years old and had been self-supporting for five years. Newspaper coverage for the show suggests that all parties—the *Gazette* and the theatre, as well as the Cherry Sisters—were financially motivated. The *Gazette* was instrumental in orchestrating the publicity for the mock trial, with an eye to the Cherry Sisters’ financial gain. Even Effie admitted that the editor told them, “I am going to do the right thing by you girls… [and] by handling the matter this way it will increase your receipts at the box office.” The newspaper ran several articles prior to March 14th, including one

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11 Effie Cherry 19, Rennie 2:14.
with a large headline that read, “A Second Exhibition of the Cherry Freaks.”\textsuperscript{12} The plan worked and the Cherry Sisters faced a sold-out crowd for the second performance and mock trial.

With this performance, the Cherry Sisters learned that public humiliation could pay handsomely. The very appearance of the women onstage was enough to send the audience into a frenzy. The \textit{Gazette} reported that “not a dozen words uttered by the sisters was heard” and the \textit{Marion Sentinel} confirmed that “It might have been a pantomime for all that the listener could discover.” Their show was little more than a warm-up act for the mock trial that followed, in which the all-male jury of local attorneys found Davis guilty of libel and a judge, costumed in a Shriner’s outfit, sentenced him to management of the Cherry farm and marriage to one of the sisters, beginning with the eldest and moving down the line to the first one who would consent to entering the “holy bonds of matrimony.”\textsuperscript{13} The Cherry Sisters may have endured ridicule of their appearance, rural background, and spinsterhood, but they netted at least $150.00 in the process.\textsuperscript{14} At this early point in their career, the Cherry Sisters had performed three times—suffering humiliation, ridicule, and rowdy assaults twice—and had netted several hundred dollars in the process. They had discovered a gold mine.

\textsuperscript{12} Effie Cherry 20, Rennie 2:14; \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette} 15 March 1893, Rennie 1:12.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette} 15 March 1893 and \textit{Marion Sentinel} 16 March 1893, Rennie 1:12.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Sentinel} 16 March 1893 and \textit{Des Moines Register} 15 March 1893, Rennie 1:12 and Effie Cherry 21, Rennie 2:14. \textit{Marion Sentinel} reported gross receipts of $690.00, with 25\%, or $172.50, going to the Cherry Sisters. \textit{The Des Moines Register} confirmed a sold out house of 1200 and reported a 75\% admission price, resulting in gross receipts of $900.00; if the Cherry Sisters received 25\% of these figures, they would have earned as much as $225.00. Effie Cherry corroborates that gross receipts were nearly $1,000.00, so it appears that the Cherry Sisters probably earned at least $150.00 for the show.
The Cherry Sisters capitalized on their growing notoriety and embarked on a tour of Iowa that spring. Between March 1893 and October 1896, they toured Iowa and then the Midwest on an intermittent basis, appearing whenever they could obtain bookings. Addie, Effie, and Jessie Cherry performed, while Lizzie and Ella continued to work the farm. (Lizzie stayed involved in the act, often serving as business manager and performing with her sisters on an irregular “as needed” basis.) During these years, the Cherry Sisters’ reputation as the worst act in show business grew, spreading throughout the Midwest. Contemporary accounts indicate that audiences, predominately male, were drawn by the opportunity to mock and revile the women and to participate in rowdy mob scenes. At least initially, the popular novelty act continued to draw a substantial crowd and income. Effie Cherry reported that they received “only $150” for their performance in Dubuque in May 1893, even though the box office take was “Over seven hundred and fifty dollars, of which seventy-five per cent came to us by our contract.” While Effie’s aggrieved account of the box office gross may be somewhat exaggerated, her figure of $150 seems plausible based on their solidly booked tour that spring. However, the Dubuque money was hard earned. The audience quickly turned into a violent mob and the Cherry Sisters experienced the first premeditated, full-scale riot of their career.

While prior audience responses could be explained away by theatrical tradition—i.e., booing, hissing, and throwing rotten fruit at a bad performer—the Dubuque audience’s brutality could not. According to the Dubuque Herald (as reprinted in a

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15 Effie Cherry 24, Rennie 2:14.

16 The Cherry Sisters performed during a period when rowdyism had fallen out of favor. American audiences became more well-mannered during the 1830s and 1840s, with the rowdy elements relegated to some “lower-class” houses and variety theatres by the 1860s.
*Gazette* article headlined “He Hurling a Wash Boiler”), the audience consisted of “seven or eight hundred people, only a few of whom were women.” The riot was expected and premeditated. A Bellevue newspaper offered the opinion, “The Newspapers in advance told of what latitude was to be allowed, the theatre manager sanctioned it, and the police laughed at it.” This is supported by a report that the theatre manager took the precaution of replacing the stage curtain with an old one that was “a misfit for the proscenium, leaving open spaces on either side.” Additionally, the audience came equipped with seltzer syphons, fire extinguishers, and a large wash boiler. The Cherry Sisters were violently assaulted and repeatedly driven from the stage. The usual fruits, vegetables, eggs, and tin cans soon gave way to seltzer spray, forceful discharges from fire extinguishers aimed at their faces, and large missiles, including the wash tub that was thrown from the balcony and aimed directly at the women. When one of the “eldest sisters,” presumably Effie, was driven from the stage, she returned with “a shotgun and a defiant look” that created a momentary pause in the rowdy behavior. However, the performance was terminated shortly thereafter (without gunfire) and the crowd followed the Cherry Sisters into the street, where the men pelted them with rocks, sticks, and eggs until they reached the safety of their hotel.17


17 *Dubuque Herald* May 1893, Rennie 1:12; unnamed Bellevue Iowa newspaper quoted in Effie Cherry 24, Rennie 2:14. The *Herald* report that one of the Cherry Sisters threatened the audience with a shotgun seems apocryphal at first glance. However Jessie’s diary entry of August 5, 1901 (quoted in Van Etten, n. p., Rennie 3:7) includes a
The Dubuque audience’s behavior not only transgressed the acceptable boundaries of audience behavior, but also moved beyond the realm of theatre when the men took the riot into the streets. The mob assault indicates how dangerous the Cherry Sisters’ enterprise had become. In fact, the city censured the theatre manager and city marshall for dereliction of duty in their failure to protect the women. After a three-month retreat to Marion for regrouping, the Cherry Sisters ventured out on tour again in the fall of 1893, with renewed commitment and vigor. It is indisputable that the Cherry Sisters reentered show business with open eyes. Although they continued to publicly profess a belief in the public’s adulation, Dubuque forced them to face reality. Privately, they had to know that adulation does not result in riots that threaten the performers’ safety, driving them from the theatre and through the streets of the city. In fact, the Cherry Sisters continued to experience violent physical assaults on a periodic basis, even in their hometown of Marion in 1895. According to the *Marion Pilot* that riot broke out immediately after the opening religious tableau, stopped the show, and continued uncontrolled for about an hour. The Cherry Sisters were assaulted with raw meat—tenderloin and liver—and their manager sustained a serious injury when an audience member broke a chair over his head. Yet the Cherry Sisters apparently took the Marion riot in their stride and continued their tour.

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note that “Effie took her revolver out on stage with her.” Consequently, there are at least two documented instances in which a sister, presumably Effie, pulled some kind of gun on the audience.

18 *Cedar Rapids Gazette* 23 May 1893, Rennie 1:12.

19 *Marion Pilot* 17 Nov. 1895, Rennie 1:12.
During the next ten years, the Cherry Sisters toured throughout the Midwest variety circuit, where the combination of their greenhorn performance of a failed femininity and predominately male audiences continued to prove volatile. According to Effie, they began to write their own songs and sketches, which, in retrospect, suggest a conscious decision to emphasize their amateurish status. An 1895 program provides a typical sampling of a Cherry Sisters’ performance. Jessie sang “Bicycle Ride to the Fair,” and “Fair Columbia,” which she reportedly performed while draped in an American flag. She also recited her temperance essay, “Corn Juice.” Both Addie and Effie appeared in male drag, delivering moralizing essays titled “The Modern Young Man” and “The Traveling Man” (fig. 2.1). The program often featured grand tableaus, including Jessie’s signature “Clinging to the Cross.” Contemporary reports of that tableau describe Jessie suspended on or clinging to a giant crucifix; in Odebolt, Iowa, red lights and a musical rendition of “Rock of Ages” accompanied the pose. The program content—earnest patriotism, temperance, and melodramatic religiosity—provided fodder for audience ridicule. Addie and Effie’s drag performances of moral essay recitation, both of which criticized young men specifically, appear to be direct challenges, even male baiting, to the young male audience.

The Cherry Sisters’ performance of “The Hypnotizing of Trilby” further illustrates that the women consciously created a self-deprecating act. George du Maurier’s 1894 novel permeated the popular culture, both in America and abroad, and parodies of the book and subsequent play were wildly popular. The Cherry Sisters

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20 Marion Opera House Program, November 1895, Rennie 1:10. Also see Lord Richard Acton and Patricia Nassif Acton, To Go Free: A Treasury of Iowa’s Legal Heritage (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995): 207.
Figure 2.1  Addie Cherry in drag costume that she wore for her moralizing lectures to young men. (Photo courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
performed the scene in which young Trilby, completely oblivious to her lack of musical talent, first sings “Ben Bolt” for Svengali. By choosing that particular scene, which featured Trilby’s initial ineptitude rather than her later accomplishments, the Cherry Sisters performed a double parody—of Trilby, as well as their own act. The “Ben Bolt” scene closely reflected their own situation, giving them further inspiration and support for their stage career. They not only appropriated the material, but also adopted Trilby’s artless persona as their own theatrical persona. The element of theatrical ineptitude was essential to the Cherry Sisters’ relationship with their male audience, who could then attribute their own raucous, hostile, and assaultive behavior to socially acceptable theatrical rowdyism.

The second essential element of the Cherry Sisters’ appeal was their performance of a failed femininity. In late nineteenth century theatre, both legitimate and popular, a female performer’s beauty and youth was often more important than her talent. In popular entertainment, this was most evident in burlesque, which put the issue of female sexuality on center stage. According to Robert C. Allen, burlesque was responsible for creating a new, highly sexual theatrical image of female beauty. In the mid-nineteenth century, troupes such as Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes were largely responsible for a radical shift in societal ideas of female beauty, moving from the Victorian ideal of a “slender, asexual steel-engraving lady to the large-breasted, big-hipped ideal.” Women in burlesque performed as sexualized female spectacle, complete with an impertinent, naughty, and winking-to-the-audience manner. Allen characterizes the relationship between performer and audience as a “system of display and gaze” that
was driven by male pleasure. Male audiences, situated in a position of power and
privilege, assumed the right to look, judge, objectify, and accept or reject the female
performer. By the 1890s, burlesque’s influence throughout popular entertainment was
evident. The sexualized, voluptuous body type had become a stage ideal of female
beauty and men expected female performers to be beautiful, sexy, and compliant in the
gendered “display and gaze” dynamic (fig 2.2).

The Cherry Sisters were the antithesis of the late nineteenth century theatrical
ideal of femininity in both appearance and decorum. They were not young, beautiful, or
graceful; they were neither voluptuous nor sexy; they were far from charming or
endearingly flirtatious; and, above all, they were not compliant (fig. 2.3). The Cherry
Sisters played up their Iowa farming background, performing in homemade dresses—
highnecked, longsleeved, and utilitarian—and seldom wore any makeup, thus cultivating
a no-nonsense, asexual stage persona. As a result, they challenged the male audience’s
complacent belief that female performers’ primary purpose was to provide sexual
pleasure by submitting to their gaze. Instead of competing with theatrical images of
beauty, the Cherry Sisters satirized the very standards that excluded them from a
traditional career. They burlesqued burlesque.

Their signature song, “Eulogy on the Cherry Sisters,” illustrates the Cherry
Sisters’ burlesque of theatrical femininity. They typically opened their act with the
“Eulogy,” a parody of the popular song “Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay,” sung to the
accompaniment of Jessie’s bass drum (fig. 2.4). British music hall star Lottie Collins had
popularized the original song in 1891, building her American career on the suggestive

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21 Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
Figure 2.2  Voluptuous feminity as performed by women in late nineteenth century burlesque, 1899. (Sketch courtesy of Library of Congress.)
Figure 2.3  Addie, Jessie, and Effie Cherry circa 1896.  (Photo courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
lyrics, delivered with “deceptive demureness” and a ‘kick dance’ version of the cancan. The song was a “smash hit,” and audiences, especially male ones, were certainly well acquainted with its titillating elements. The song celebrated the New Woman who remained a “good girl” at the same time that she flaunted her sexuality in a flirtatious manner:

Never forward, never bold,
Not too hot, and not too cold,
But the very thing, I’m told,
That in your arms you’d like to hold!22

In contrast, the Cherry Sisters’ nonsensical parody avoided flirtatious or sexual references, instead “introducing” themselves to the audience:

Cherries Red and Cherries Ripe
The Cherries they are out of sight
Cherries Ripe and Cherries Red
Cherry Sisters are still ahead.23

In contrast to the flirtatious Lottie Collins’ delivery style, the Cherry Sisters opened their act standing stiff and awkwardly, covered in modest calico from head to toe, and singing the parodic lyrics with straight faces and seemingly deadly seriousness.24 A comparison of carte de viste photographs of Lottie Collins and Jessie Cherry, in which their facial features and hairstyles are remarkably similar, helps illustrate the parodic aspect of the Cherry Sisters’ performance of a failed femininity. Collins’ photograph includes a knowing half-smile directed to the camera, long and curly hair falling to her waist, a


Figure 2.4  Addie, Jessie, and Effie Cherry with their famous bass drum. (Photo courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
corseted hourglass figure that is emphasized by draped material around her hips and shoulders, and shapely arms shown off by closely fitted gloves (fig. 2.5). In contrast, Jessie’s straightforward pose and serious demeanor convey an image of a non-sexual school girl rather than a flirtatious, sexy woman (fig. 2.6). Although her dress is similar in style to Collins’ dress, her figure is uncorseted and fails to replicate Collins’ hourglass silhouette; Jessie’s bulky, long sleeved dress conceals rather than reveals her body. By performing the “Eulogy” as their first number, dressed in unstylish and modest dresses, the Cherry Sisters firmly established the theatrical persona that served as the basis of their entire career in the first moment of performance. While maintaining an air of earnest innocence, the women offered themselves up for ridicule as parodies of the sexy and flirtatious femininity that was highly popular in contemporary entertainment.

The Cherry Sisters’ act, incorporating both an amateurish persona and a failed theatrical femininity, appealed to a predominately male audience, most of whom were young, confused, and angry about the cultural developments of the 1890s. According to Gail Bederman, men’s traditional bases of power were threatened on numerous fronts. First, a series of depressions created financial uncertainty, loss of confidence, and men’s compromised ability to fulfill the traditional role of breadwinner. Secondly, changing job markets severely limited prospects for advancement, with the result that young middle-class men faced the possibility that access to male power and status would be closed to them forever. Finally, the male sense of superiority and privilege was further undermined as the New Woman entered public life through college education, social reform work, and professional careers normally reserved for men. Traditional ideas about masculinity were being challenged on several fronts, with the New Woman’s
Figure 2.5 British music hall star Lottie Collins, who popularized “Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay.” (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.)
Figure 2.6 Jessie Cherry, who bears a striking resemblance to Lottle Collins in appearance and dress. (Photo courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
success being particularly threatening. Biederman argues that women’s advances “undermined the assumption that education, professional status, and political power required a male body” and that “men reacted passionately by ridiculing these New Women.”

While the Cherry Sisters were not typical New Women, their refusal to participate in the compliant “display and gaze” arrangement between female performer and male audience directly challenged the young men’s threatened sense of privilege, authority, and power. The combination of cultural upheaval of the decade and the Cherry Sisters’ confrontational performance of amateurism and failed femininity created the niche for their novelty act. The Cherry Sisters served as a cultural scapegoat, allowing respectable young men to vent their frustration, anger, and misogyny within a contained and socially acceptable theatrical environment. Although it is unlikely that the Cherry Sisters masterminded the phenomenon, they took advantage of it once they realized the financial potential of their act, actively pursuing a long-term career in popular entertainment.

However, despite the Cherry Sisters’ perserverance, they failed to become rich on the Midwestern variety circuit. While they continued to attract curious and rowdy male audiences, their initial financial windfall soon dwindled to a much lower and sporadic income, and they spent the remainder of their career chasing after the possible wealth promised by their earliest performances. Winifred Van Etten reports that the Cherry Sisters hired a number of managers during their first year, including A. J. Wheeler who contracted, as early as May 1894, to pay the three women a flat $200 per month. Throughout the decade, they lived the lives of itinerent variety performers, precariously

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from day-to-day, and were sometimes stranded on the road without work. In December 1894, Addie wrote home to Lizzie for money:

If you will send $5.00 we will send you all we can spair [sic] next week…
Now Lizzie if you don’t send us 5.00 I am not so sure as we will send you any money next week but will keep it so we will not get broke again. But $5.00 is not much to ask of you. We do not want $15.00.²⁶

The Cherry Sisters soldiered on in their pursuit of the elusive fortune promised by their early success, attributing their financial problems to unscrupulous theatre managers and unfair newspaper editors.

The Cherry Sisters’ relationship with newspapermen was complex and mutually manipulative. The male critics shared the misogynistic attitudes of the male audience and their articles often reviled the women—their performance and their failed femininity—in extreme terms. However, it appears that the Cherry Sisters purposely encouraged, even goaded, the newspapermen into an antagonistic relationship in order to gain publicity and keep their name in the public arena. When confronting the press, the Cherry Sisters portrayed themselves as innocent victims in a baffling, hostile world. Their libel suit against the Cedar Rapids Gazette and mock trial created the model for the Cherry Sisters’ long-term relationship with the press.

²⁶ Van Etten, 71 and 73, Rennie 4:1. While Van Etten’s manuscript lacks citations, it is especially important because a portion of the collection was lost in a flood in 1956 and her manuscript is the only surviving documentation of some lost primary materials. I tend to accept Van Etten’s account as accurate for several reasons. She was an English professor at Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa from 1937 to 1968. Her manuscript is well researched, with some notes included in the Rennie collection. I have been able to verify portions of her manuscript. For instance, the Rennie collection includes only two pages of detailed financial information from Jessie’s 1901 diary. Van Etten’s manuscript includes this information—without error—as well as additional figures from missing pages covering the remainder of the year. Van Etten also quotes from personal correspondence between the sisters and I have been able to verify her accuracy in the surviving letters, which makes me trust her account of the lost letters also.
The Cherry Sisters’ most effective boost came from a *Dubuque Times* article in March of 1896, which reported on the installation of a net to protect the women during performance. The story captured the imagination of the public and became the most enduring aspect of the Cherry Sisters’ legend:

[The Cherry Sisters] have at last succeeded in effecting a way to protect themselves from everything except pistol bullets. They carry with them a wire screen, such as is put up in front of base ball grand stands…This is put up immediately back of the footlights and is securely held in place with guy ropes. Mr. S. G. Arnold of [Dubuque], who was in Osage Saturday evening, says that…the show went along without any further trouble, the girls looking like people giving a performance in a cage.\(^{27}\)

While the installation of a net could be true, it is more likely a part of a pattern of unsubstantiated mythos surrounding the Cherry Sisters. Despite the detailed description, the newspaper report is suspect. The *Dubuque Times* article, which appears to be the only Iowa newspaper account of the Osage net, relies upon one man’s unsupported eyewitness account in a small town located about 150 miles from Dubuque.

In fact, allusions to a net were present from the beginning of the Cherry Sisters’ career. During their first Cedar Rapids appearances in 1893, the *Gazette* reported that the theatre manager suggested a second performance with a protective screen and then followed with its own suggestion that the onstage jury be protected by a net during the mock trial.\(^{28}\) Apparently, the *Gazette* not only played a role in promoting the Cherry Sisters’ early career, but was also responsible for planting the seed for further speculation about the need for a net as well.

\(^{27}\) *Dubuque Times* reprinted in *Cedar Rapids Republican* 13 March 1896, Rennie 1:11.

\(^{28}\) *Cedar Rapids Gazette* 13 March, 1893 and 14 March 1893, Rennie 1:12.
Despite its suspect origins, the net story is the most enduring aspect of the Cherry Sisters’ legend. While Hale only noted that “there came the day when they were obliged to perform behind fish netting and wire screens,” other accounts often claimed—without any evidence—that the first net appeared during the Cherry Sisters’ New York run in 1896. For instance, the *Des Moines Register* reported that a net was installed as a result of a rowdy opening night audience in New York and was used thereafter throughout the Cherry Sisters’ career. In 1982, Gartner also assumed a New York origin, suggesting that Oscar Hammerstein himself may have masterminded the idea. By 1994, even Slide had accepted the New York origin as fact.²⁹

If the Cherry Sisters had performed behind a net, we would expect to find mention of it in more than one newspaper review. Although the New York newspapers covered the Cherry Sisters’ 1896 New York appearance extensively, no paper ever mentioned a net and details in articles argue against its presence. The *New York Herald* reported that a man was ejected for throwing things onto the stage. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* coverage suggested a remarkably mild audience reception and reported that the Cherry Sisters were pleased to receive flowers instead of shoes and eggs. The *New York Times* critic, who was appalled by the apparent poverty and ignorance of the Cherry Sisters, as well as by the entire spectacle of their performance, also failed to mention a net; if one had been present, it would likely have added to his horror and garnered mention in his review. Finally, immediately following their New York appearance, the Cherry Sisters played Chicago, where the management placed a sign on the stage that prohibited the audience from throwing anything except flowers. The

²⁹ Hale 95; “The Cherry Sisters’ Nice, Clean Act is on the Stage Again,” *Des Moines Register* 2 Sept. 1928: 3; Gartner 29; and Slide, *Encyclopedia* 94.
presence of a sign, and the reporter’s account of it, strongly suggests that a net was not in place for the Chicago performances; it would have been highly unlikely that the reporter made note of a sign but not the net.\textsuperscript{30}

Eyewitness and anecdotal accounts of shows with the net in place do exist, but in each case the credibility of the report is questionable. In the Junior League of Cedar Rapids Oral History project, Eleanor Cook Thomas claimed that when she saw the Cherry Sisters perform, “they had netting up.” However, Thomas also claimed that she saw Jessie Cherry’s “Clinging to the Cross” tableau, which was impossible; Thomas was born in 1909, six years after Jessie died. In the early 1960s, Orville Rennie ran an ad in the \textit{Cedar Rapids Gazette} searching for eyewitnesses. His single response came from a man who claimed to have seen the Cherry Sisters perform behind a screen in Boston, but with no corroborating information regarding date or place. This claim is compromised by the fact that Effie wrote in her autobiography—three decades earlier—that they regretfully never played Boston.\textsuperscript{31} Regardless of the veracity of the net story, Arnold’s widely circulated March 1896 article brought the Cherry Sisters to the attention of people outside of the Midwest and probably played a role in their big break—New York—later that same year.


The Cherry Sisters’ legendary role in Hammerstein’s financial recovery appears to be true. Hammerstein’s lavish Olympia Theatre opened in October 1896, and was an immediate financial failure, leaving Hammerstein overextended and in bankruptcy court when he engaged the Cherry Sisters for a limited run in November. Just twelve days after the Cherry Sisters opened, The New York Times reported that Hammerstein’s creditors had agreed to temporarily suspend bankruptcy proceedings against Hammerstein, subject to full payment of his debts totalling $84,000.\(^{32}\) It appears that the Cherry Sisters, playing to sold-out houses from November 16\(^{th}\) to December 11\(^{th}\), helped stabilize Hammerstein’s immediate financial situation.

The New York engagement was supposedly a financial turning point for the Cherry Sisters as well, catapulting them into the upper echelons of high-paid entertainers. In his 1910 memoir, producer Robert Grau reported that the “incompetents” were so popular that they were paid $1000 a week. Grau’s unconfirmed figure eventually hardened into a “fact” cited by both Hale and Slide.\(^{33}\) The surviving evidence indicates that the Cherry Sisters never received $1000 a week. In a 1962 interview, Rennie pegged their New York salary at only $100 a week plus expenses.\(^{34}\) According to Van Etten, upon returning to the Midwest, the Cherry Sisters reportedly commanded $400 weekly for their appearance at the Imperial Music House in Chicago. That figure matches Effie’s claim that their post-New York tour included Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, and that


\(^{34}\) Kelly 18. Although Rennie did not cite his source, it is possible that he had access to information that is no longer in the collection—i.e. lost in the flood.
the largest salary they received on the trip was $400. Effie also claimed that six months after the New York engagement, the Cherry Sisters earned $600 for two 4th of July shows at Hubinger’s Park in Keokuk, Iowa. These post-New York engagement appear to be the largest salaries that the Cherry Sisters commanded.

Upon their return to the Midwest, the Cherry Sisters continued to face extreme hostility from both male audiences and reporters. Critics became increasingly virulent, incorporating violent language and imagery in their assessment of the women. Their criticism changed from discussion of the Cherry Sisters amateurism and failed femininity to hostile condemnations of the women as grotesques. For example, the *Oskaloosa Daily Times* reported that Jessie “swooned away like a cow when knocked on the head with an ax…She would make a lovely corpse.” Other reviews of the post-New York era were equally hostile and cruel, dehumanizing the women by routinely comparing them to heifers, mules, and automatons.

One particularly virulent review, published in the *Odebolt Chronicle* and reprinted in the *Des Moines Leader* in 1898, reflected the prevailing journalistic treatment of the Cherry Sisters by the late 1890s, and resulted in the landmark libel

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36 *Oskaloosa Daily Times* 29 Sept. 1896, Rennie 1:11; *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 15 March 1893, Rennie 1:12; and *Quincy (IL) Herald*, undated, Rennie 1:12. The Gazette described the Cherry Sisters as “a band of enrobed skeletons that were worked like automations” and the Herald claimed Lizzie had “the gyratorical abandon of a yearling heifer.”
lawsuit. The article in question, written by William Hamilton, characterized the Cherry Sisters as grotesque in extreme terms:

Effie is an old jade of 50 summers, Jessie is a frisky filly of 40, and Addie, the flower of the family, a capering monstrosity of 35. Their long, skinny arms, equipped with talons at the extremities, swung mechanically…The mouths of their rancid features opened like caverns, and sounds like the wailing of damned souls issued therefrom…Effie is spavined, Addie is knock-kneed and string halt, and Jessie, the only one who showed her stockings, has legs without calves, as classic in their outlines as the curves of a broom handle.37

Hamilton dehumanized the women, comparing them to infirm and diseased horses, taloned creatures, and rancid, damned souls and, ironically, failed to address their performance. At the trial, Hamilton defended his article as a satiric piece and Addie Cherry, at the request of the judge, performed a sampling of the variety act.38 The court ruled that there was no evidence of intentional malice, which is the basis for libel, concluding:

One who goes upon the stage to exhibit himself to the public, or who gives any kind of a performance to which the public is invited, may be freely criticised (sic). He may be held up to ridicule, and entire freedom of expression is guaranteed dramatic critics, provided they are not actuated by malice or evil purpose in what they write.39


38 Although the original lawsuit was filed by all three performing Cherry Sisters, only Addie Cherry continued the suit as far as the State Supreme Court.

39 Northwestern Reporter 325.
Although this ruling stands as the broad standard for performance criticism today, it is predicated upon Hamilton’s misogynistic attack on the Cherry Sisters’ personal appearance rather than their dramatic performance. For the Cherry Sisters, operating within a nineteenth-century male dominated judicial system, “fair comment” was synonymous with “fair game.” Even the Iowa Supreme Court acknowledged that the ruling was based on an exception made in the case of the Cherry Sisters: “Ordinarily publication of such an article as the one in question would of itself be an indicium (sic) of malice, but, as applied to the facts of this case, we do not think it should be so held.”

The newspaper reviews, as well as the details of the failed lawsuit, can be viewed as evidence of the hostile, misogynistic environment that the Cherry Sisters routinely encountered. Between 1897 and 1902, they began to hire off-duty policemen for protection during their performances, which indicates that the women were compelled to continue performing under dangerous conditions.

Although the Cherry Sisters managed to continue performing, their career increasingly became a litany of despair and poverty, a sharp contrast to the fortune heralded in the Cherry Sisters’ mythos.

By the turn of the century, the Cherry Sisters had to travel farther from home in search of venues and earned less money for their efforts. After a disappointing Western tour in 1900, the Cherry Sisters returned to the more familiar territory of the Midwest, but

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40 *Northwestern Reporter* 323-4.

41 Van Etten, n. p., Rennie 4:1. Van Etten had access to records that covered the content of the Cherry Sisters’ later performances, as well as contracts and financial records. I assume that this portion of the collection was lost in the 1956 flood. Consequently, I have relied extensively upon Van Etten’s manuscript for this portion of the Cherry Sisters’ history, supplementing her account with newspaper articles and surviving personal correspondence.
circumstances failed to improve. Jessie’s 1901 diary reads as a record of troubles inherent to the life of itinerant actors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1, 1901</td>
<td>Fulton, Ill.</td>
<td>took in $16.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 6</td>
<td>Morrison, Ill.</td>
<td>took in $22.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 18</td>
<td>Rockford Iowa</td>
<td>took in no $ blizzard didn’t play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Addie had the lawyer at Ogden send for Effie’s jewelry. She paid him $5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 29</td>
<td></td>
<td>Addie gave the lawyer 50¢ to send for Effie’s jewelry at Dayton. Our lawyer from Ogden came to room to get 50¢ more which was mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>We played at Seamore Iowa. took in 11.20 the house was rude and very small. We cut the concert at the intermission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>We played Colimes Iowa took in no $</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 12</td>
<td></td>
<td>We left Colimes for Lisbon Iowa. Left our board bill unpaid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Effie took her revolver out on the stage with her. Took in $57.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 31</td>
<td></td>
<td>Okland IA…The opera manager had to advance us the tickets to get us there…We couldn’t get any musician and it was best that we couldn’t. Our share after the entertainment was $3. The Anita opera man attached our baggage. We had just $1 left after expenses were settled.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many ways, Jessie’s journal entries serve as a microcosm of the Cherry Sisters’ career, encompassing the constant pursuit of money in an unfriendly world of bad weather, rude and dangerous audiences, unpaid bills, lawyers, and financial disappointments. They held on to their precarious touring career until 1902, when they settled in Hot Springs, Arkansas, to run a resort restaurant, but that endeavor also failed. Jessie Cherry died of typhoid the following year and Addie and Effie returned to Marion, where they stayed for two years before venturing onto the stage again.

Between 1905 and 1938, the two surviving Cherry Sisters performed when and where they could, as a means of supplementing their income. Addie and Effie primarily

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supported themselves by operating a bakery in Cedar Rapids from the late 1910s until 1932. Newspaper records indicate that they limited their performing career to short tours, special appearances, and a series of nostalgic comebacks in Iowa and Chicago until 1932. After the bakery closed, they made a concerted effort to return to the stage fulltime, going out on the road for Midwestern tours once again.

Their series of comeback performances, beginning in 1905, were devoid of virulent audience responses. The gendered cultural upheavals of the 1890s had leveled out and the Cherry Sisters’ niche as theatrical scapegoat was no longer relevant. Instead, the shows were nostalgic in nature, playing to both male and female audiences who focused on the amateurism of the act, and there was a decidedly pathetic aspect to them. Publicity photos of Addie and Effie that appear to have been taken decades apart show the women wearing the same dresses and accessories; while the clothing may have been retained as costume staples, they give the appearance of “genteel” poverty, whether intended or not (fig. 2.7). Recounting a 1918 performance, Van Etten reported that Lizzie assisted by playing the part of the young lady in “The Gypsy’s Warning,” a skit that became more ludicrous as the women aged:

Addie, stouter now by a good many pounds, in [a] garment that stagehands at the Majestic described as patent-leather pants, still played the Spanish Cavalier, the vile seducer. Lizzie, now some sixty years of age, a perfect pelt of hair hanging in hanks down her back, her gaunt face made gaunter by quantities of eye makeup, played the maiden and languished on the shoulder of fat Addie, who was much too short to be languished on gracefully. (fig. 2.8).

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43 Van Etten 236, Rennie 4:1.

44 Van Etten 223, Rennie 4:1.
Figure 2.7  Left: Effie and Addie Cherry in the early years of their nostalgic comeback career. Right: Years later, they are still wearing the same dresses and accessories.  
(Photos courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
Figure 2.8  Addie, Lizzie, and Effie Cherry in a nostalgic version of the Cherry Sisters’ signature skit, “The Gypsy’s Warning.” (Photo courtesy of the Orville and Jane Rennie Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.)
As the women aged, the audience progressively viewed them as parodies of their younger selves, with the result that they evoked sympathy and pity rather than hilarity.

The nostalgic performances provided a sporadic income during the 1910s. Based on signed contracts dating from 1909 to 1911, the Cherry Sisters earned $100 to $125 per week, with a few contracts paying as much as $150, when they could find work. As late as 1918, they were paid $125 for a three-day engagement at the Majestic Theatre in Des Moines.\(^45\) By the 1930s, however, the well had finally run dry. The Cherry Sisters could not sustain a viable career at a time when it was desperately needed. In 1935, they returned to New York to appear at the Gay Nineties nightclub; Addie was 76 and Effie was 68. The sisters appeared so elderly and pitiable that the audience was mortified. Van Etten, quoting an unnamed source, reported that Tallulah Bankhead and Gracie Allen were in the audience and both women wept.\(^46\)

Financial records and personal correspondence from the 1930s indicate that all of the Cherry sisters were living in poverty, with Lizzie and Ella fighting to survive on the farm. Addie and Effie received $200 for the 1935 Gay Nineties appearance and, hoping that once again a New York engagement would provide a short-term boost, used the money to bankroll a Midwestern tour that failed dismally. Stranded on the road, Effie regretfully wrote to Lizzie, “I wish we had come right home from New York with our $200.”\(^47\) While Addie and Effie struggled on the road, Ella and Lizzie lived in extreme

\(^{45}\) Van Etten 214 and 222, Rennie 4:1.

\(^{46}\) Van Etten 269, Rennie 4:1.

\(^{47}\) Van Etten 272, Rennie 4:1.
conditions on the farm. The farmhouse had collapsed in 1934, and Ella and Lizzie retreated to the basement:

[T]hey set up a stove which fed by inserting one end of a log into the firebox, pushing it gradually further in as it was consumed. The method was accompanied by…smoke…and made their eyes sore but they no longer had sufficient strength to cut wood. Beds were heaps of rags on the basement floor…By February no one could endure the situation any longer. [Authorities] came and carried Ella out…In March she died.48

After her own hospitalization, Lizzie returned to the family farm and attempted to live there alone. Correspondence between Addie and Effie, and Lizzie during the Cherry Sisters’ 1936 tour was filled with health and financial concerns. In January, Lizzie wrote, “[M]y hands are numb, my feet are numb, I can hardly light the fire;” on February 4th, the county sheriff once again removed her from the premises and placed her in the Linn County Home.49 Meanwhile, Addie and Effie were stranded on the road. On February 24, 1936, they wrote to Lizzie:

We are going to stay another week where we are which will make 3 weeks, for it was such bad weather here that we could not get any other place as the theatres were all empty as they said the St. Louis people will not get out when the weather is bad.50

A month later, Addie and Effie still hadn’t made enough money to return home. On March 28, Effie wrote, “I know that you will be disappointed (sic) that we did not come home from Peoria Ill, but we did not have money enough. I thought he would keep us

48 Van Etten 262, Rennie 4:1.

49 Van Etten 270-1, Rennie 4:1.

50 Addie and Effie Cherry to Lizzie Cherry, St. Louis, 24 Feb. 1936, Rennie 1:2.
another week.”51 The letters of that winter paint a picture of desperation for Lizzie, confined to the county home against her will, and for Addie and Effie, stranded on the road without steady engagements or income. The archived correspondence ends with the March 28th letter, which suggests that the sisters managed to return home before Lizzie’s death on May 13th. Addie and Effie retired to Cedar Rapids, applying for their old age pensions in 1938 and sharing a room in a boarding house. They made their last public appearance at the Strand Theatre in Cedar Rapids in 1938, when Addie was 79 and Effie was 71 years old. Van Etten wrote, “Addie, old and heavy, had to be helped onto the stage.”52 Addie died in 1942 and Effie followed in 1944. Effie died in poverty and debt; Rennie bought the Cherry Sisters’ collection from her landlady in exchange for back rent.53

Effie’s *New York Times* obituary was an affectionate celebration of the Cherry Sisters’ mythos. It made no mention of the harsh reality of their career—the very real hostility of the audiences, the physical attacks and riots, or the deeply entrenched misogyny that acted as the psychological core of the decade-long sustained novelty act. It also failed to mention the paper’s own 1896 review, in which the critic wrote that the women were untalented, poverty-stricken Western versions of “poor whites.”54 Instead, the obituary resurrected all the elements of the Cherry Sisters’ legend: the first show that paid for a trip to the Chicago World’s Fair, the women’s perpetual naïveté, a bizarre but

51 Addie Cherry to Lizzie Cherry, Indianapolis, 28 March 1936, Rennie 1:2.

52 Van Etten 322 and 276, Rennie 4:1.

53 Kelly 9.

idyllic career built on good-natured rowdyism, the $1,000 a week salary, the net installed by Hammerstein, and a comfortable retirement. In all likelihood it was the source for Hale’s popular article later that year.

CHAPTER 3
TRIXIE FRIGANZA AND THE FAT COMEDIENNES: PERFORMING
NONTRADITIONAL FEMININITY

When Eva Tanguay died in 1947, more than five hundred people, mostly women, attended her funeral in California. One of the attendees was an old friend, Trixie Friganza, who had costarred with Tanguay in The Chaperones, her first Broadway revue, in 1904. Several years after that show, Tanguay turned from musicals to vaudeville, where she earned as much as $3,500 a week at the height of her career. But she lost everything, reportedly as much as $2,000,000, in the crash of 1929. Compounding her problems, Tanguay was plagued by physical ailments, including gradual blindness, that forced her into retirement at the age of fifty. Thereafter, she lived frugally, often in seclusion, and dependent upon charity. Another popular entertainer and friend, Sophie Tucker, paid for the operation to restore Tanguay’s eyesight.¹ Tanguay, Friganza, and Tucker all belonged to a new popular entertainment phenomenon that emerged at the turn of the century—the fat female comedienne. Tanguay’s demise serves as a poignant reminder that this new group of women not only competed for roles, but also supported each other and bonded in lifelong friendships.

In contrast to the Cherry Sisters’ severely modest asexuality, the new fat
comediennes presented an overt, sometimes excessive version of nontraditional
femininity. The coterie included May Irwin (1862-1938), Fay Templeton (1865-1939),
Marie Dressler (1869-1934), Eva Tanguay (1878-1947), Sophie Tucker (1884-1966), and
Trixie Friganza (1870-1955). They operated in a small, specialized field, often
performing together or replacing each other in musicals. Their interchangeability was
possible, despite the fact that their individual performance personas were quite unique,
because none of them fit the criteria for traditional beauty typically portrayed on the
popular stage. Instead they shared the common attributes of the new comic character
type—approaching middle age (typically 30s or 40s) and excess weight—the
combination of which served as a visual sign to audiences that the women intended to be
purposely funny rather than sexually alluring. All of the women enjoyed long-term
careers and, perhaps not coincidentally, most suffered multiple failed marriages. Despite
their longevity and popularity, the women’s long-term financial success varied widely,
ranging from Tanguay’s destitution to Tucker’s solid business planning and lifelong
security.

Although the new comediennes’ careers spanned over five decades, for the
purposes of this study, the years between 1900 and 1920 are especially significant.\(^2\) The
comediennes emerged at a time that popular entertainment itself was in transition, with
vaudeville creating new opportunities for not only female performers, but also new types

\(^2\) Most of the fat comediennes performed in operettas, musical comedies, and vaudeville
from the 1890s or 1900s and some (Dressler and Friganza in particular) worked in
movies well into the 1930s and 1940s; Tucker continued to sing in nightclubs until
shortly before her death in 1966.
of female performers. Additionally, the vaudeville audience became more heterogeneous, moving from a largely working-class male audience in the early days to one that included increasing numbers of middle-class people, including large numbers of women who became target audiences for some of the new comedienne.

Another important change that affected the fat comedienne’s careers was a rise in the commercial marketing of entertainers, often through professional publicity and press agents. Photography played a large role, ranging from postcards and newspaper photos to formal publicity photos and the use of entertainers’ images in advertising. As a result, popular culture was saturated with idealized images of feminine beauty. Savvy use of photography and marketing techniques catapulted many young, beautiful female performers to new levels of celebrity. The fat comedienne emerged at this time and used the same techniques of marketing, self-promotion, and photography to craft their careers, which were grounded in direct opposition to the prevailing ideas about female beauty, sexuality, and femininity. In a sense, the fat comedienne phenomenon emerged both because of, and in spite of, the heightened focus on idealized theatrical images of feminine perfection. At a time when women’s appropriate social roles were being questioned, challenged, and renegotiated, the fat comedienne challenged the current standards of not only beauty, but also female behavior and respectability.

Although the two-decade period is identified as one of great activity in the women’s suffrage movement, culminating in women’s right to vote in 1920, the fat comedienne were, for the most part, remarkably apolitical. There are two possible explanations for this. First, before women’s suffrage finally began to gain legitimacy with the general public, especially after 1910, it was considered by many to be a radical
movement. With some exceptions, such as Lillian Russell (who came from a family of early, strong feminists), many popular performers studiously avoided the subject in their acts and publicity tactics, probably because it was dangerous to their popularity and success to be linked with what was considered a fringe political movement. For the nontraditional fat comediennes, any close association with women’s suffrage had the potential of calling attention to and exposing their own radical position of transgressive femininity, independence, and agency. A second, more practical, explanation is that the comediennes, as self-reliant and independent working women, were not inclined to join groups. Instead of looking to organized women’s movements for inspiration or support, they focused on concerns that were more immediate and personal—improving their own lives and advancing their careers. Nevertheless, despite the comediennes’ limited involvement in the suffrage movement, it is important to acknowledge that their era is defined by women’s concerns: self-representation, self-definition, increased agency, and greater public visibility for both performers and women in society, all of which resulted in a burgeoning sense of female community.

Although Trixie Friganza is today the least well-known or remembered woman in the group of comediennes, she is the most appropriate touchstone for examining their careers within the cultural context of the suffrage era. Even though Friganza worked steadily, she never achieved a high level of stardom or extraordinary financial success. Instead, she remained a dependable, popular, and well-regarded second-tier entertainer, playing to and cultivating both female and male audiences. She was a quintessential working performer as opposed to a star. And because she was a second-tier comedienne, Friganza’s performance personas, remarkable career management strategies, and
cultivation of a niche female audience are especially germane for an analysis of a representative fat comedienne’s career strategies and tactics. Friganza’s brief foray into the women’s rights movement is particularly significant because it occurred in 1908, at a pivotal time for women’s suffrage. The movement was in the doldrums following the death of Susan B. Anthony and was still considered outside the mainstream. Just a few years later, it would gain momentum, drawing leadership from society and theatrical women, and begin its final push toward success. Friganza’s early attempt to engage in the movement had serious ramifications for her career and required a strong publicity campaign to counter the adverse press coverage.

Each of the fat comediennes developed a definitive persona that was based on a unique version of nontraditional femininity. Depending upon individual attributes, the fat comediennes were often described as eccentric, strenuous, or grotesque. May Irwin, described as a “plump, jolly blonde, known for her rollicking exuberance,” specialized in musical comedies. However, she is most remembered as a ragtime coon shouter, a performance style that was often referred to as grotesque when performed by a white woman. In performing her famous “Bully Song,” Irwin assumed the role of a black male narrator, which was made possible by the combination of her ragtime musical style, large physical size, and strong, aggressive persona. In her vaudeville act, Irwin presented herself as a fat comedienne, making exaggerated, self-deprecating remarks about herself as “hippotomatic” and the “jumbo of farce.”

Trixie Friganza was often compared to the

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other fat comedienne, including May Irwin, despite the fact that their performance personas had little in common beyond physical size. In order to contextual Friganza’s persona and career within the fat comedienne typology, I will begin by examining the careers of two other distinctly unique fat comedienne, Eva Tanguay and Marie Dressler, in order to illustrate the wide range of personas represented within the category. I will then turn to Friganza for a detailed analysis of her career, with emphasis on her career-long evolving personas, her career management techniques (including the women’s suffrage incident), and her cultivation of women as her niche audience.

In terms of popularity and financial success, Eva Tanguay was one of the most successful vaudevillian entertainers, either male or female. She was variously described as “The Girl Who Made Vaudeville Famous,” “Vaudeville’s Greatest Box Office Attraction,” and “The Man-o-War of Vaudeville.”4 Even though Tanguay lacked any real talent as a singer or dancer, she proved wildly popular based on the sheer force of her personality and frenzied energy of her act.5 Tanguay’s act consisted of suggestive songs accompanied by abandoned dancing. Her hits included “I Want Somebody to Go Wild with Me,” “It’s All Been Done Before, But Not the Way I Do It,” and “Go As Far As You Like.” Her signature song was “I Don’t Care”: “I don’t care what people say or


do. My voice, it may sound funny, But it’s getting me the money, So I don’t care.”

One bewildered critic summarized her act by reporting, “She flung her arms wildly. She shook her head madly. She tore crazily at her ruffled blond hair. All the time she sang a nutty song.”

Physically, Tanguay was overblown rather than obese, although Anthony Slide offers the opinion that she deliberately posed for publicity photos in a manner that was “most repellent and outrageous, with bosoms bursting out of bras and thighs rippling with fat.” She was partial to suggestive, bizarre, and novelty costumes, often decorated with ostrich feathers and spangles, that emphasized her zaftig figure (fig. 3.1). Shortly after the Lincoln penny entered circulation in 1909, Tanguay wore a short, form-fitting costume that was completely covered in pennies, and she threw money to the audience while she sang and danced; one report states that she flung 1,200 pennies a day (fig. 3.2).

Along with her eccentric appearance, Tanguay performed a rebellious version of the sexually alluring femininity traditionally portrayed on the popular stage. Her persona centered on a heightened, unrestrained display of female sexuality that crossed over into parody; Susan A. Glenn identifies Tanguay as a “female female impersonator.”

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8 Slide 146.

Figure 3.1 Eva Tanguay in a feather and spangles costume in 1921. (Photo private collection of Peach Pittenger)
Figure 3.2 Eva Tanguay in her Lincoln penny novelty costume. (Photo private collection of Peach Pittenger)
example, at the height of the Salome craze in 1908, Tanguay billed herself as “The Real Salome” and performed her parodic, sexually-charged version of “Salome and the Dance of the Seven Veils” to sold-out crowds. Critics quickly noted the two main draws—Tanguay’s brief costume and cyclonic dancing (fig. 3.3). One summarized the act as “the electrically eccentric actress going through her Salome stunts clothed in a warm smile and a girdle.” Another claimed that she “danced like one possessed, shrieking . . . in her happiness.”

Through her idiosyncratic performance of heightened sexuality, Tanguay satirized the very essence of the chorus girl, presenting herself as a female performer whose talent meant nothing compared to her overt sexuality. In her novelty costumes, which burlesqued the scanty, “themed” costumes of Ziegfeld’s *Follies* and other revues, Tanguay performed a radical send-up of the popular chorus girl. Her act exposed an important aspect of the chorus girls’ working life. Although they compliantly appeared in revues as decorative objects of female beauty and sexuality, chorus girls often earned good wages in the exchange and had little compunction about selling their appearance. Like “I Don’t Care” Tanguay, many chorus girls lacked talent and didn’t care as long as they made the money. Tanguay’s satire of the commodification of women resulted in a wildly comedic performance of traditional theatrical femininity run amok.

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Figure 3.3 Eva Tanguay as Salome, 1908. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
In contrast to Tanguay’s transgressive hyper-sexuality, Marie Dressler based her comedic career in musicals, vaudeville, and movies on the persona of a traditionally romantic woman caught in a nontraditional, decidedly unfeminine body. Dressler, who titled her autobiography *The Life Story of an Ugly Duckling*, developed a typically feminine character who yearned for beauty, romance, and love, but was trapped in a body and face that could easily be mistaken for a large, strong, masculine man in drag (fig. 3.4). Dressler claimed that she made most of her own clothes, supposedly because she could not buy fashionable, feminine clothing to fit her body. She rejected the “mannish tailored suit,” arguing, “Let a woman be a woman, no matter how much it hurts.”

Although her claim may be hyperbolic, Dressler supposedly bought the decorative accessories for her dresses and hats in upholstery departments, so that they would be of an appropriate scale (fig. 3.5). Her costumes went even further, parodying the elaborate fashions of the era, upsized and exaggerated to match Dressler’s presence. In *Higgledy-Piggledy*, she “costumed herself with a huge diamond pickle breastpin and a leopardskin contraption fastened on the left shoulder with a leopard head.” She completed the image by singing “A Great Big Girl Like Me.”

Dressler’s defining role was Tillie Blobbs in *Tillie’s Nightmare* (1910) and the spin-off film titled *Tillie’s Punctured Romance* (1914). Tillie embodied the contradictory

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11 Dressler 49.

12 Dressler 110.

Figure 3.4 Marie Dressler (Photo private collection of Peach Pittenger)
Figure 3.5  Dressler modeling a customized costume with upholstery braid decorative trim.  (Photo courtesy of Shubert Archive)
aspects of Dressler’s persona, being a “boarding house drudge” who dreamed of love and romance. Dressler believed that audiences responded to Tillie because they empathized with the traditionally feminine woman buried within the physical package of a large, awkward woman: “[I]t was the sincerity of her—the tears that glistened back of every laugh that [made] her live.”

Dressler not only capitalized on her large frame and masculine appearance, but also her unrestrained, athletic physicality. In many shows, Dressler played variations of the Tillie Blobbs character, but with less emphasis on sentimentality. Instead, she showcased her strong physicality for comedic purposes. According to biographer Betty Lee:

> At thirty years of age, Dressler was in exuberant physical shape. She had learned to move with extraordinary grace and authority, with a gliding, effortless step that grabbed attention. She still had trouble keeping her two hundred pounds under control.

At that time, Dressler was appearing intermittently in *The Lady Slavey* (1896 to 1900) with Dan Daly. One of the highlights of the show was their vigorous “cyclonic” dance that ended with Daly jumping on Dressler’s hip and being hauled offstage by Dressler. She continued to overpower and manhandle her male co-stars in later productions, including Joe Weber in *Twiddle Twaddle* in 1906. In that show, Weber played Dressler’s

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14 Dressler 111.


16 Kennedy 230.

17 Dressler 64-5.
father, who was in search of a husband for his heavyweight daughter. At one point, Dressler “picked up her parent by the nape of his neck, tucked him under her arm, threw him over her shoulder and laid him across her lap for a spanking.”

Taken together, Tanguay and Dressler illustrate two contrasting personas within the fat comedienne character type. Dressler wrapped her body in strikingly ugly costumes, exaggerated her masculine size and build, and juxtaposed her masculine appearance and physical strength with a feminine character who desired what society expected women to desire—love and romance. Tanguay used costumes to blatantly flaunt her overblown figure, emphasize her female sexuality, and express a defiant disregard for societal rules of behavior for women. Both performers based their acts on the female body in action and challenged cultural ideas about femininity and female sexuality. Although their performance personas were at opposite ends of the spectrum, they each—by virtue of their comedic, exaggerated portrayals—could be considered “female female impersonators.”

When Trixie Friganza transitioned from a young, slender chorus girl to a thirty-something fat comedienne, critics often compared her, both positively and negatively, to other large comedienennes. As early as 1902, the Chicago Post offered the opinion that she was “more entertaining and far better looking than Miss Irwin, Fay Templeton, or Marie Dressler,” but criticized her “silly notion” that she must “become stout to be a genuine

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18 Kennedy 49-50.
comedienne.” Friganza was most often compared to Irwin and Dressler as this review of Eddie Foy’s *The Orchid* illustrates:

> Miss Friganza is doing her best just now to act like a regular fat comedienne. She is reasonably successful and more than reasonably promising, both as to flesh and talent. She is neither as rough nor as funny as Miss Dressler; neither as neat nor as gifted as Miss Irwin. But she adds a bit here and a bit there, and no doubt may become, if she keeps on trying, one of our coarsest and largest female comics.

Another critic for the same show wrote, “Fraganiza is evidently intent on combining May Irwin, Marie Dressler, and Fay Templeton all in one and labeling it Trixie.”

The reviews also confirm Friganza’s second tier status as a fat comedienne. In her autobiography, Marie Dressler claimed that Friganza frequently replaced her in roles when Dressler moved on to new projects and that Friganza once said to her, “Did you see what the papers said about my copying you? Huh! I’d be a fool to copy anybody else.” While Dressler’s anecdote suggests that Friganza was often perceived as a clone of Dressler, Friganza was also capable of putting her own unique stamp on her stage.

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19 *Chicago Post*, 14 April 1902, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

20 *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 9 Oct. 1907, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220. RLC. Within the context of the era, the term “coarse” can be interpreted as a reference to female comedienne’s nontraditional femininity, including excessive girth, performance physicality, and focus on comedy rather than passive presentation of beauty. While some comedienne, such as Tanguay and Tucker, incorporated risqué material into their acts, Dressler and Friganza avoided coarse, or offensive, material.


persona. For example, Friganza and Dressler appeared together in Joe Weber’s *Twiddle Twaddle* in 1906. Their pairing on the same bill indicates that, even as fat comedienne, their personas remained distinctively individualistic.

Friganza’s career spanned fifty years, beginning as a young, pretty chorus girl in *The Pearl of Pekin* in 1889, at age nineteen, and ending with a film appearance in *If I Had My Way* in 1941, at the age of seventy-nine. Friganza joined *The Pearl of Pekin* touring company in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and after that show she toured with the Carlton Opera Company for five years before making the complete transition into musical revues and comedy. She appeared in *The Chaperones* (1902) with Eva Tanguay, *The Prince of Pilsen* (1904), *Higgledy-Piggledy* (1905) and *Twiddle Twaddle* (1906) with Joe Weber and Marie Dressler, *The Orchid* (1907) with Eddie Foy, *The American Idea* (1908) with George M. Cohan, *The Passing Show of 1912*, and the Shuberts’ revue, *Town Topics* (1916), where she was replaced mid-run by Sophie Tucker due to a knee injury. Her signature song, from *The Sweetest Girl in Paris*, was “No Wedding Bells for Me.” Also during this period Friganza played vaudeville, where she could command higher salaries. She often incorporated song and dance into her solo act, performing with miniature ukuleles and large bass viols, both of which further called attention to her massive size (fig 3.6). Greg Palmer’s video, *Vaudeville*, includes a short, rare film of Friganza performing a rousing song accompanied by her wild beat on the bass viol.  

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Figure 3.6 Friganza in a fat comedienne costume with a miniature musical prop. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
a glimpse of Friganza’s performance persona late in her career. Due to health problems, Friganza eventually abandoned the stage in favor of Hollywood, where she played featured roles, usually a society dowager, in both silent and early talking films, including *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *A Star is Born* (fig. 3.7). Friganza also starred in two short films, *My Bag o’ Trix* (1930) and *How to Undress in Front of Your Husband* (1937), a comic piece filmed when Friganza was aged sixty-seven. In all, Friganza’s credits include numerous operettas, 55 musical comedies, and 37 movies, as well vaudeville.\(^{24}\) As her prodigious resume illustrates, Friganza was a hard-working female entertainer. In a post-retirement interview, she claimed, “From 1889 to 1939—that’s f-i-f-t-y years—I never loafed more than two days in a year. Made money in all of them. Now I have bought myself an umbrella, and I am living under it.”\(^{25}\)

During her career, Friganza’s performance persona evolved from a young, traditional female performer to a fat comedienne, a necessity due to Friganza’s aging process and increasing girth. She lacked exceptional talent as a singer, dancer, or actor,


Figure 3.7 Friganza as a Hollywood dowager. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation, photo by Paramount)
but was successful in the long view due to her career strategies. Since Friganza never broke through to great stardom, she is emblematic of the working women in popular entertainment of the era. In order to attain longevity in a fickle industry, Friganza proved to be extremely adaptable. She reinvented her persona repeatedly (ranging from chorus girl to dowager), adjusted her business strategy (moving from musicals and vaudeville to Hollywood movies), and developed a strategy of self-promotion, using publicity schemes and press agency to keep herself in the public eye. Throughout her career, even during her early days, Friganza negotiated for a viable position in popular entertainment within the established persona confines available to women.

As a young, slender, pretty woman, Friganza gained entry into show business in a classic manner—as an innocent chorus girl from Ohio. She was a viable candidate for the chorus, based on her petite size and striking good looks (fig 3.8). According to her publicity, Friganza had been working as a ribbon clerk in a department store, when a boyfriend, cash boy employee, or “theatrical man,” depending upon the newspaper article, suggested that she give up her $3 per week job for the stage, where she began at “$18 a week in the chorus and had good prospects of advancement.” Friganza took the advice, knowing that she “was not bad looking and that [she] had a good figure.”

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Figure 3.8 Friganza as a young chorus girl circa 1895.

(Photo courtesy of Footlight Notes

http://gabrielleray.150m.com/ArchiveTextF/TrixieFriganza.html)
Although few chorus girls graduated out of the chorus, it was possible to do so. Marie Dressler, Lillian Russell, and Fanny Brice all made the transition from chorus to stardom.\(^{27}\)

Once Friganza was established as a chorus girl, she attempted to differentiate herself from the pack by marketing herself as a representation of the American Girl, an iconic ideal of womanhood and female beauty. As Martha Banta documents, images of the American Girl dominated American culture between the 1890s and 1910s, when the social obsession with questions of identity intersected with a new focus on appearance. The American Girl was traditionally feminine, marriageable, and often portrayed as the popular Christy or Gibson Girl. She was decidedly WASP in appearance, fair complexioned and often blond, which stood in direct contrast to the recent influx of Eastern European immigrant girls. In fact, the image of the American Girl represented an idealized WASP regularity of features.\(^{28}\) And while the American Girl embodied traditional, even Victorian, ideals of femininity, she simultaneously incorporated some aspects of a modern New Woman. She was taller, stronger, more athletic, active rather than submissive, but nevertheless retained her proper femininity and decorum. Margo

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\(^{27}\) Benjamin MacArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1984): 155; and Dressler 25. Dressler’s chorus girl beginning is particularly significant because both she and Friganza made their careers as large women who specialized in physical comedy. However, Dressler was never a traditional beauty and her entry into show business via the chorus was a lucky break. In her autobiography, she acknowledged that, during her first job as a chorus girl in Robert Grau’s company, she was “greatly handicapped in spite of a really lovely voice” because she was “too homely for a prima donna and too big for a soubrette.”

Peters identifies another female performer, Ethel Barrymore, as the epitome of the American Girl (fig. 3.9). Friganza, a brown-eyed beauty of Irish and Spanish descent, presented herself as an American Girl in early publicity photographs that are remarkably similar in appearance, pose, and fashion to Barrymore’s American Girl image (fig. 3.10). By packaging herself as an American Girl, Friganza attempted to gain credibility as a modern young woman of substance rather than one of hundreds of young, pretty women relegated to the chorus and minor roles.

Very early in her career, Friganza developed a strategic relationship with both photographers and the popular press, for the purpose of gaining maximum publicity. By 1905, one newspaper article claimed that Friganza was “probably one of the most photographed women on the American stage” because she “possessed the characteristics of figure, face, and ability to pose, which resulted in the most charming of pictures.” The article also noted that, until recently, she had posed as a favor to photographers, thus saving money for herself, but that she now had to decline invitations due to her demanding position as one of the leading comediennes. Whether or not Friganza paid for her publicity photos, the claim that she was widely photographed is supported by the massive number of short articles, press releases, and interviews, a great many of which are accompanied by photographs, that appeared in newspapers throughout Friganza’s career. One such article from 1903, published under the headline “Heyday of the

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31 See the Trixie Friganza scrapbooks in RLC.
Figure 3.9 Ethel Barrymore as an American Girl

(Photo courtesy of Shubert Archive)
Figure 3.10 Friganza as an American Girl (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
“Heyday of the American Girl,” outlined the physical beauty and exercise routines of the American Girl.

It was illustrated with full-length photographs of Friganza as the ideal woman (fig. 3.11). The accompanying text defined the physical attributes of the American Girl:

The ideal girl of today is not fat. She has taken it off with exercise, with massage, and in various ways, including walking, cycling, and dieting, until she is just the right size. She wears a flat fronted straight corset, which gives her the desired front line and she is slender below the belt.32

The newspaper’s use of Friganza’s lithe image appears to be an acknowledgment of her bona fide status as an American Girl. It is noteworthy that neither her professional career nor her current production is mentioned in the article, a rare and exceptional occurrence in Friganza’s ambitious press coverage.

Friganza worked to cultivate the American Girl image, not only in photos but also in publicity stunts. A year earlier, in 1902, Friganza responded to a sermon by Dr. John L. Scudder, in which he called for American girls to be active by climbing trees and eating corned beef and cabbage. Ever the opportunist, Friganza immediately staged a publicity event in Central Park for a willing reporter by climbing up a beech tree and declaring, “Dr. Scudder . . . knows precisely what is needed by all of us who lead the modern strenuous life. How can any girl expect to win fame or fortune if she doesn’t know how to climb a tree.” The article identified Friganza as “leading woman of ‘The Chaperones,’ at the New York Theatre,” thus giving her current production a shot of free

Figure 3.11 Friganza as an ideal specimen of the American Girl (Photo from unidentified newspaper, 23 Aug. 1903, Trixie Friganza scrapbook, vol. 220, Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library)
Friganza’s stunt reinforced an important aspect of the American Girl image, that of an active, athletic young woman who participated in sports, bicycling, and even tree climbing. And while the article depicted Friganza as a wholesome, spunky young woman, the description invariably played on a reader’s naughty fantasy: a proper young woman, indecorously scrambling up a tree, and standing, in a dress, directly over the head of anyone watching from below.

As a young performer, Friganza projected an image of traditional beauty, tremendous stage presence, and a charming sense of humor. In 1906, a hometown critic described her as “strikingly beautiful, handsomely gowned and inspiringly vivacious,” and went on to note her personal magnetism that made her lack of “potency in art” a non-issue. Two years later, in her review of *The American Way*, Chicago critic Amy Leslie, praised Friganza not only for her beauty and charm, but also her artistry:

Miss Friganza is decidedly the attraction of the show. She is beautiful, tremendously amusing, and artistic. In some of the give-and-take repartee scenes in which George Cohan excels, Miss Friganza was simply irresistible and her songs, well sung and dainty, were the hits of the evening. She wore costumes which made her a dazzling picture, and seemed happy in her environment.

Friganza was in her mid-thirties when both of these reviews were published. Neither reviewer remarked on her age or increasing girth, focusing instead upon her traditional femininity, fashion, and comedic charm. Nevertheless, Friganza was in the process of

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33 “Gives Practical Demonstration of Her Belief in Dr. Scudder’s Theories,” Unidentified Newspaper 17 June 1902, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

34 *Cincinnati Comm.* 8 Oct. 1906, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

evolving from an American Girl persona to the new fat comedienne type, with the Toledo Blade noting in early 1906 that she was “getting stout.” A publicity photo circa 1907 shows a heavier Friganza dressed in a bibbed jumper with extra straps to contain her ample bosom (fig. 3.12).

As Friganza made the transition to the fat comedienne type, she struggled create a unique, competitive niche for herself. Marie Dressler’s adroit physical comedy, combined with her sentimentally romantic Plain Jane persona, kept Dressler in the top tier of popular female performers. And despite low periods, including two bankruptcies (in 1900 and 1909), Dressler went on to a successful, long-term career on stage and screen. Tillie’s Nightmare gave Dressler financial security, paying for her first home purchase. She reached new levels of popularity in the movies, winning an Academy Award in 1930 for Min and Bill. Eva Tanguay’s madcap performance and rebellious personality propelled her to the top of vaudeville performance. As a headliner, she enjoyed over two decades of success before she suffered financial reverses and retired in 1930. The height of Tanguay’s career, from the mid 1900s to late 1920s, intersects with Friganza’s own celebrity turn. Friganza could not compete with Tanguay’s force of personality, essentially pitting a well-behaved woman against a wild one, any more than she could top Dressler in physical comedy. But what Friganza lacked in theatricality, she attempted to make up for in marketing.


37 Lee 39 and 70.

38 Dressler 117.
Figure 3.12 A “stout” Friganza circa 1907. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
Friganza’s public persona, as presented in her ongoing massive campaign of self-promotion, was centered on an image of a somewhat frivolous feminine celebrity, or Friganza as a charming show business personality. Whenever she was performing, Friganza gave interviews (or distributed press releases written in the format of an interview) in which she rambled through her life story and chattered about her role in the current show, always with an upbeat, energetic, and lighthearted spin. Friganza gave numerous variations of her life story: she was born in Kansas, Iowa, Cincinnati, or Ireland; she joined the chorus to escape the drudgery or to support her mother and sister; her father was Irish and her mother was Spanish, resulting in her name change from Delia Callaghan/O’Callahan/O’Callaghan to Trixie Friganza; her hot temper came from her doubly volatile heritage; a stage hand named her Trixie or she chose Trixie to go with her mother’s maiden name of Friganza; and she was married two or three times, with the earliest husband dismissed as dead.\(^\text{39}\) She not only climbed Central Park trees as an American Girl, but in later years also showcased her home in Bensonhurst, detailing the décor in minute detail and, in the process, perpetuating an image of herself as a home-loving, middle-class woman. As an example of Friganza’s vigilant opportunism, when a naïve Newfoundland theatre manager offered Friganza $25 a week at a time when she

\(^{39}\) Since there is no known collection of Friganza’s personal papers, it is impossible to ascertain the accuracy of many of her publicity statements. As a result, Friganza’s history is inseparable from her self-promotion. Her public persona, created and perpetuated through a massive marketing campaign, remains largely impenetrable.
was playing vaudeville for $750 a week, a humorous account of the incident found its way into *Variety*, thus reminding everyone that Friganza was working and doing quite well.\(^{40}\)

As Friganza gained weight, she waged a publicity campaign to sell her new image. She presented the increased girth as an advantage that enhanced her popularity: “Of course I didn’t get fat purposely, but now I realize it’s good stock in trade for a comedienne. . . . I eat what I want and that makes me funny, or I guess it does for I see the people laugh when they look at me.”\(^{41}\) Another tongue-in-cheek article, supposedly written by Friganza and published in several newspapers, compared the “large, ample, swelling, bulging comedienne, with a bubbling sense of humor” to the less fortunate “thin, scrawny, shrunk, caved-in female” of the higher drama. Friganza claimed that weight made the comedienne and predicted that, in the future, managers would place comedienennes on the scale and pay, like confectionery, by the pound; “the ‘sweller’ the comedienne, the larger her salary.”\(^{42}\)

Along with her marketing campaign, Friganza developed her own idiosyncratic performance persona as a fat comedienne. In contrast to the transgressive personas of Dressler and Tanguay, both of which presented eccentric or grotesque representations of femininity, Friganza played it relatively safe, performing a more traditional version of

\(^{40}\) *Variety* 5 June 1909, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

\(^{41}\) Unidentified Newspaper 2 Feb. 1908, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

\(^{42}\) Trixie Friganza, “Comediennes Chosen By Weight,” Unidentified Newspaper 24 April 1907, and “Trixie Friganza in ‘The Orchid’,” *New York World* 18 April 1907, both located in Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.
femininity. In fact, her persona developed out of her prior, younger images as an attractive chorus girl and traditional American Girl. Friganza’s fat comedienne was a good natured and proper woman who, much to her own surprise, had fallen victim to age and middle-aged spread. And while, at first glance, the persona appears to be completely traditional, it was radical in that it contradicted and challenged the prevailing cultural ideas about older women, fat comediennes, and idealized femininity. Historian Susan A. Glenn notes that, according to popular wisdom, “the beautiful woman was never fat” and the fat comediennes’ supposed sacrifice of beauty, looks, and grace “disturbed cultural expectations about the feminine.” By performing an attractive, fat, and middle-aged version of femininity, Friganza created a positive, insistently visible representation of middle-class, middle-aged women, a demographic that was traditionally marginalized or ignored in the youth and beauty driven culture. In 1907, at the age of thirty-seven and as a fat comedienne, Friganza garnered praise for both her appearance and performance in the musical revue, *The Orchid*:

> The one vivid, rakish, and brilliant voice in the wilderness of coarseness was Trixie Friganza. She came on looking a gloriously modern Cleopatra (fig. 3.13) and . . . entertained broadly and suggestively, but with a characteristic vigor and originality which was refreshing. Her little, warm Grecian smile and her adorable Irish humor had free play, and in the song “No Wedding Bells for Me,” Trixie made a tremendous hit.

The positive review makes note of several important aspects of Friganza’s performance persona. The descriptive word choices, such as “vivid,” “rakish,” “warm,” and

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43 Glenn 45 and 56.

Figure 3.13 Friganza in elaborate headdress, probably in her role as Cleopatra in The Orchid (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
“adorable,” paint a picture of Friganza as a charming, charismatic, and lighthearted performer. Additionally, the critic singles her out as an exception in a cast dominated by “coarseness,” which indicates that Friganza maintained a strong measure of propriety and modest femininity in her performance persona.

Figranza’s performance in the Shuberts’ Passing Show of 1912, in tandem with the corresponding newspaper coverage, fully illustrates the adroit merger of her performance and public personas as a means of career management. The premise of the loosely unified revue, according to Variety, was to “surround ‘The Ballet of 1830’ with a few vaudeville acts.” As the company comedienne, Friganza appeared in the “vaudeville act” portion of the revue. She delivered two monologues, sang a “frank little song entitled ‘You Never Could Tell We Were Married’,” and performed in several burlesques, including one on grand opera, “The Metropolitan Squawkette,” with Willie Howard, Eugene Howard, and Ernest Hare (fig. 3.14). Friganza’s vaudevillian performance in the revue was well received. The Cleveland Leader noted, “She sings well, she dances marvelously, for a woman of her size, and she has a sense of fun that is the envy of her sex.” As the review reiterates, Friganza was first and foremost a consistent, amusing, and charismatic comedienne, with her fat persona being an identifiable type for her critics and audience.

45 Variety 26 July 1912, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.


47 Cleveland Leader 12 Nov. 1912, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.
Figure 3.14 Friganza in the Metropolitan Squawkette sketch, *The Passing Show of 1912*

(Photo courtesy of Shubert Archive)
But in addition to the vaudevillian segments, Friganza was featured in a chorus girl scene. Typical for a Shubert revue, the centerpiece of the show was the display of female sexual spectacle, with scantily clad chorus girls parading down the infamous Shubert runway that ran from the stage to the rear of the auditorium, placing the parading chorus girls directly over the audience. The highlight of the revue was a burlesque of a harem scene from “Kismet,” which placed the fat, middle-aged Friganza onstage front and center, surrounded by a large group of scantily clad, beautiful chorus girls. The setting included a large tank of water and the chorus girls alternatively played in the water and performed a series of classic dances. The scene was quite provocative, eliciting a demand from the *Cleveland Leader* to:

> Cut out these putrid spots in the harem scene; put stockings on the bare legs of the girls, for naked flesh and big, bulging muscles from dancing are not the least pretty; stop the parading of these half naked women up and down the runway through the audience as if they were slaves being exhibited for sale, and the show will have lost its offensiveness.\(^{48}\)

Friganza, a former chorus girl herself, burlesqued both the appearance and performance of the chorus. In contrast to their skimpy costumes and display of flesh, Friganza wore a large pink gauze skirt and a “huge headdress with plastic fruit draped around the crown.” Her travesty dances were energetic, “sufficiently strenuous to prove the fallacy of the claim that violent exercise is a panacea for the feminine ill of surplus flesh.” For her grand finale, Friganza jumped into the tank of water, acting as if she had accidentally

\(^{48}\) *Cleveland Leader* 12 Nov. 1912, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.
fallen. A typical report claimed that Fiftieth Street outside of the Winter Garden was flooded by the splash caused by Friganza’s weight.\textsuperscript{49}

Friganza’s comedic performance was reminiscent of Fanny Brice’s self-deprecating appearances in the Ziegfeld \textit{Follies}, in which her lanky, awkward physicality and Jewish appearance served to further emphasize the idealized femininity of the Ziegfeld Glorified Girls. Brice appeared intermittently in the \textit{Follies} between 1907 and 1936, so the juxtaposition of Friganza’s fat comedienne with the Shubert chorus girls was not a new idea. In all likelihood, it was inspired by the Brice/chorus girl dynamic.\textsuperscript{50} And that dynamic illustrates the limited performance options for less attractive, older female performers. Friganza, like the other fat comedienes and Brice, was caught in an either/or dilemma. A woman could be either a young, pretty idealized version of femininity, such as the chorus girls and the iconic American Girl represented by Ethel Barrymore, or she could be the opposite—old, unattractive, and transgressively unfeminine. Friganza negotiated her self-representation within this framework by perpetuating traditional versions of femininity, complicated by their embodiment in an attractive but larger, older body.


\textsuperscript{50} Fanny Brice’s performance persona shared several characteristics with the fat comedienne type, even though she was slender. Instead of fat-based comedy, Brice performed an awkward physicality and rubber-faced mugging for comic purposes. Her Jewish identity and performance of coon songs further set her apart from the chorus girls featured in the \textit{Follies}.
Friganza’s good-natured, self-deprecating approach to her *Passing Show* performance proved to be a publicity goldmine for the revue and herself. The Shuberts’ in-house press agency capitalized on the tank scene by concocting an interview with Friganza. The release reiterated Friganza’s comic persona as a large, aging chorus girl, told through the “voice” of a publicity-milled Trixie personality. In the release, Friganza claimed, “I used to be a tiny little thing, so thin that they hardly dared to trust me with a soda water straw. They were afraid I might slip into it and get drowned. …Showed even then they were saving me for the tank.” She described herself as the “human porpoise of the Winter Garden aquarium” and claimed:

> The chorus damsel is no more . . . Plumpness has settled down upon me, I have the settled look of a housewife going to market. All I need is a bonnet and a market basket. Fancy it . . . little Trixie, who could once have drifted through a keyhole. They’d have to take out a wall now.51

The Shuberts’ press agent captured the essence of Friganza’s cheerfully self-deprecating comedic persona. He not only reinforced Friganza’s reputation as a fat comedienne, by focusing on her fat performance in the show, but also perpetuated her image as an accessible, friendly, and outgoing personality who had no doubt that the world was fascinated by her egocentric stories. In fact, Friganza’s career-long strategy of self-promotion closely resembled the Shuberts’ savvy and professional in-house type of celebrity marketing, even prior to her initial affiliation with the Shuberts in 1907 for *The Orchid*. Friganza was a professional, effective publicity hound who allowed for few missteps in her career.

51 “The Passing Show of 1912,” In-house publicity release, typed manuscript, Shubert Archive.
In 1908, Friganza’s involvement in the women’s suffrage movement proved to be her singular publicity nightmare. Friganza explained her initial involvement in the suffrage movement from the viewpoint of a working woman, stating that she was “a taxpayer and wage earner” who objected to being “classed with felons, minors, and idiots.”\(^{52}\) Just prior to the November 1908 election, Friganza publicly announced her new political interests through an interview with an obliging *New York Telegraph*, which revealed that Friganza was “now a full-fledged ‘Suffragette’” who had contributed $50 to a local suffrage organization. She adopted the feminist rhetoric of the era, claiming, “I do not believe any man—at least any man I know—is any better fitted to form a political opinion than I am.” She also expressed her admiration for the “many women who have the courage to take the stand for their rights and to make this fight.”\(^{53}\) As an independent, self-reliant working woman, Friganza was probably sincere in her support of women’s suffrage. Nevertheless, her political stance was undoubtedly yoked to yet another opportunity for self-promotion.

Other promotional activity linked to women’s suffrage and the 1908 election support the idea that Friganza was at least partially motivated by self-interests. Within a day of her suffrage interview, *The New York Times* announced that theatre owner Percy Williams, in collaboration with National Progressive Women’s Suffrage Union, would have mock voting booths in his theatre lobbies on election day, so that female patrons could cast their votes on appropriately pale pink ballots. While the women’s organization

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\(^{52}\) *New York Telegraph* 3 Nov. 1910, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.

may have been seriously courting new members and Williams obviously was hoping to attract a large audience on election day, the overall concept of women casting meaningless ballots remained frivolous, as indicated by the feminine pink ballots and the newspaper’s comment that “every woman can practically make her own ticket by scratching as much as she pleases.”

It is probable that Friganza, a consummate opportunist, was aware of the mock voting booths in theatre around town and, combined with the public’s interest in the impending election, believed that she could garner some timely publicity for herself.

On October 29, 1908, Friganza joined a suffrage group that attempted to force a meeting with the mayor in City Hall. When they were refused entry into his office, the women gathered outside on Chambers Street and reportedly used a ladder in lieu of a speaking platform. One newspaper reported, “the attack on the mayor’s office had been heralded far and wide, and as it was the luncheon hour, thousands of men and boys gathered before city hall to witness possible disturbances.”

Friganza, who planned to speak at the gathering, dressed appropriately. A photo reveals her in a suit jacket and wide brimmed hat, and, quite surprisingly, without makeup (fig. 3.15). When she attempted to speak, Friganza was jeered by the crowd and, taken aback by the negative response, made a rapid retreat. At that point, Friganza’s suffrage work ended. The collision of Friganza’s publicity strategies with the cultural norms surrounding women’s place in society not only illustrates Friganza’s career management skills but also her

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Figure 3.15 Friganza speaking at the women’s suffrage rally on October 28, 1908

(Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
precarious balancing act between social anxieties about, and resistance to, women’s changing role in society and her own nontraditional employment as a working woman in popular entertainment.

Press coverage immediately following the rally appears to have been distributed before Friganza and her press agency fully realized the negative impact of her participation in the event. A boilerplate press release, accompanied by a large publicity photo of Friganza, appeared in the *Indianapolis News* the day after the rally. After parenthetically summarizing the suffrage fiasco, the bulk of the article addressed Friganza’s career:

> [Friganza] has been on the stage since 1889. She is the daughter of Irish and Spanish parents and was born in Cincinnati. For the last year she has been appearing in vaudeville, and in last winter’s season she was with Eddie Foy in ‘The Orchid.’ Previously she had appeared with success in ‘The Prince of Pilsen,’ ‘His Honor the Mayor,’ ‘Twiddle Twaddle,’ ‘The Chaperone,’ and ‘The Girl from Paris.’ She has played successfully in London and Paris.\(^{56}\)

Within a couple days, Friganza’s publicity machine went into overdrive in an attempt to ameliorate Friganza’s feminist stance and distance her from the event. Another Midwestern newspaper article, under the byline of Herbert Corey, treated Friganza’s suffrage appearance as a comic episode in which Friganza was the innocent victim in a plan hatched by her press agent. Making note of the fact that “her appearance as a suffragette was really for Art’s sake, as the young lady is now cutting up nightly in one of the Cohan shows on Broadway,” Corey’s description of Friganza’s participation is markedly similar to a Shubert press release in detail, tone, and content:

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The violence of her longing for woman’s rights is revealed by the fact that her press agent stage managed the affair. . . . She wore a big yellow sash with “Votes for Women” smeared all over it, and a yellow button bearing the same device in her very close fitting suit—note the close fitting part. . . . Miss Friganza was right in the hubbub, and the way she goo-gooed at Lieut. Kennel, the mayor’s bodyguard, and at Inspector Schmittberger, in charge of the detachment of 50 police who guarded the suffragettes, is described as sin. . . . When Miss Friganza got up to speak, they cheered her. They liked her looks, but the crowd of 10,000 didn’t care a rap about her sentiments. . . . [She] began to look about for her press agent. ‘I’ll show him what he gets for landing me in this sort of mess,’ she declared, as the cab rolled on. Oh yes. She recovered her temper in time to blow a kiss to Schmittberger.57

The article indicates that a damage control effort was in full force, extending out into the Midwest, within two days of Friganza’s ill-advised appearance. It reads as an in-house press release for several reasons. First, Friganza was portrayed as a flirtatious woman distracted by handsome men in the midst of a serious feminist activity, an image that fully supports her persona as a typically silly, rather than serious, woman. Secondly, the account is written from a decidedly male point of view, as exhibited by the derogatory use of “smeared” to describe the wording on her sash and the attention given to Friganza’s figure in the tight-fitting suit.

In the weeks and months following the event, Friganza’s press coverage continued to focus on her complex relationship to women’s suffrage. At times, the rhetoric became quite contradictory, as Friganza distanced herself from the failed rally at the same time that she attempted to clarify and justify her feminist politics. Additionally, Friganza clearly saw a need to reassure her female audience base that she was not a wild-eyed radical feminist but rather a middle-class American woman who shared their

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traditional ideas about women’s roles in society. At the time, Friganza was on a Midwestern tour with George M. Cohan in *The American Way*, and so her press coverage appears to have been shaped specifically for the more conservative ideas and values of the Midwest.

Sometimes the language and ideas attributed to Friganza were severe in their condemnation of the women involved in the suffrage movement. In a Kansas City interview, Friganza questioned the normalcy of the suffragists. Ironically, she claimed that they were after “the cheap publicity they can create,” a comment that came dangerously close to one of Friganza’s own motives. However, she also condemned the women as unnatural: “They’re women who don’t know what a home is. They have a room in a hotel or apartment house and never made a baby dress in their lives. They do freak things and their insincerity retards the work.” It is difficult to discern if the comments are really Friganza’s from an interview or a manufactured press release. At any rate, Friganza herself spent years in hotels as she worked and toured, and she never had children, so she never indulged in the motherly duty of sewing baby clothes. Even so, Friganza portrayed herself as a traditional married woman, despite her career and status as a divorcée. She also invoked supposedly traditional, Midwestern values in her facile redefinition of a true suffragist: “A woman that is a good chum, who sympathizes, and then who loves and makes the world right when a man’s in need. One that makes a home, truly lives and finds joy and beauty in all life and all real things.”58 By doing so, she reiterated her fictional persona as a supportive, loving wife and homemaker, and,

58 “No Love in Heart of the Suffragette,” *Kansas City Post* 24 Nov. 1908, Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.
combined with her condemnation of the politically active suffragists, completely
distanced herself from the movement.

But a month later, while appearing in Chicago, Friganza once more retooled her
opinion about women’s suffrage in order to appease the local audience base. This time,
she studiously avoided the movement itself and, instead, praised the serious, professional
methods of Jane Addams and the Chicago women’s clubs in their work that benefited
women. Friganza expressed her admiration for their use of publicity, noting that she
personally “welcomed publicity, for being an actress, it is the breath of my nostrils.”
Friganza’s press agent probably created the Chicago interview, since remarkably similar
versions of it appeared in at least two publications, issued four months apart. One edition
even included an insider joke, with Friganza supposedly saying, “I am a specialist in
press agents—in fact, I’m talking like one now.”

Friganza was still “talking” like a press agent in Fort Worth a full three months
after the incident, now playing the rally for its full comedic effect and solidifying the
press agent’s role as villain:

\[59\] “Fair Actress Works Hard for Suffrage Cause,” Unidentified Newspaper 30 Dec. 1908; and
\textit{Green Book} April 1909, both located in Trixie Friganza, vol. 220, RLC.
Recently I was shoved unwillingly into the suffragette movement over in New York, and was hustled around with that crowd of women who ought to have been cleaning house. What do they know about politics, and what good would it do them if they did? I was all right for a while and made a fine speech to the crowd in front of City Hall. But somebody hit me with a tomato, and then I got mad, defied the press agent and told the whole bunch what I thought of their lot. Now, wasn’t that a pretty trick for a press agent to pull off on me?60

As these press items show, Friganza’s supposed opinions about women’s suffrage and the women actively involved in the political movement became increasingly critical. In the last one, she argued that women’s primary social duties were custodial (i.e. housecleaning) and that they lacked the mental capacity for participating in political life. At the same time, the hostility was couched in typical Friganza humor, with herself as the victim of the joke, manipulated by the press agent, and pelted with a tomato by the mob. By now, her official response had devolved into a routine Friganza publicity spin, showcasing both her famous hot temper and good natured humor while finessing her political involvement.

Considering the actual, rather uneventful details of Friganza’s brief appearance at a single rally, the continuing press coverage seems excessive and overly reactionary. Since the items continued to appear in the newspapers over the course of several months and became increasingly derogatory towards the women involved in suffrage, they seem to have served several purposes. Despite the negative reaction to Friganza’s feminist politics, the publicity enhanced her public visibility and created an opportunity for extended press coverage during the tour of *The American Way*. The backpedaling

rhetoric used to distance Friganza from the political movement also reiterated Friganza’s fictional performance and public personas as a traditional, middle-class married woman, thus reasserting her popular status with a conservative audience base. The interviews appear to be the work of male press agents rather than actual interviews with Friganza, based on their hostile commentary and professional style; if so, they offered male press agents a means of expressing their own negative feelings about women’s suffrage through the mouthpiece of Friganza. The fact that we cannot ascertain the veracity of the interviews reveals the impermeable nature of Friganza’s public persona. A cynical reading of the incident would be that press agents, with or without Friganza’s knowing participation, orchestrated the event from beginning to end, including Friganza’s rally appearance, the initial negative public reaction, and the subsequent manufacture of “necessary” corrective press coverage.

However, it is more probable that Friganza contributed money and participated in the rally because she had a sincere interest in improving the status of American women, including herself as a working woman and taxpayer. And if so, Friganza was a woman only slightly ahead of her time. In 1908, women’s suffrage was an unpopular, controversial movement and acted as a lightning rod for cultural anxieties about gendered social roles. Very few women in polite society or the theatre were involved in 1908, but major changes occurred within the next two years. In 1909, Mary Shaw played the lead role in Elizabeth Robin’s play, *Votes for Women*, in New York. A major suffrage parade in 1910, well organized with marchers from numerous women’s groups and political districts, helped establish the movement as a mainstream concern. That parade set the
pattern and standard for all future events.\textsuperscript{61} By 1912, the Women’s Political Union included an Actresses Committee, which included the quintessential American Girl, Ethel Barrymore, and other prominent legitimate actresses.\textsuperscript{62} Women’s suffrage had become a mainstream cause and female performers’ careers were no longer in danger due to political involvement.

The other fat comedienne faces the same dilemma as Friganza regarding women’s suffrage. Glenn acknowledges the difficulty for female performers, noting the “risks involved in taking sides in a divisive political campaign” and cites several popular entertainers, including May Irwin and Trixie Friganza, as women who did take the risk.\textsuperscript{63} However, May Irwin did not become actively involved until much later in the campaign. In 1916, during performances of her play, \textit{33 Washington Square}, Irwin had “evangelists for women’s rights lecture the audience between acts.” \textsuperscript{64} According to biographer Betty Lee, Marie Dressler actively resisted the women’s movement, arguing that women were “never devised to steer the ship of state or to go to the polls and cast the ballot with the men.” Lee makes the case that Dressler, a theatrical pet of New York socialites, only came around under pressure from her society friends, noting that Dressler was “somewhat shaken, in fact, when the influential and formidable Mrs. Oliver H. P.


\textsuperscript{62} Glenn 136.

\textsuperscript{63} Glenn 137 and 139.

\textsuperscript{64} MacArthur 155.
Belmont . . . led a suffrage parade down Fifth Avenue on May 4, 1912."65 It was only years later, in 1919, that Dressler became politically active as president of the Chorus Equity union, negotiating on behalf of the chorus girls. There is no indication that the other great comic star, Eva Tanguay, was involved in the women’s political movement during her career and there is no reason to believe that the rebellious, greatly successful “I Don’t Care” girl cared about suffrage. As for Friganza, there is no surviving evidence that she was ever again seriously involved in the women’s movement, although she incorporated a song into her act in 1913. It was titled “Indian Suffragette” and was described as “a most amusing burlesque on the advanced woman sort of thing.”66

Despite Friganza’s failed foray into women’s suffrage, she lived her life within a supportive, woman-centered sphere. While her three marriages were all short-lived, Friganza’s primary long-term relationship was with her sister, who not only worked with Friganza, performing minor roles, but also lived with her throughout most of their adult lives. Friganza maintained lifelong friendships with her fellow fat comediennees. For example, although she was incapacitated by severe arthritis and bed-ridden at the time, Friganza made the difficult effort to attend Tanguay’s funeral in 1947; several years later, her friend Sophie Tucker visited the ailing Friganza to help celebrate her eighty-first birthday (fig. 3.16). Friganza was a lifelong practicing Catholic and, after her sister’s death and her own health decline, Friganza lived with the Dominican sisters at the Flintridge (CA) Sacred Heart Academy, an institution that served as both a convent and

65 Lee 86.

Figure 3.16  Trixie Friganza and Sophie Tucker celebrating Friganza’s 81st birthday

(Photo from unidentified newspaper dated December 1952, Trixie Friganza clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library)
private girls’ school, from 1939 until her death in 1955. According to Friganza, the arrangement was by choice rather than necessity, having planned financially for her retirement.\(^{67}\)

Friganza’s strong affinity with women was reflected in her career choices as well, especially her personas and strategic cultivation of women as her primary niche audience. The most remarkable aspect of Friganza’s fat comedienne persona was its ordinariness. Friganza didn’t perform an eccentric, grotesque, or demeaning version of femininity; her fat comedienne was feminine and remained attractive and likeable. Also, she did not transgress social expectations about women’s sexuality and propriety. Instead, she maintained a sense of self-respect for herself and American womanhood, even in her self-deprecating humor. Her fat comedienne was a lady, one who could be forgiven, even indulged, for her own excessive indulgence in simple pleasures.

Friganza’s performance persona was actually an inventive amalgam of the three traditional versions of femininity that the other fat comedienes resisted. Friganza retained the pretty, compliant aspects of the chorus girl; she continued to exhibit the healthy, energetic, proper demeanor of the American Girl; and she incorporated the persona of a traditionally dependent good wife into her vaudeville act, even though she didn’t have a George Burns-type husband either onstage or in real life. Friganza’s

\(^{67}\) See Hedda Hopper, “Trixie Friganza at 75 Lives in Cloistered Place,” *Los Angeles Times* n. d.; “The Show Still Goes On,” unidentified newspaper Dec. 1952; and “More Than 700 Attend Trixie Friganza’s Funeral,” *Los Angeles Times* 3 March 1955 n. p., all located in Trixie Friganza Clippings File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library. The details of Friganza’s financial arrangement with Flintridge Academy are unknown. According to Sister Mary Hilary Miller, in e-mail correspondence dated 18 Feb. 2005, the academy has little documentation about Friganza’s years there, but “as far as [they] can determine she did not leave a ‘fortune’ to the school.”
chattering, charming “illogical logic” found in many of her publicity interviews followed the formula of the “dumb Dora,” a female type that was prevalent throughout the vaudeville era and perfected by Gracie in the late 1920s. In a 1909 interview, Friganza announced the loss of eight pounds as the “most important piece of news” and shared her secret. She stood up for twenty minutes after every meal, which “worked like a charm.”

By providing a report on her weight loss and illogical diet regimen, Friganza managed to simultaneously address the problem of weight management, a serious concern shared by her female readers and spectators, and to trivialize the issue, treating it as a joke for the enjoyment of both men and women. By doing so, Friganza promoted herself as an easily identifiable comedic woman, i.e. a silly, illogical, entertaining—an endearing—ditz who eased women’s anxieties about their own imperfections.

Friganza’s strategy was to develop as broad an audience base as possible, but also to cultivate a strong niche audience base of middle-class, middle-aged women. And so, in her vaudeville act, Friganza performed a broad comedy, singing and dancing for the entertainment of both men and women. However, she shaped her comic monologues to appeal specifically to the women in her audience. In an unusually frank publicity item, Friganza shared her trade secrets for success with female audiences, noting that she made it her business to “compel women to laugh.” Her six points focused on commonalities between herself and her audience, although Friganza used a light touch of self-deprecation in her presentation of self:

Friganza’s strategy was based on three fundamental principles. First, by presenting herself as envious of the women in the audience and making fun of her own supposedly “gross” appearance, Friganza encouraged her female audience’s sense of superiority and complacency. She specifically played to a woman who appeared to have never seriously suffered romantic disappointment or pain, thus setting a light tone that reinforced the “just kidding” aspect of her comedy. Secondly, Friganza established a common bond of understanding with her audience, perpetuating the fiction that she too was a married woman who knew the demands and difficulties of husbands. She created an intimacy with her audience, encouraging a sense of “just between us” and women united against a common enemy in the war of the sexes. Friganza also played to her female audiences’ fears of the aging process, further developing an intimate relationship with them through the shared secrets of female artifice—women’s dependence upon makeup and hair color.

to preserve a sense of youth and beauty. And finally, Friganza’s routine depended upon the believability of her persona. She had to appear sincere and spontaneous rather than insincerely practiced.

Friganza’s act, focused on her own excessive weight and self-deprecating acceptance of her feminine fallibilities, did little to actually challenge the prevailing social norms or status quo. Instead, she reinforced the cultural ideas about the normalcy of middle-class marriage, in which women enjoyed security and comfort, both financial and social. At the same time, she offered much appreciated comic relief, diminishing women’s frustrations about men and the inherent constraints imposed upon women within early twentieth-century marriage. Historian Susan A. Glenn makes the distinction in political terms, arguing that Friganza’s act was “female rather than feminist in the sense that it did not directly challenge the status quo of gender orientation or imply the need for political participation.”

Every aspect of Friganza’s career, from her persona to her career management choices, is emblematic of the larger cultural contradictions surrounding American women during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Her performance persona was firmly grounded in traditional versions of femininity, but she performed it within the context of the new, transgressive fat comedienne type. Her persona reinforced the status quo in nearly every respect, although it stood in direct opposition to Friganza’s actual life as a self-reliant, independent working woman. Her support of women’s suffrage became

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70 Glenn 59.
extremely problematic for Friganza, due to the timing of her involvement and the possible negative ramifications to her career based on a fictional traditional femininity.

All of the fat comediennes were products of the culture in which they performed. Whether they challenged or reinforced the status quo through their performances, all of them worked in response to the gendered cultural expectations and demands with which they had been inculcated. Consequently, the fat comediennes naturally performed a wide range of femininity, from Tanguay’s rebellious sexuality to Dressler’s feminine romantic trapped inside a masculine physicality to Irwin’s racialized performance of male violence, as they negotiated for a place for themselves within popular entertainment.

Within that framework, Friganza represents the new working woman who looked forward in her own ambitions and career plan, but nevertheless struggled with her past indoctrination that caused her to still value and vicariously pursue the traditional female roles within her culture.
CHAPTER 4

ETHEL WATERS AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES: CRAFTING A CAREER IN THE PRE-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

Black female performers of the vaudevillian era not only experienced the routine challenges encountered by nontraditional white female performers, but also faced the challenge of crafting careers within the racially prejudiced climate that existed prior to the Civil Rights era. Race complicated their negotiation for a place in popular entertainment to such an extent that it often took precedence over gender. This was especially true for black women who performed for predominately white audiences, who responded to black performance through deeply ingrained racial preconceptions about African Americans. Prevailing ideas about primitive or excessive black sexuality and violence further impeded black female performers’ control over their personas and artistic achievements, to such an extent that an analysis of black female personas is essentially an examination of the confines of racial stereotypes.

This chapter is a case study of the career strategies and tactics used by Ethel Waters to craft a longterm career within the constrictions imposed upon her by the popular entertainment industry, through long-established theatrical stereotypes, and her predominately white audiences, through deeply embedded racial preconceptions. My analysis focuses on a pivotal performance, Waters’ dramatic debut in *Mamba’s*
Daughters, but encompasses her entire career and ever-evolving performance persona. It is my intention that a detailed, incisive examination of Waters’ career will reveal the full complexity of the black female performers’ compromised ability to control her own self-representation, self-definition, and self-expression within a conflicted, racist society.

On January 3, 1939, Ethel Waters made her Broadway debut as a dramatic actress in Dorothy and DuBose Heywards’ southern melodrama, Mamba’s Daughters. Waters thus joined a number of starring actresses who performed on Broadway during the 1938-39 season, including Katharine Cornell in No Time for Comedy, Katharine Hepburn in The Philadelphia Story, and Tallulah Bankhead in The Little Foxes. Waters was well aware that she had crossed both a professional and color line that year.1 Recalling her opening night, Waters proudly reflected: “While the carriage trade was arriving outside, I sat at the [Empire Theatre] dressing table where all the great actresses, past and present, had sat as they made up their faces…Maude Adams, Ethel Barrymore, Helen Hayes, Katherine Cornell, Lynn Fontaine, and all the others.”2

Mamba’s Daughters, directed by Guthrie McClintic, had a large, mixed-race cast of twenty-seven performers including Georgette Harvey, Willie Bryant, Canada Lee, Alberta Hunter, and José Ferrer; an ensemble of thirteen actors portraying plantation workers completed the cast. Prior to this production, Waters had enjoyed a successful career as a musical star, combining tours on the black vaudeville circuit with appearances

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1 Waters’ career advance into drama is highlighted by the fact that Swingin’ the Dream, a black musical version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream starring Louis Armstrong, ‘Moms’ Mabley, and Butterfly McQueen, was also running on Broadway; at an earlier time in her career, Waters might have been a shoe-in for a lead role in that musical production.

2 Ethel Waters, His Eye is on the Sparrow (New York: Bantam, 1952): 303.
in New York nightclubs and musical revues. In addition, she had become a popular blues recording star (fig. 4.1). Despite these substantial successes, the dramatic role in a Broadway play marked a giant step up for Waters. She claimed that it was a miracle that “they would even consider her, the heat-waving torch gal, for the powerful part.”

Waters’ dramatic performance in Mamba’s Daughters is emblematic of the artistic challenges faced by black performers who played to predominately white audiences during the pre-Civil Rights era. An examination of the text and Waters’ performance, viewed within the context of her longterm career, reveals a complex cultural web of race-based beliefs, assumptions, and expectations by white America that severely hampered its ability to respond to black experience, or the expression of that experience through performance, outside of a deeply ingrained racist paradigm. Like other black performers of the era, Waters was caught in an impossible dilemma when it came to self-expression. She wanted to articulate her own authentic (i.e. individual and specific) black experience, but she played to a predominately white audience that was mired in a cultural miasma of racial stereotyping and primitivism. The disconnect between Waters’ intentions and the spectators’ assumptions resulted in diametrically opposing ideas about representation of a black authenticity.

Waters’ dramatic debut reveals the layered complexities of the challenge she faced. The Heywards, well-meaning liberal playwrights, naively assumed that they could create a black character who transcended minstrelsy traditions and stereotypes. Waters used the character in an attempt to renegotiate black authenticity and representation with white audiences and critics, both of whom were conditioned by decades of racist

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Figure 4.1. Advertisement proclaiming Waters the “Best Blues Singer in America.”

*Chicago Defender* 5 Nov. 1921: 7. (Courtesy of <www.indiana.edu/~jah/teaching/2004_03/sources/ex2_waters...>)
theatrical stereotyping. Theatre critic Brooks Atkinson, who tried to evaluate Waters’ performance without conceding to racially based lowered expectations, found himself in the midst of a controversy. Everyone involved—the playwrights, Waters, audiences, and critics—approached the production with good intentions, but none recognized the complexity of Waters’ dilemma as a black female actor. Her dramatic debut serves as a window into the complex racial climate of the theatrical world of the pre-Civil Rights era, especially as respects the ongoing negotiation for control of black representation between performer and audience.

Waters’ performance as Hagar proved to be a pivotal turning point in her career, as she moved from blues and musical revue performer to dramatic actress specializing in matriarchal and “mammy” roles. After *Mamba’s Daughters*, she appeared as Petunia, a wronged but loyal wife, in the stage and movie productions of *Cabin in the Sky* in the early 1940s; a grandmother in Elia Kazan’s 1949 movie *Pinky*, which earned Waters a best supporting actress nomination; and as Beulah, a domestic in her own television show in 1950. Today, she is best remembered for her performance as Berenice, a classic “mammy” role, in Carson McCuller’s play (1950) and movie (1952), *The Member of the Wedding*. Despite Waters’ attempt to transcend stereotyping constraints, she managed to extend her career by two decades only by surrendering to them.

Waters’ musical career had declined dramatically after the 1933-34 season, in which she peaked as a high-salaried, popular performer in Irving Berlin’s *As Thousands Cheer* (fig. 4.2). Between that show and *Mamba’s Daughters* six years later, Waters’ only noteworthy appearance was as a special guest in the 1937 *Cotton Club Express*
Fig. 4.2. Waters as a musical revue star in *As Thousands Cheer* in 1933.

(Photo from private collection of Peach Pittenger)
revue. One reason for the decline was the effect of the Depression on the music business. The recording industry was devastated and the black vaudeville circuit Theatre Owners Booking Association ceased operations in 1930, with the result that many musical performers’ careers did not survive the decade. Waters’ own opportunities in black musical revues declined. In addition to the dire economic conditions, Waters, in her mid-thirties and fighting a losing battle with weight, was past her prime as a sexy musical star. Waters’ problems, however, were not just economic or personal.

Two decades earlier, during the Harlem Renaissance, black artists, writers, and performers all faced the same dilemma. Should black artists create literature, music, art, and theatre that derived from and spoke to black identity, or should they sublimate their individual, specific black experiences in favor of art that addressed a broader, more universal (i.e. not racially centered) human identity? Was universal art created by black artists even a possibility in a racially divided country? And to whom should they direct their art? Richard Wright declared that black artists had only two choices—to either help blacks mold a much-needed new consciousness or, by addressing whites, to merely “continue begging the question of black humanity.” For most artists, however, the dilemma was much more complicated, due to the artists’ own identity issues, artistic purposes, financial needs, and desire to be recognized and accepted by white American society. As a result, W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness—self awareness

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through the eyes of others, feeling one’s “twoness” as “an American, a Negro”—emerged as the core dilemma for the Harlem Renaissance generation. The artists of the 1920s grappled with the impossible challenge of expressing an authentic (i.e. specific, individual) black identity and experience within the confines of a divisive society that imposed its own racial beliefs, prejudices, and stereotypes onto black Americans.

In 1939, Waters still struggled with that same dilemma. Even though she believed that the role of Hagar offered a rare opportunity for artistic expression of her authentic self, it is equally true that, with this role, Waters traded one racial stereotype for another in order to prolong her career. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues, only two categories of representation were available to black women:

> At the bottom of the social hierarchy is the black woman . . . manipulated as sexual object or as servant . . . [T]wo images predominate: the black woman who is regarded as sexually available and equated with the prostitute—‘Brown sugar’: and the desexualized mammy of the Aunt Jemima type.7

As a young musical performer, Waters was famous for her tall, rangy, toothsome beauty, which she often used to create a glamourous, sophisticated public persona (fig. 4.3). In 1939, her character of Hagar fits within Pieterse’s framework as a transitional role between prescribed racial representations, with Waters moving from a musical “brown sugar” to a dramatic “mammy.” Waters and her supporters attempted to counter the

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Fig. 4.3. Ethel Waters circa 1920s  (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
stereotype by portraying her as an immensely talented natural-born actress whose performance transcended race. Yet Waters’ achievement was limited at best, hobbled by not only the Heywards’ lurid script and stereotypical characters, but also her own untrained acting method and the racial climate in which she performed in 1939. *Mamba’s Daughters* appealed to a voyeuristic white audience, whose idea of black authenticity was based on a long history of racial stereotypes. The audience’s understanding stood in direct opposition to Waters’ own ideas, which resisted a racially centered identity but included race as an important component of the whole. Depending upon one’s point of view, Waters’ Hagar could be perceived as either a fully realized dramatic character or a dangerously thrilling and fearful racial stereotype.

Waters expected that the “staggering emotional impact [of] *Mamba’s Daughters*, written by a Southern white man and his wife” would be the vehicle that earned her a place alongside the great Broadway actresses who had also performed at the Empire, several of whom were regarded as first ladies of the American theatre. However, Waters’ timing for her Broadway debut was less than auspicious. 1939 was also the year that Hattie MacDaniel won an Oscar for her quintessential Mammy role in *Gone with the Wind* (fig. 4.4). In fact, Waters and *Mamba’s Daughter* had more in common with MacDaniel and *Gone with the Wind* than Katharine Hepburn and *The Philadelphia Story*.

Dorothy and Du Bose Heyward’s script—a simplistic, sensationalistic melodrama that invokes, and depends upon, racial stereotypes—seems an unlikely vehicle for Waters’ dramatic debut. The story spans twenty years, from the 1910s to 1930s, and is set in South Carolina. Hagar, a large, slow-witted woman, is convicted of assault and

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8 Waters, *His Eye*, 303.
Fig. 4.4. Hattie MacDaniel as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, 1939.

(Photo from private collection of Peach Pittenger)
“sentenced” to a plantation in the Sea Islands where she works as a field hand. She provides money for her daughter Lissa, who is being raised by Hagar’s own mother, Mamba, in Charleston. Hagar and Lissa have little contact until Lissa, as a young woman, visits the plantation before embarking on a singing career in New York. During the visit, Lissa is raped by Gilly, one of the plantation men. When Hagar and Mamba conceal the resulting pregnancy (including the birth and death of the baby), Gilly blackmains them. Hagar, simplistically noble and impulsively violent, kills Gilly and then commits suicide in order to preserve Lissa’s reputation and career.

The plantation mise-en-scène, anachronistic for a play set in the early 1900s, provides an odd mix of romanticized Dixie life filled with “happy darkies” who live low lives of immorality and violence; the plantation is a safe place away from the evils of the world and, at the same time, a world unto itself, rife with crime, passion, double-crossings, and danger. The action of the play includes a rousing church service, gospel singing, dancing, a craps games, and the obligatory razor fight. Even as the Heywards attempted to write an honest play about black life, they reproduced and reinforced the prevailing stereotypes, not fully recognizing the complexity of racial representations of the era. Their 1927 Broadway endeavor, Porgy, also employed racial stereotyping such as superstitious characters, gambling, and spirituals. Black critics found both Porgy and its offshoot, George and Ira Gershwin’s 1935 Porgy and Bess, problematic due to the outsider status of the white authors. Hall Johnson criticized Gershwin’s inauthentic black
music, supposedly based on trips to Charleston for local color. He also found fault with the stereotypical characters, which were “imprisoned in white Broadway’s conceptions of black culture.”

The Heywards’ theatrical representations of black life, derived from minstrelsy’s comedic and musical depiction of plantation life, had been present in plays and musicals for decades. By the 1880s, the ubiquitous Uncle Tom’s Cabin revivals often featured nostalgic musical numbers performed by large plantation choruses. In addition to the romanticized plantation setting, blacks were theatrically represented as dangerous and violent, as exhibited in the popular coon songs of the late nineteenth century. Charles Trevathan’s “The Bully Song,” sung by May Irwin in the Broadway show The Widow Jones in 1895, centered on a razor fight between two black men: “Razors ‘gun a flyin’/ niggers ‘gun to squawk,…/When I got through with bully, a doctor and a nurse/Wa’nt no good to dat nigger, so they put him in a hearse.” The tradition of racial stereotyping continued in the early twentieth century with Al Jolson’s performance of the plantation song “Swanee” in 1919, the musical revue Africana’s portrayal of the “hypothetical delights of a Dixie paradise” in 1927, and Porgy and Bess in 1935, which featured a deadly craps game as well as the character of Sportin’ Life, a modern-day version of minstrelsy’s urban, craps-shooting Zip Coon character.

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Heywards as a serious representation of black life and characters, *Mamba’s Daughters* nevertheless retained a strong element of derivative melodrama and racist stereotypes, rooted in minstrelsy and black musical revues.

The stereotypes were enhanced by the black characters’ language, which was derived from both the indigenous Gullah (Creole English) dialect of the Sea Islands and a theatricalized, nonrealistic black dialect. The Heywards made no attempt to replicate the Gullah dialect; for instance, they simply noted in the stage directions that Gilly’s language is “halfway between Gullah and white folks’ talk.” But they wrote his lines in standard English. In contrast, the Heywards specified the non-Gullah black dialect, with the result that the familiar black stereotypes are further reinforced. The theatrical black dialect is exaggerated, as shown by Mamba’s line: “I bring dis chile up different from you. Since I been workin’ wid white folks I see how de white chillun is raised an’ I gib dis chile a bath ebery day.”¹¹ The combination of dialect and subject matter creates an image of blacks who are ignorant and less civilized than whites; Mamba not only speaks improper English, but she is also unaware of the standards of hygiene until whites demonstrate them for her.

Based on the music, as well as the focus on black characters, a strong argument can be made that the drama is actually a variation of early black musicals. A radio figures prominently in the play, with characters gathered around it in several scenes, listening to lengthy “live” musical broadcasts. Also, live music and dance are featured, with the plantation characters serving as chorus. Gospel singing is integral to the

elaborate church meeting scene. Not surprisingly, critic Brooks Atkinson found the musical numbers hackneyed and predictable, noting that they were “staged like scenes in a stereotyped Harlem revue and in the inevitable low comedy and frenzy of the spiritual singing in a ramshackle darkychurch.”\textsuperscript{12} Atkinson’s criticism suggests that the purpose of the musical interludes was to provide white audiences with a familiar element of entertainment, imposing aspects of black musical revues onto the black melodrama.

Nevertheless, Waters attempted to use the songs as acting devices for conveying Hagar’s deep feelings. During a clandestine, late night trip home, Hagar finds a moment of tender happiness as she rocks her small, sleeping daughter and sings a lullaby. Hagar and young Lissa are alone on stage and the visual image of a rare, intimate moment between mother and child is established prior to commencement of the song. According to stage directions, Hagar begins to hum “Motherless Child,” then sings in a low voice, gradually building in volume while retaining the lullaby cadence.\textsuperscript{13} The scene is significant because it reveals a nurturing, loving, and maternal side of Hagar, who is essentially an absent mother in the play. Hagar’s alienation and loneliness is also evident in her rendition of Jerome Kern’s mournful ballad, “Lonesome Walls,” which was performed as a full-scale musical number. Waters delivered it as a solo, supported by the plantation chorus on the refrain. Despite the musical staging, the song served as dramatic dialogue and a means of character development. The stage directions indicate that it “should emerge casually, in the folk manner, and should start almost upon a conversational note.”

\textsuperscript{13} Heyward 89.
are interspersed between the stanzas, further emphasizing the dramatic purpose of the
song. The Heywards also provided directions for the emotional arc of the song, which
laments a woman’s loss of man and child; each stanza includes acting instructions such as
“pleadingly” or “sadly, with resignation.”

Even though Waters relied upon her well-established musical talent to help her in
the dramatic role, its impact upon an audience cannot be dismissed. Her career as a blues
singer, which predates her rise to stardom in black revues, proved that she excelled in
delivery of powerfully emotional songs. Rudolph Fisher described her pre-Harlem
Renaissance performance for a black audience at Edmond’s nightclub:

Here a tall brown-skin girl, unmistakably the one guaranteed in
the song to make a preacher lay his Bible down, used to sing and
dance her own peculiar numbers, vesting them with her own
originality…She knew her importance, too…She would stride with great
leisure and self-assurance to the center of the floor, stand there with a half-
contemptuous nonchalance, and wait. All would become silent at once.
Then she’d begin her song, genuine blues, which for all the humorous
lines, emanated tragedy and heartbreak.

Fisher’s reminiscence evokes a vivid image of Waters’ strong, self-confident stage
presence, as well as her emotionally open delivery. The performance circumstances—a
Harlem nightclub and all-black clientele—provided the best possible opportunity for
Waters’ artistic self-expression without the double consciousness imposed by the
presence of white listeners.

14 Heyward 114-6.
393-98.
By 1933, Waters had begun to sing for predominately white audiences in black musical revues and was aware of the challenge she faced as a black performer. In *As Thousands Cheer*, she performed Irving Berlin’s “Suppertime,” a song in which a woman prepares supper for her husband who, unknown to her, has been lynched. Waters wrote, “In singing it, I was telling my comfortable, well-fed, well-dressed listeners about my people.”\(^\text{16}\) Her comment encapsulates Waters’ position within the double-consciousness bind: as she sang of a black experience, attempting to convey her own concept of authentic black identity, she was fully aware that her audience viewed the performance through a white perspective. Six years later, Waters encountered a similar situation in *Mamba’s Daughters*, in which she used a “genuine blues” song to reveal Hagar’s feelings of loss and heartbreak to a predominately white audience. Double consciousness is rarely an “all-or-nothing” phenomenon; Waters, like all black artists, operated within a complex system of creativity—striving for self-awareness and expression, resisting the otherness and alienation caused by double consciousness, and always attempting to renegotiate her black authenticity with white audiences.

The concept of an authentic black experience, theatricalized for a white audience, has a long American history that often includes racial stereotypes of blacks as primitives. A 1895 production of *Black America*, which depicted scenes of life on a plantation, was reported to be performed by black non-actors who just acted naturally. David Krasner notes, “Although [the production was] falsely conceived, whites had every reason to

believe that they were viewing something authentic yet benign.”¹⁷ By the 1920s, white audiences had developed a deep fascination with “the primitive.” White New Yorkers were often drawn to the Harlem nightclubs by the supposed primitivism of black performers, who offered the thrilling potential of a contagious loss of control at any moment. In 1930, George Tichenor wrote about the joys of “slumming:”

[W]e love the rich human-ness of Negro art, its earthy saltiness. It is also characteristic and enjoyable that the emotions of both audience and performers are always on hairtrigger. . . . If the booming drum should move the rhythm faster, much faster . . . until the last restriction broke . . .¹⁸

Tichenor’s unfinished sentence implies a potential for total abandonment of civilized behavior on the part of audience and performer. Yet, he concluded with the observation that the audience returned to its original state: “staid, proper and a community pillar.”¹⁹

The nightclub patrons experienced a vicarious thrill, driven by the possibility that a performer, in a “hairtrigger” emotional state, might lose all inhibitions and connect with an authentic primitivism. The phenomenon of “slumming” was based on a split consciousness in the white spectator’s mind. Although fully aware that the performance was theatricalized, the voyeurs accepted it as an authentic representation of black experience; at the same time, they were aware of the potential for a real “authentic” experience to erupt, with art and life then becoming indistinguishable. Thus the audience was essentially duped by its own racism, failing to realize that the “exotic primitive” existed only in its own mind.


¹⁹ Tichenor 490.
During the 1920s, this layered racial stereotyping and split consciousness among whites was present in the theatre as well as Harlem nightclubs. As David Krasner notes, “Modernism promoted the idea of ‘authentic’ African Americans onstage as opposed to white minstrel imitations in blackface,” yet “the [modernist] image was based on racist presumptions.”

Glenda Gill argues that white playwrights were inspired by singer Josephine Baker’s “exotic primitive” mystique and that both Eugene O’Neill and Paul Green capitalized on the stereotype in their plays for black actors.

In 1939, the Heywards struggled with the same challenges that O’Neill faced with *The Emperor Jones*. In both instances, white playwrights attempted to break black stereotypes and examine a common aspect of the human experience through black characters. Charles Gilpin, who originally played Brutus Jones, was well aware of the inherent racism of the play. O’Neill biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb report that Gilpin, who “had suddenly grown finicky about using the word ‘nigger’ (called for by the script) was rewriting the role” and “substituting ‘black baby’ and other terms he considered more genteel.” O’Neill replaced Gilpin with a more compliant Paul Robeson when the show moved to London. Paul Robeson argued that O’Neill’s play was an “exultant tragedy of the disintegration of a human soul.” Robeson revealed that he himself was caught in the racist logic embedded in the primitivism vogue, noting that Jones threw off the layers of civilization (presumably white) as he “return[ed] to the

\footnote{Krasner 19.}


primitive soil from which he (racially) came.” Primitivism assumed that blacks were naturally closer to an uncivilized, less evolved state of being, which supported racist beliefs in black inferiority. As a popular artistic aesthetic and social concept, it permeated the American culture. A photograph of Waters illustrates the subtle, contradictory nature of primitivism’s inherent racism (fig. 4.5). Although Waters appears polished and sophisticated, complete with styled hair, makeup and jewelry, she is posed behind an arrangement of palm leaves that partially conceal her nude body but still fully reveal a naked breast. As a beautiful black woman, she is both modestly civilized and naturally primitive. The appeal of the photograph would have been the contrast between the apparently respectable woman and the transgressive nudity of a black female body.

Plays such as O’Neill’s that attempted to reveal universal truths through primitive black characters could never completely overcome white audience’s racially-filtered responses. Black actors confronted that fact each time they performed for white audience, whether or not they consciously acknowledged it. And despite Waters’ belief in the authenticity of her performance, she was caught in the crux of an impossible, irresolvable cultural paradox.

Waters’ negotiation of black authenticity in *Mamba’s Daughters* was complicated by the Heywards’ attempt to create a complex, fully developed character that went beyond racial stereotype. Hagar is described as a “young woman of large proportions, unusually tall, unusually broad and giving an immediate impression of great strength. Above her superb body is a pleasant, childlike face.” Carl Van Vechten, well-known

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24 Heyward 19.
Fig. 4.5. Ethel Waters in a sophisticated primitive portrait, 1935. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
for his photographs of Harlem Renaissance personalities, made a portrait of Waters in the role of Hagar, which captures aspects of the character that are not readily evident in the script or contemporary reviews (fig. 4.6) Waters, in costume, is seated in front of a draped backdrop. The composition of the photo conveys a pensive mood: bowed head, slumped shoulders, clasped hands held in her lap. The photo evokes images of loneliness, sorrow, and quiet resignation. Although the photograph is effective, it cannot be considered an accurate representation of Waters’ Hagar because it is posed outside of the scope of the performance. The woman in the photograph is not large, strong, or childlike, but rather Van Vechten’s interpretation of the inner sorrow of the character.

The script soon makes it apparent that Hagar is childishly slow-witted and quick tempered, which results in a character dichotomy—both a gentle giant who is morally good and a dangerous woman whose presence is powerfully threatening. In fact, the character is reminiscent of Lenny in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, which opened on Broadway in 1937. Both characters are giants of powerful physical strength who don’t fully realize their destructive potential. Hagar also evokes images of Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas in the novel *Native Son*, which was published in 1940, then dramatized by Paul Green, John Houseman, and Orson Welles in 1941. Both Hagar and Bigger are victimized African Americans who respond violently to a world that is beyond their

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25 *Mamba’s Daughters* is based on the Heywards' 1929 novel of the same name. However, it was substantially revised when adapted for the stage, with the minor character of Hagar reshaped and made the protagonist of the piece. It is possible that Steinbeck’s novel, published while the Heywards were in the process of adaptation, influenced the character revisions for Hagar.
Fig. 4.6. Carl Van Vechten’s portrait of Waters as Hagar, 1939. (Photo courtesy of Karl Priebe Collection, Marquette University)
understanding or control, but while Hagar appears to be a dramatic representation of black Southern life in all its pathos, Bigger Thomas is a more fully developed psychological character. Through him, Wright indicts a racist society.

Despite the Heywards’ intentions, they were only partially able to transcend racial stereotypes of the era. In 1933, Sterling Brown identified the five main black stereotypes in American fiction: “the contented slave, the comic Negro, the exotic primitive, the tragic mulatto, and the brute nigger.” Most of these types are present in Mamba’s Daughters; the ensemble includes a plantation mammy (“contented slave”), promiscuous black women (“exotic primitives”), a hypocritical preacher (“the comic Negro”), and a citified con artist and rapist (“the brute nigger”). Despite Hagar’s relative complexity, she can be viewed as a hybrid stereotype, embodying the “mammy” (or nurturing matriarch) and “brute nigger.” Hagar’s “mammy” is masculinized; despite her love and dedication, Hagar is an absent mother, fulfilling her parental role as breadwinner, provider, and, in the end, fierce protector and avenger—all roles typically fulfilled by fathers. Hagar’s violent behavior invokes the “brute nigger” stereotype, which is traditionally masculine: a primitive, violent man who lacks elemental civilization and lives by physical violence. The Heywards themselves were unable to escape the deeply embedded racial stereotypes, conflating two gendered racial types into the character of Hagar.

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26 Pieterse 152.
Apparently it was the innovative and dangerous characterization of a masculinized, “brute mammy” that thrilled white Broadway audiences. The stage directions for a fight scene call for a melodramatic visible transformation when Hagar is provoked into violence, so that she becomes a sort of Jekyll and Hyde character:

In her distressed, childlike face there grows slowly an expression of such savage hate and rage that Gilly’s jaw drops and he shrinks back against the wall, his knees all but giving under him. …Hagar is upon him. Has him around the throat. He beats wildly against her…Hagar’s back to the audience, her great shoulders arched by the power of her grip. Gilly’s arms cease to annoy her. They feebly beat the air.\textsuperscript{27}

The second violent encounter between Hagar and Gilly, which ends with his murder, has a similar arc. It begins with Hagar slowly and deliberately approaching Gilly with “murder in her eye.” Then the scene develops into an increasingly violent confrontation in which Hagar struggles with Gilly, flings him across the room, and eventually kills him with her bare hands. The scene is staged in relative darkness (the lamps having been destroyed during the struggle); Hager’s hands “close around his throat and their figures sway together into the surrounding blackness.” Finally, with the sound of “a brief, dreadful gasping for breath,” Gilly is murdered.\textsuperscript{28} It is Hagar’s violence in these scenes that distinguish \textit{Mamba’s Daughters} from numerous other romanticized race plays set in Dixie.

Waters’ acting style, which she claimed was nothing more than a sensory recall of the violence in her own life, further complicated the authenticity issue for both Waters and her white spectators. She claimed that, as an untrained actress, she lived the scenes

\textsuperscript{27} Heyward 130-1.

\textsuperscript{28} Heyward 164.
rather than acted them. For each performance, she invoked sensory recall of events in her own life. She once said, “I have no acting technique. I act instinctively. That’s why I can’t play any role that isn’t based on something in my life.”

Other black actors of the era also eschewed formal training. Canada Lee, who played Bigger Thomas, stated, “I never studied acting . . . What could a black man study in acting school, anyway? ‘How yuh boss, yas suh boss.’”

Waters’ acting apparently blurred the lines between performance and reality during the fight scenes. Susannah McCorkle relates a harrowing account of Waters’ acting experience:

[S]he simply ‘lived’ her part over and over, giving everything she had every night. A telling dressing-room interview . . . describes her as shivering with fatigue after the final curtain. “It’s made me feel cold and numb, and I don’t feel anything any more. . . . We really fight onstage. I don’t know how to play-fight. We get hurt . . . I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The interview could be chalked up to actor bravado except that Waters actually had a lifetime of violent experiences to call upon. In her autobiographies, Waters recalled her hardscrabble childhood on the streets and related a litany of brutal assaults. As an adult, she beat her boyfriends while in jealous rages. On another occasion, using her boxing training, she broke a man’s jaw with a “terrific short jab.”


32 Waters, His Eye, 144 and 234.
violence was evident from early childhood: “I was so strong and violent as a child that I didn’t want anyone to touch me for fear I couldn’t restrain myself.” An episode of homicidal fury at age eleven not only illustrates the point but also mirrors Hagar’s own violent transformation. When her older sister attacked Waters with a hatchet, she struck back with her bare hands:

I don’t remember anything after that. I was temporarily insane and I must have choked and punched, kicked and gouged Vi in my maniacal fury. [The man next door] pried my hands from Vi’s throat and stopped me from killing her. I never would have let go by myself until she was dead.

Waters’ autobiographies were written after her religious conversion, so it is possible that she “juiced up” the accounts of her violent nature in order to emphasize the magnitude of her salvation. Nevertheless, the number of violent events and their consistent presence throughout her early life argue for a strong measure of truth in her accounts.

Waters’ well-known violent nature became a central element of her performance: art and life conflated, creating an element of danger, an implicit understanding that real, life-threatening violence could occur during any performance. Consequently, for a white audience, Waters’ acting, which included a strong element of primitivism, added yet another layer of authenticity that played into her audiences’ racist fascination and expectations. From a white spectator’s point of view, Mamba’s Daughters delivered a logical duality—Hagar, the “brute mammy,” performed by Waters, the brute actress. Since Waters considered her performance a dramatization of her own black experience, it also reinforced contemporary white audiences’ racist beliefs about black violence and primitivism. In that respect, Mamba’s Daughters was the theatrical equivalent of

34 Waters, His Eye, 57.
“slumming” in Harlem nightclubs; in both cases, white audiences went in search of an authentic—i.e. exotic, primitive, and less civilized—experience via black entertainment. A staged publicity photograph of the murder scene inadvertently emphasizes the artifice of the theatricalized black violence (fig. 4.7). Waters appears to be less than imposing in height or girth; her strangulation of Gilly is exceptionally stagy rather than frighteningly realistic. Of course, the photo is not an accurate representation of the performance staging or emotional tone of the scene; in fact, a third character has been added to the publicity photo. Nevertheless, the photo serves as a reminder that white audiences looked for an authentic black experience within the context of theatricalized realism.

Waters encouraged the public’s perception of her untrained performance as an authentic representation. Writing in 1947, Edith Isaacs observed that “there is no remark so disparaging to the Negro actor, singer, musician, as the one—often intended as a high compliment—that he is a natural born actor, who does not benefit by training.”35 Waters proved to be an exception, as revealed in a 1940 article in The New York Times:

She says she never has had any formal education in music . . . Likewise, when she played Hagar . . . she was completely lacking in dramatic training…Making the comparison in the highest complimentary way possible, Ethel Waters is as much a born artist as the so-called ‘primitives’ in the fields of painting and sculpture.”36

Waters considered Mamba’s Daughters a biography of her own life—with Mamba being the grandmother who raised her, Hagar being her own mother (who gave birth to Waters at age twelve, as the result of a rape) and the daughter being herself, who managed to “go

36 Shalett.
Fig. 4.7. Georgia Burke, Ethel Waters, and Willie Bryant in a publicity photo for *Mamba’s Daughters*. (Photo courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor. Lenox and Tilden Foundation)
out into the world and become a successful singer.” Mamba’s Daughters gave her a rare opportunity to show white audiences the truth about her own life as a black woman: “I had shown them all what it is to be a colored woman, dumb, ignorant, all boxed up and feeling everything with such intenseness that she is half crazy.” Waters believed that her performance shattered racial stereotypes, revealing a real black woman instead. She thought that she had committed an act of honest self-revelation and, by doing so, dramatically revealed a truly authentic black consciousness to a white audience that comprehended and appreciated it on her terms.

However, Waters’ reading of her performance was naïve in several ways, due to her denial of the limitations imposed upon black representation by white society. She could not single-handedly alter the deeply entrenched racial attitudes of white Broadway audiences. Du Bois called attention to the circumscribed roles available to black actors, noting, “[W]e can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for anything else there is still small place for us.” More significantly, he cited Porgy and Bess, arguing that white audiences would not have accepted the same story with white characters. He wrote, “The only chance [Heyward] had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.” Du Bois’ observation captures the irony of Waters’ dilemma; the role of Hagar presents a human condition packaged in a representation of black experience, creating a safe emotional distance for white audiences. Consequently, many spectators found Waters’ performance emotionally powerful and deeply moving, yet they understood it as a realistic portrayal of black life.

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37 Waters, His Eye, 292.

38 Waters, His Eye, 304.

rather than as a set of well-established stereotypes about black people. And for some spectators, this representation reinforced the idea of black primitivism. Within this framework, Waters’ authentic artistic expression co-exists with, but is ultimately dominated by, white audiences’ own stereotypical beliefs about black authenticity.

The complicated issue of theatrical black authenticity was reflected in the critical responses to the play as well. Burns Mantle, presuming a natural artistic inferiority in black performance, critiqued Waters according to his lowered expectations:

> Guthrie McClintock…[holds] his colored players to the simple actions that are safely within their range. He has used the same care in the direction of Miss Waters…He does not permit the actress ever to attempt an exhibition of acting and thus she is able to reveal herself a simple and natural actress in situations she perfectly understands and simply and easily dominates.40

While Mantle’s comments mirror Waters’ own explanation of her performance, and thus appear to validate her claim of autobiographical performance, there is a significant difference. Waters believed that the role afforded her the opportunity to perform her own experience, but Mantle assumed that Waters’ life experience was typical of black women in general, thus reflecting the racist beliefs of Waters’ white audiences in search of an authentic black experience.

The New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson found himself caught in the middle of a controversy regarding Waters’ performance because he attempted to apply the same demanding standard of judgment to Waters as he applied to white actors. The controversy cuts to the heart of Waters’ complicated authenticity dilemma, with both

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blacks and whites attempting unsuccessfully to view Waters’ performance from a racially neutral position. In his first review, Atkinson panned Waters’ performance:

\[\text{[Although Miss Waters plays with her usual rangy and gleaming wholesomeness, she does not go very deep inside her part...The play is curiously inarticulate about the aspects of character that should distinguish \textquote{Mamba’s Daughters} from synthetic plays about Negroes. Part of this is the result of limitations in Miss Waters’ acting of Hagar. She is personally earnest and magnetic enough to win everyone’s personal respect and good wishes, and she gives the whole play a sturdy quality in the scenes she plays. But her limp, plodding style, which she seems unable to vary, results in a performance rather than the expression of a character.}\]

Although Atkinson found fault with the script, his major criticism focused on Waters’ limitations as an actress. Later that week, Carl Van Vechten organized an impressive theatrical coterie that protested Atkinson’s review in a paid advertisement in *The New York Times*. Praising Waters’ “superb performance” as a “profound and emotional experience,” they called it “a magnificent example of great acting, simple, deeply felt, moving on a plane of complete reality.” Among the nineteen people who signed the review were Judith Anderson, Tallulah Bankhead, Norman Bel Geddes, and Burgess Meredith.

Under pressure from Van Vechten’s group, Atkinson agreed to re-review the play the following week. Still, he found it difficult to compromise or give Waters a positive review. He lambasted the character of Hagar as a “sluggish-witted...inarticulate [and] lumbering creature of elemental emotions,” admitting only that Waters’ performance was “valiant,” considering the script. Atkinson concluded—somewhat obliquely—that, in

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the end, Waters’ Hagar became the “tragic queen of the marshland plantation.”

This time Atkinson adroitly avoided criticizing Waters, directing his attention instead to the script, including Hagar’s character and the melodramatic plantation mise-en-scène.

Although *Mamba’s Daughters* failed to catapult Waters into the upper echelons of dramatic acting, it did provide a new route for her declining career, prolonging it for another fifteen years. The triumph that Waters and Van Vechten expected in 1939 finally manifested itself in 1950, with her memorable appearance in *The Member of the Wedding*. The critics were unanimous in their praise of Waters’ performance as Berenice, the classic “mammy” role. Atkinson, perhaps atoning for his negative reviews of *Mamba’s Daughters*, wrote that she gave “one of those rich and eloquent performances that lay such a deep spell upon any audience that sees her.”

Critic William Hawkins echoed Atkinson’s praise: “Lines roll from her lips with such genuine emotion . . . Her description of her marriages is a masterpiece of comedy and pathos, and when she soothes the two distraught children with an old hymn, only a pinhead could remain unmoved.” Hawkins’ critique reveals that Waters’ performance was viewed within the confines of a familiar stereotype, Berenice being an icon of the romanticized “mammy” character (fig. 4.8).

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Fig. 4.8. Julie Harris and Ethel Waters in film version of *A Member of the Wedding*, 1952. (Photo courtesy of www.beckerfilms.com/MedmerofWedding.gif)
The critics’ acclaim for Waters’ natural acting style is remarkably similar to Waters’ own claims about her performance in *Mamba’s Daughters*. Although Hagar was primitively violent and Berenice was lovingly maternal, audiences viewed both performances as authentic exhibitions of Waters’ own personality and life as a black woman. Even as Berenice—a heartwarming, beloved character—Waters’ humanity, as well as her theatrical success, was defined by white spectators within the confines of unchanging racial stereotypes. For black artists in the pre-Civil Rights era, little had changed between the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, *Mamba’s Daughters* in 1939 and *The Member of the Wedding* in 1950. Perhaps Waters received acclaim as Berenice rather than Hagar because the element of primitivism was absent, leaving white audiences with an uncomplicated, familiar, and reassuring “mammy” stereotype. At any rate, the elusive respect that Waters sought for her performance in *Mamba’s Daughters* was finally attained in 1950 when critic Robert Garland declared that Waters’ performance in *The Member of the Wedding* placed her “high up among the first ladies of the American theatre.”

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Of all the women included in this study, Sophie Tucker (1884-1966) is most exemplary of the successful female performer. Her popular and financial success can be attributed to her savvy use of both short-term and long-term strategies during her fifty-eight year career. Throughout her career, Tucker reinvented and retooled her performance persona in order to gain access to the stage, develop a broad audience base, and eventually cultivate a highly devoted niche audience of first-, second-, and third-generation Jewish immigrants who identified with Tucker’s American success story. Tucker’s adaptability—her fluid transitions between popular entertainment genres, musical styles, and venue types—and her extremely personal, hands-on approach to marketing herself were key to her continuing success in an era of rapidly changing popular entertainment. Additionally, Tucker approached performance as a business venture in the entertainment industry. She planned for a long career and rarely relinquished control of her self-representation, self-definition, or career management.

Musically, Tucker’s styles—and monikers—reflect both the progression of her career and the changing tastes in popular musical entertainment. She was billed as a “World Renown Coon Shouter” when she entered vaudeville in 1907, “The Mary Garden of Ragtime” when she abandoned blackface in 1912, “The Queen of Jazz” when she
performed with her band, the Kings of Syncopation, in 1916, and finally, “The Last of the Red Hot Mamas” when she introduced that song in 1928. Tucker based her performance persona on a comic version of overt female sexuality, presenting herself as an aggressive, demanding, and independent hot mama through song lyrics and her suggestive delivery of their innuendos and double entendres. Tucker began in a beer hall and moved to vaudeville, musical revues, and movies during the height of her career; she was also a recording artist. Tucker always cultivated nightclubs as her primary domain. Nightclub venues showcased her strongest assets—her risqué, ribald style and her friendly, personal connection with the audience, which she strategically and purposely nurtured. Tucker developed her audience “one member at a time,” by mingling with fans, compiling a massive address book, and personally writing hundreds of invitations to her upcoming appearances.

As a first generation Russian Jewish woman, Tucker operated within two cultures, immigrant Jewish and American, simultaneously. She belonged to the massive number of Eastern Europeans who immigrated around the turn of the century. The vast majority of Jewish immigrants settled in urban areas; between 1880 and 1910, the Jewish population in New York City increased from 80,000 to 1,100,000. The early generations of immigrants struggled to assimilate into American society at the same time that they adjusted to the loss of homeland and a way of life that centered on Jewish religion and old world traditions. Cultural ideas about American identity reflected the bifurcated experience of Tucker’s generation. John Higham defines it as a debate:

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On one side . . . is the vision of an increasingly unified society, a vision that used to be concentrated most powerfully in the symbol of the melting pot. On the other side . . . is a vision of persistent separateness, the vision of a society that is in some basic sense pluralistic and irreconcilably divided.2

This cultural duality was a constant factor in Tucker’s career. As her performance persona evolved, she acknowledged her Jewish identity and incorporated it into her act. Over the years, her audience also evolved, moving from a predominately non-Jewish demographic to a largely Jewish audience in her later years. Tucker’s ability to connect with audiences that reflected the duality of a melting pot ideal and a culturally divided reality accounts for her longevity long past her prime as a singer.

By the time that Tucker arrived on the scene in 1907, Jewish immigrants had established a strong presence in New York theatre and popular entertainment. Jewish businessmen dominated the industry: Klaw and Erlanger’s Syndicate controlled booking systems and theatres throughout the country; the Shuberts broke Klaw and Erlanger’s monopoly only to create their own as theatre owners, managers, and producers; and other Jewish businessmen, including Marcus Lowe and Adolph Zukor, controlled many vaudeville circuits and theatres. In fact, one of Tucker’s first engagements was in a “little ten-cent theatre owned by Lowe, Zukor, and Schenck.”3 In addition to the businessmen, Harley Erdman notes that Jews figured prominently in “Tin Pan Alley,” Broadway, and vaudeville: “Jewish presence, while not easily quantifiable, is plainly evident in the names of the actors, managers, agents, songwriters, musicians, publicists, and journalists


3 Howe 557.
who were working in vaudeville in the 1900s and 1910s.” Leonard Dinnerstein estimates that half of the people working in New York entertainment were Jewish by 1905, and the full range of occupations cited by Erdman indicates an impressive professional achievement and dominance. 4 A large number of young Jewish immigrants went on the stage as popular entertainers, including singers, actors, comics, and dancers. In her 1954 Golden Jubilee speech, Tucker recalled:

> It was a generation such as show business will probably never see again. . . . Al Jolson, Fannie (sic) Brice, Willie Howard, Norah (sic) Bayes, David Warfield, Joe Weber, Lew Fields . . . Eddie Cantor, Georgie Jessel, Irving Berlin, Jack Benny, Ted Lewis, Belle Baker, Nat Burns. . . . We were all swept to the shores of this country on the same tidal wave of immigration. . . . Most of us spent our childhoods in Ghettos. Similar circumstances brought most of us into show business. Nearly all of us went through the same welter of beer-halls, dives, burlesque and vaudeville. 5

Tucker’s litany of Jewish performers is predominately male, which may be indicative of the difficulties encountered by aspiring female Jewish performers of the era. In addition to the standard challenges that female entertainers faced in a male-dominated industry, Jewish women carried the additional burden of cultural expectations of women from within their communities. Irving Howe, noting that young Jewish women’s options were limited to marriage and motherhood, claimed that immigration to America created a crisis

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for Jewish women. They had come from a tradition that “enforced a combination of
social inferiority and business activity” that could not continue to coexist in their new,
American lives. Tucker is a prime example of a young immigrant woman who rejected
the constrictions of tradition and embraced an Americanized version of women’s
business independence. She abandoned an early marriage, leaving a young child with
family in Hartford, and moved to New York to pursue a career in show business.

Tucker’s career, especially the evolution of her onstage persona, reveals the
complexities of a moment in American history in which important social concerns and
changes, which centered on race, ethnicity, and gender, intersected. These included the
continuing perpetuation of Jim Crow racism, the rise of anti-Semitism (both overt and
covert) as a result of rapid Eastern European immigration, and the celebration of
idealized white female beauty. All three cultural factors played pivotal roles in Tucker’s
creation of her performance persona and her audience following. Theatrical trends and
traditions, including the increasing Jewish presence in entertainment and lingering
minstrelsy conventions, also exerted influence upon Tucker’s career. Tucker’s entry into
show business is distinguished by rare cunning and talent for creating a dynamic persona
that operated within and responded to a miasma of cultural tensions and constrictions.

Sophie Tucker got her start in vaudeville as a blackface coon shouter in 1907 and
did not reveal her Jewish identity to the public until 1910-11. Many historians, including
James R. Barrett and David Roediger, argue that Jewish performers such as Tucker,
Jolson, and Cantor performed in blackface as a means of masking their Jewish identity.
They contend that the Americanization of Jewish immigrants took place in a “nation

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6 Howe 265.
obsessed by race” and that the process of “becoming white” and “becoming American” were intertwined. While this may be true, the issue is more complicated, as exhibited by a close examination of the development of Tucker’s persona within its social and theatrical contexts. During the pivotal years, from 1907 to the mid 1910s, Tucker moved from minstrelsy blackface to a more “realistic” performance of black identity as a coon shouter. She then made a clever transition to a ragtime and jazz singer who continued to perform “black” without blackface makeup. Eventually, she claimed her Jewish identity, incorporating Yiddish patter and Jewish humor into her existing act.

As a result, Tucker embodied dual personas of the maternal as a popular musical entertainer—the sexually voracious black ma ma and the sentimentally viewed, self-sacrificing Jewish mother. It was possible for Tucker to perform such contradictory maternal representations of femininity because she was primarily a singer rather than an actor. Audiences expected and accepted rapid, often incongruous changes in subject matter, mood, tone, and narrative voice from a singer; performance variety rather than a rigid, coherent character prevailed. Tucker’s performance dichotomy, once jelled, served as the foundation of her career, despite her advancing age and increasing weight, over the course of nearly sixty years.

Tucker’s first vaudeville performance persona was that of a blackface coon singer. In her 1945 autobiography, Tucker claims that an amateur night manager allowed her onto the bill, but only as a blackface singer because she was “so big and ugly the crowd out front [would] razz her.” Accordingly, a theatre assistant blackened her face,

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ears, and neck with burnt cork, and she appeared in her street clothes (a tailored suit) with black cotton gloves, a red bandana over her hair, and a lipsticked “grotesque grinning mouth.”

Biographer Armond Fields questions Tucker’s version, asserting that her “shape and size were very much in keeping with the preferences of the day.” Instead, he believes that agents and managers of the small-time theatres “did not want her Jewishness to seem so obvious on stage.” While both versions may hold a measure of truth, there is another explanation for Tucker’s debut in blackface. As a holdover from nineteenth century minstrelsy, blackface performance was a well-known and popular act in vaudeville entertainment; it may have simply been Tucker’s most obvious and easiest means of gaining access to the stage. According to Irving Howe, by 1910, Jewish performers had taken over blackface almost entirely, making it a specialty of Jewish entertainment. Al Jolson, George Burns, George Jessell, and Eddie Cantor (who performed a blackface transvestite version of Salome) all appeared in blackface early in their careers.

Alison Kibler argues, “racial masquerades emboldened some white [female] comediennees by setting them apart from svelte, perky chorus girls.” That was likely the case for both Tucker and Fanny Brice, neither of whom could package herself as a traditional WASP beauty. Both women crafted their careers by using comedy.

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10 Howe 562.

nontraditional femininity, and Jewish identity as a counter to the prevailing ideals. Brice also performed coon songs early in her career, although she did so without blackface makeup. Tucker, a star struck and ambitious, yet inexperienced, singer newly arrived from Hartford, and intimidated by the beauty and apparent self-possession of young women in show business, certainly may have viewed comedic performance her best bet. It paid off for her early in her career, garnering a brief appearance in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1909*. In that show, Tucker sang a song with a primitive motif, “Moving Day in the Jungle,” in which she appeared in blackface and a leopard-skin costume; she was supported by a chorus of scantily-clad dancing jungle girls.\(^{12}\) While Tucker’s Ziegfeld number was a blackface comedy, her publicity portrait for the *Follies* showed her as a sophisticated woman in a gold gown (fig. 5.1). The theatrical tradition of blackface by Jewish performers probably was Tucker’s most logical means of gaining initial access to the stage.

An equally important aspect of Tucker’s blackface performance was her choice of music. Coon songs had been a vital part of popular entertainment for at least a decade, with May Irwin’s infamous rendition of Earl Hogan’s “All Coons Look Alike to Me” dating back to her performance in an 1896 musical, *Courted into Court*.\(^{13}\) They derived from minstrelsy and were a precursor to ragtime. According to Fields, spirit rather than musical style differentiated coon songs from ragtime, since both were characterized by an up-tempo, syncopated melody. Coon songs were defined by “stereotypical plantation

\(^{12}\) Fields 33.

Figure 5.1. Sophie Tucker publicity portrait for *Ziegfeld Follies of 1909*.

(Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
dialect and racial characterizations, usually dealing with love, loss, and heartbreak” as interpreted through white sensibilities. Coon shouters invariably assumed a plantation dialect and “black” singing style, so that their performance as much as their appearance perpetuated the minstrelsy stereotype. Not all coon shouters performed in blackface. Arguably the most famous one, May Irwin, forewent burnt cork in favor of “construct[ing] her racial masquerade primarily through the dialect and lyrics” throughout her career, including during an extensive vaudeville tour in 1907-08 that coincided with Tucker’s own blackface years. Several years later, when Fanny Brice performed coon songs in musical revues, most notably “Lovie Joe,” she also delivered the songs with appropriate dialect and style without blackface makeup. According to Susan Glenn, most of the white female comics “performed racially inflected material without the use of blackface makeup,” which means that Tucker’s debut persona actually fell into the minority style based on an “entire costume of racial caricature.” And finally, although it seems obvious, it is important to note that contemporary audiences accepted blackface as a stage convention; they were fully aware that almost all performers (with the exception of black performers such as Bert Williams) were white beneath the spectacle of the minstrel mask.

14 Fields 14.

15 Kibler 126.


Tucker’s blackface performance was further complicated when, shortly after her debut, she abandoned minstrelsy blackface for a more realistic, more believable black appearance. A photo from this period reveals the relatively subtle, realistic effect of her “high yellow” persona (fig. 5.2). According to Tucker, she made the change for a practical reason: the burnt cork made it difficult to keep her white satin costume clean. However, it resulted in a drastic change in her act because audiences, accustomed to the burnt cork convention, initially believed that she was actually a black performer. Billed as “Sophie Tucker, the Ginger Girl, Refined Coon Singer,” Tucker performed in a “high-yellow” makeup and used gloves to conceal her white skin. Acknowledging that the change worked to her advantage, Tucker wrote, “It made a good stunt at the end of my act to peel off a glove and wave to the crowd to show I was a white girl.”

By adopting a realistic makeup and performing in the traditional coon singer “black” style, Tucker distinguished herself as something new and different, not just another blackface shouter. Fields’ account reveals the effect that Tucker’s performance had on unsuspecting audiences: “At first, the audience was in shock when she removed the [wig and gloves] but, after a poignant pause, as if to collect their collective breath, they broke out into cheers and applause due to the surprise. The stunt became a regular, triumphal ending for her blackface act.”

Tucker’s ginger blackface performance helped her gain credibility as a performer and played a major role in her popularity with audiences. For a year, she performed the

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18 Tucker, Some of These Days, 35.

19 Fields 25.
Figure 5.2. Sophie Tucker as the Ginger Girl, Refined Coon Singer.

(Photo courtesy of Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas)
surprise act, armed with a black wig, black hose, black cotton gloves, a tube of brown paste, a can of brown powder, and red lipstick.\textsuperscript{20} Her performance of a black woman was not only artistically believable, but also added a sense of authenticity or heightened professionalism. A \textit{Variety} critic, observing her 1908 appearance at Tony Pastor’s, noted that she “makes an attractive looking young woman.” He also offered the opinion that she made a wise decision to appear in “darkey makeup,” strengthening her act by “carrying out the coon impersonations to the strict letter.”\textsuperscript{21} As Tucker continued to perform the stunt, the surprise ending would have become common knowledge and all or most audience members would have known that Tucker was not actually a black woman. And so the dynamics of the act would have changed, with a major part of the entertainment being the audience’s new appreciation of Tucker’s expertise in performing a more realistic, believable impersonation of a black female performer. The surprise stunt then became an open, shared secret—or inside joke—between Tucker and her audience. That insider secret would prove to be the seed for Tucker’s later development of a close, familiar, and personal relationship with her audiences.

While Tucker’s realistic makeup was an anomaly for a coon shouter in vaudeville, ginger blackface also made an appearance in the \textit{Ziegfeld Follies}, beginning with the first production in 1907, where it served a different purpose. Wearing café au lait makeup in order to create a light-skin or mulatto appearance, a \textit{Follies} Girl sang “Miss Ginger of Jamaica,” in which she claimed to be known for “doing things up brown.” \textit{Follies} historian Linda Mizejewski explains the use of café au lait makeup as a means of

\textsuperscript{20} Tucker, \textit{Some of These Days}, 39.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Variety} 6 April 1908, qtd. in Fields 27.
fetishizing racial whiteness, an essential aspect of Ziegfeld’s spectacles. Ziegfeld replicated the image of the light-skinned chorus girls, who were currently appearing in black musical revues in New York City, and thus gained a “way to appropriate but also distance a racially structured, forbidden sexuality;” the makeup “signified ‘naughty’ sexuality.”

Ziegfeld’s success relied upon the commodification of women’s bodies and sexuality. His shows were famous for beautiful chorus girls who appeared in revealing costumes, often nearly nude and sometimes completely nude for a brief, “artistic” moment. His appeal to proper, middle-class audiences was the glorification of feminine beauty in an acceptable, appealing way. The titillating nudity drew audiences, but the polished class and dignity of the chorus girls countered, and even normalized, the blatantly sexual display. The addition of café au lait makeup for the performance of “Miss Ginger of Jamaica,” as well as similar numbers in later shows, served a double purpose. First, it increased the vicarious thrill for the audience by playing upon racial stereotypes and white fantasies about black female sexuality. At the same time, as noted by Mizejewski, the makeup served as a “sexual mask” for the more daring performances; it made it possible for the Ziegfeld girls to transgress propriety without compromising their own lily-whiteness.

While the Ziegfeld Follies of 1907 provided a model of realistic blackface performance for popular entertainment audiences, there were differences between the Follies and Tucker’s vaudevillian performance. Follie’s audiences had no doubt that the

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23 Mizejewski 11.
café au lait performers were actually beautiful white performers; the racial mask was a cultural device, as well as an aesthetically pleasing aspect of the performance. But Tucker’s early audiences believed that she was a light-skinned black woman until she revealed herself at the end of her performance. Fields infers this was the case, claiming that a vaudeville manager first suggested that Tucker remove the gloves and wig because he “noticed that the audience had shown uneasiness about listening to a Negro singer.”

While Field’s anecdote is unsupported, its existence illustrates the fact that Tucker’s blackface appearance was read by audiences as racially ambiguous. Even after audiences were aware of the conceit, Tucker’s impersonation played into and responded to cultural anxieties in a racially conscious audience that desired clear-cut clarity.

Another important difference between the Follie’s café au lait blackface and Tucker’s more realistic makeup was the performance of female beauty and sexuality. Alison Kibler assumes that racial masquerade in vaudeville was a choice (conscious or unconscious) that female performers made in direct opposition to the prevailing standards of white beauty. She argues that it was a tactic that gave unattractive, often fat, women a chance for success in vaudeville. While Kibler’s interpretation explains Tucker’s initial decision, as a popular entertainment neophyte, to perform in blackface, it fails to acknowledge the more obvious fact that blackface was a traditional means of entry into show business for Jewish entertainers, both male and female. Kibler also makes a more germane point that blackface, when combined with a fat body, immediately cued

24 Fields 25.
audiences that the female performer was meant to be comic rather than erotic. When Tucker switched from a minstrelsy blackface to a more natural, believable blackface, she disrupted the comic vs. erotic binary, forcing her audience to react to her persona outside of the traditional, stereotypical minstrel conventions. Instead of a full-blown caricature, Tucker presented a complex characterization with racially loaded implications. Traditional blackface female performers in vaudeville were notorious for their “rough and sexual racial style,” and that theatrical stereotype reinforced racist ideas about black female sexuality and aggression. The combination of Tucker’s believable, ginger blackface and her musical songs filled with sexual innuendos created a new version of the black female stereotype, one that appeared to be the “real thing” rather than a mere theatrical performance of black female sexuality. As a result, Tucker developed a new level of credibility on two fronts—as a more realistic black female stereotypical character and as an accomplished, artistic impersonator and performer.

During the first decades of the 1900s, race and ethnicity proved to be volatile issues in American society, both of which played out on the American stage. Although racism and anti-Semitism often prevailed in society, there was a gradual, growing awareness of the damaging social effects associated with theatrical stereotyping. As a result, the content of coon songs changed over time, moving from an emphasis on racist and violent depictions of African Americans in the 1890s to a softened, more “balanced” counter representation based on sentimentalism and love. The changes are illustrated by

25 Kibler 130.
26 Kibler 113.
May Irwin, who made a hit with a violent, racist song titled “The Bully” in 1895, and her later hits such “Magdaline My Southern Queen” (1900) and “Ma Mississippi Belle” (1903). In 1907, Tucker followed the adapted formula, balancing the more risqué and racial numbers with songs such as “Rosie, My Dusky Georgia Rose.” These changes represented the beginning of greater changes that would follow in the next several years. Russel Nye notes that coon songs finally provoked “a rash of indignant outcries . . . particularly after the formation of the NAACP in 1909.” (Six years later, the organization also confronted the overt racism in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film, Birth of a Nation.) Tucker broke into show business on the last vestiges of coon shouting and, if she intended to merely mask her Jewish identity, she depended upon an increasingly contested racial stereotype in order to do so. The move away from the minstrelsy-based stereotype may have been one more factor in Tucker’s decision to perform in ginger blackface.

In part, Jewish performers masked their ethnicity due to increasing anti-Semitism during the first two decades of the 1900s. The prejudice resulted from the rapid population growth and social changes that were effected by the extraordinary number of Eastern European immigrants, most of whom settled in New York City, between 1880 and 1920. Higham estimates that by 1910, three-quarters of the population of New York

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27 Kibler 132.

28 Tucker, Some of These Days, 48.

City consisted of first and second-generation immigrants. According to Barrett and Roediger, anti-Semitism was systemic, with “Congress, the Ku Klux Klan, the media and popular opinion all [reinforcing] the inbetween, and even non-white, racial status of Eastern and Southern Europeans.” They cite the strict anti-immigration legislation of 1920 as a “triumph of racism against new immigrants.” It was a period of intense social negotiation between Jewish immigrants who struggled to preserve their old world traditions as they assimilated into American society and the hegemonic society, which strove to accommodate what felt like an overwhelming wave of new, and different, Americans. Israel Zangwill’s 1909 drama, The Melting Pot, popularized the ideal of an assimilated American identity, in which immigrants had been purified of their “visible ethnic difference” through ethnic blending. His dramatization of the cultural tensions surrounding immigration offered a simple, tidy, and possibly comforting resolution to the complex social challenge that affected both immigrants and Americans. Despite the idealized hopes expressed in Zangwill’s play, many Jewish entertainers, working in the real world, adopted a less ethnic public persona in order to downplay their Jewish roots. Many changed their names, including George Burns (Nathan Birnbaum), Eddie Cantor (Israel Iskowitz), and Jack Benny (Benny Kubesky). Some distanced themselves from their ethnic backgrounds by eliminating Yiddish language and humor from their acts or erasing cultural markers of ethnicity in their performances.

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30 Higham 14.
31 Barrett and Roediger 14.
32 Erdman 134.
One successful Jewish performer who effectively erased her ethnicity was Nora Bayes (Dora Goldberg), one of the first successful Jewish performers in vaudeville. Bayes’ beauty and non-Jewish appearance aided her disguise; one critic remarked that she was “very good to look at, which is something of a rarity with comediennes.”33 Bayes’ success was predicated on playing to, and never challenging, the status quo. Her onstage persona “showcased a new female image—the respectable, middle-class married woman who was at once fashionable, attractive, aggressive, humorously irreverent, and a little bit naughty.”34 Bayes’ very public marriage and professional partnership with Jack Norsworth provided an additional layer of assimilated traditionalism. Glenn describes their onstage personae as “one of a happy, modern, companionate-style” marriage and partnership; they played lovebirds as they performed duets such as “Shine on, Harvest Moon,” and, in their public relations, explained their marital bliss in terms of a fairy tale.35 With her beauty, non-Jewish appearance, and partnership with a protective husband, Nora Bayes had little to offer Sophie Tucker as a model for successful Jewish women in show business.

Fanny Brice (1891-1951), on the other hand, not only provided a model but also paved the way for Tucker’s long-term career. Without Brice’s success, it is possible that Tucker may have never made the necessary transition from blackface coon shouter to Jewish musical comedienne. Brice’s own career quite successfully spanned four decades.

33 New York Telegraph, 15 Nov. 1906, qtd. in Glenn 67.
34 Glenn 67.
35 Glenn 72.
in burlesque, vaudeville, musical revues (including nine Ziegfeld Follies), and film; in radio, she gained great popularity as the comic Baby Snooks. The beginning of her career resembled Tucker’s in some ways. She was a coon singer, although she appeared without blackface. Like numerous other Jewish performers, both women changed their names. Tucker replaced her maiden name of Abuza with Tuck, via a young, failed marriage, and then amended it to Tucker when she entered show business. Brice changed her name from Fania Borach in 1908, in an attempt to “seem less ethnic, less foreign, less Jewish, and, by doing so, to broaden her appeal.”

However, there was one significant difference in Brice’s background; she trained herself in the tradition of the male Hebrew comics, even mimicking famous ones, such as Joe Welch, in amateur shows. Brice’s appropriation of the male comic figure resulted in her own feminized version of a Jewish male stereotype, which served to showcase Brice’s own talent for comedy based on self-deprecation and gangly physicality. In 1909, her successful performance of “Sadie Salome, Go Home!” in a benefit show propelled Brice’s career to a new level. As a direct result of that appearance, she was hired as a featured player for the “College Girls Show” touring revue, in which she reprised the “Sadie Salome.” That stint led to a featured role as a female player in the 1910 Ziegfeld Follies and Brice’s career was launched (fig. 5.3).

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37 Erdman 157.
Figure 5.3. Fannie Brice publicity portrait circa 1910s by Ziegfeld photographer Alfred Cheney Johnston

(Photo from the private collection of Peach Pittenger)
Ironically, Brice’s success derived from her exploitation of her Jewishness and caricature of her ethnicity. The Irving Berlin song parodied the recent Salome craze. In the act, Brice performed the character of Sadie, a stereotypical Lower East Side girl who delivered an awkward, but energetic, histrionic rendition of Salome, the dancing symbol of female depravity. Brice’s Sadie made a spectacle of herself:

You better go and get your dresses
Ev’rone’s got the op’ra glasses
Oy, such a sad disgrace! No one looks in your face
Sadie Salome, go Home!

The character depicts a young immigrant girl who has been greatly influenced by the American idealized standards of female beauty and sexuality exhibited in popular entertainment. The comedy of the piece derives from her inadequate and inappropriate attempt to become a sexually alluring American girl. Erdman’s analysis captures the comic contrast:

Brice performed the piece in Yiddish dialect in a white sailor suit, gathered up at the crotch; her wriggling and shimmying, while full of sexual innuendo, made clear this eighteen-year-old Jewish girl with rolling eyes was incompetent both as an exotic dancer and sex object. . . . Brice’s performance of the song then, represents a Jewish woman finally succeeding at a comic, self-deprecating performance of herself.

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40 Erdman 158.
By performing a comedic version of female Jewish sexuality, Brice defused a longstanding cultural fascination with Jewish female exoticism and forbidden sexuality. In its place, she created a groundbreaking theatrical persona, a hypersexual Jewish female who managed to remain non-threatening and comically familiar to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.

Brice’s combination of physical comedy and self-deprecation in “Sadie Salome” provided the basis of her stage persona thereafter. The performance also outed Brice as a Jewish performer and while her ethnicity did not serve as the center of her performance persona, it remained an intrinsic, integrated part of it. Her appearance in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1910, further solidified her status as a successful comedienne. As Grossman notes, the presence of Ziegfeld’s “elevated and homogenized standard of beauty exaggerated [Brice’s] difference from the norm” and emphasized her greatest asset: although she was not beautiful, she was “literally built for comedy.” Her Ziegfeld performance of “Lovie Joe” echoed the self-parody of “Sadie Salome,” complete with “eccentric facial expression,” “queer vocal interpretations,” and a wiggle in a tight satin gown. Brice went on to perform numerous comic roles, all based on her physical appearance and comic talents, in subsequent Follies and other popular entertainments (fig. 5.4).

Brice’s success as a Jewish comedienne in 1910 undoubtedly set the stage for and influenced Sophie Tucker’s decision to begin performing as a Jewish woman. It is probable that Tucker made a calculated decision to forego blackface, after determining that Brice’s success had changed the landscape for female Jewish performers.

41 Grossman 44-46.
Figure 5.4. Fannie Brice in comic costume, 1910.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress LC-USZ62-12613)
At least two versions of her outing exist. In her autobiography, Tucker tells of a lost trunk at a Boston appearance sometime in 1910; she claims that her stage persona was so believable that she not only had to out herself as Jewish, but also as a Northerner, telling the audience, “I grew up right here in Boston . . . I’m a Jewish girl, and I just learned this Southern accent doing a blackface act for two years.”

Biographer Fields places the event at the Majestic Theatre in Chicago in 1911, where Tucker introduced herself as a Jewish girl from Hartford and began the practice of incorporating Yiddish expressions into her songs.

Regardless of the accuracy of Tucker’s outing, the fact remains that she abandoned blackface performance on the coattails of Brice’s rise to fame.

About the same time that Tucker decided to perform without blackface, she began singing the newly popular ragtime songs in lieu of coon songs. By 1912, in order to capitalize on her new persona and style, Tucker billed herself as “The Mary Garden of Ragtime.”

Photos of Tucker from that year show a young, attractive, and almost demure young woman (fig. 5.5). Despite her proper appearance, Tucker’s ragtime repertoire was packed with songs of sexual innuendo, as evidenced by the titles: “That Lovin’ Rag,” “Wild Cherry Rag,” “I Just Couldn’t Make Ma Feelin’s Behave;” and “There’s Company in the Parlor Girls, So Come On Down.” In her first appearance at

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42 Tucker, Some of These Days, 63.

43 Fields 50. Although Fields includes a detailed description of the performance, he does not cite a source.

44 Mary Garden was a popular Scottish-immigrant opera singer. Invoking her name was a possible attempt by Tucker to elevate her own ragtime reputation to a more highbrow level.
Figure 5.5. Tucker as “The Mary Garden of Ragtime,” 1912.

(Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
the Palace in 1914, the Keith circuit objected to her rendition of “Who Paid the Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle When Rip Van Winkle was Away?” Tucker resisted efforts to censor her performances, even in the more conservative vaudeville venues. She often managed to push the limits by contrasting her risqué performance with a more sedate appearance. She presented herself as a well-dressed, well-heeled, proper, and—during her Mary Garden era—even demure young lady, but then performed the double entendre lyrics in a highly suggestive, even ribald, winking manner. Tucker anticipated new movements in music and, as a part of her career strategy, made certain that she adapted her act accordingly. She realized that the public was fickle and easily tired of stale acts; her motto was “something new,” and she applied it to every aspect of her career, including the content of her act and musical style. By 1916, she had moved from ragtime to jazz and was billing herself as “The Queen of Jazz” (fig. 5.6). She was backed by a band, The Five Kings of Syncopation, when she made a twenty-four week tour of the Orpheum circuit in 1916 (fig 5.7).

In contrast to Brice, who dropped the coon singer style when she adopted her Jewish persona, Tucker retained her black performance style, singing in “blackvoice” with an acquired thick Southern accent. She then layered her Jewish identity, through the use of Yiddish phrases and humor, onto the essentially black performance. As a result, Tucker’s persona was less comedic and more aggressive than Brice’s, in large part due to Tucker’s delivery of the sexually suggestive lyrics.

45 Fields 59.

46 Tucker 42.
Figure 5.6. Tucker as “The Queen of Jazz,” 1917.

(Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
Figure 5.7. Tucker and the Five Kings of Syncopation circa 1916-17.

(Photo courtesy of ibiblio.org. 
<www.ibiblio.org/…/stay-free/6/sophie.htm>
While Tucker continued to perform a sexually assertive persona throughout her career, an additional, somewhat discordant element was added in 1925, when she introduced Jack Yellen’s sentimental song, “My Yiddishe Mama.” Tucker had incorporated Yiddish phrases and jokes into her act for many years, but this song marked a new direction for her. It was a serious song that spoke of yearning for an irretrievable home, for the past, and for what had been lost in immigration and assimilation—all personified in the figure of a beloved, unassimilated immigrant mother. Tucker often performed the song with the lights dimmed except for a single spot, which captured Tucker standing alone, using her signature long handkerchief to enhance the emotionalism of the song (fig. 5.8). She performed two versions, often intermingled, in English and Yiddish.\(^47\) While the specificity of the song was especially pertinent to Jewish audiences, its theme of mother love and yearning for an innocent past appealed to non-Jewish audiences as well. Tucker explained the song’s sentimental impact: “‘Mother’ in any language means the same thing.\(^48\) “My Yiddishe Mama” was emblematic of Tucker’s generation’s bifurcated immigrant experience. The song spoke directly to their own specific situation as Jewish immigrants and simultaneously conveyed a more universal message about lost innocence and mother love to non-Jewish audiences. By incorporating the song into her act, Tucker effectively appealed to a broad audience base and a niche immigrant audience concurrently, thus strengthening her

\(^47\) Fields, 119.

\(^48\) Tucker, Some of These Days, 260. Sentimental songs about mothers were a traditional part of Yiddish Theatre. Howe reports that Boris Thomashevsky routinely brought audiences to tears: “No matter if the scene was laid in the hot sandy desert or the Halls of the Inquisition, Thomashevsky always managed to get in a song about Mama.” Howe 465.
Figure 5.8. Tucker and her signature prop, the long handkerchief.

(Photo courtesy of izaak.unh.

www.izaak.unh.edu/nhtj/jazzphotos.htm)
popularity. And although such a serious, even maudlin, song seems out of place within Tucker’s sexually-focused repertory, it recalls the similar aesthetic in the later coon singing performances, which juggled racist, violent accounts of black life with sentimental love songs about dusky maidens.

When Tucker introduced “The Last of the Red Hot Mamas” in 1928, she put the final touch on her evolving performance persona. At that point, Tucker was forty-four years old, stout, and showing signs of aging (fig 5.9). Within the year she would admit to a facelift (“just a little fat and loose skin”). As the song title infers, an era had passed, but Tucker refused to let go. Instead, she solidified her comedic persona of an older woman with voracious, demanding sexual appetites that no man could satisfy:

‘Cause I’m the last of the red-hot mamas,
They’ve all cooled down but me,
Those red-hot, flamin’ mamas that were once reputed
For liquid-fire lovin’ that was undiluted,
All these modern flappers,
They’re just whippersnappers,
They can’t compare with me.
They pet and kiss and hug and don’t know what it’s all about.
When I kiss men, they feel they’ve had their tonsils taken out.
And I’m the last of the red-hot mamas
Getting’ hotter, hotter all the time!

As a Red Hot Mama, Tucker performed with pianist Ted Lewis, who stayed with her for the remainder of her career. Financially well-off, Tucker continued to invest in a lavish wardrobe for her performances; she usually changed gowns at least once during a


50 Jack Yellen, “The Last of the Red Hot Mamas,” qtd. in Fields 140.

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Figure 5.9. Tucker in the early 1930s as the Red Hot Mama.

(Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
performance and supposedly only wore each gown two times before discarding it.\footnote{Fields 79.}

Although she often wore furs, her constant wardrobe prop was a long, lacy handkerchief.

Critic Hanan Swaffer captured the essence of her act:

> She sang about how fat she was, told women how to make love . . . \[and she sang\] about how red hot she could be, and how cruel she was. Nobody believed it, but it brought down the house. Beautifully gowned in white, with her golden hair shining, and with her face beaming with sauciness, Sophie held the house for number after number, daring, challenging, and yet so attractive.\footnote{Hanan Swaffer qtd. in Tucker, \textit{Some of These Days}, 250.}

Tucker’s mature and sophisticated appearance was an essential aspect of her performance persona, acting as a contradictory, comedic contrast to the risqué content of her act.

For many audience members, Tucker’s onstage persona was further complicated by their knowledge of her off stage life. Lewis Erenberg’s analysis of Tucker’s complex persona of hypersexuality reveals the complexity of her celebrity image:

> In her stage act, Tucker portrayed the aggressive woman, bent on independence, equal if not dominate to any man, a mother figure risen from the nineteenth century, capable in her bulk of succeeding and aggressively ordering men about . . . As a model for women, she was either a threat to men or a pal, never a lover. Her aggression made her unfit for the love she wanted. Given the choice, most other women probably would have accepted the need for success but not chosen the emotionally disastrous model of Sophie Tucker.\footnote{Lewis A. Erenberg, \textit{Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930} (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1981): 199.}
It is necessary to take a closer look at—and counter—Erenberg’s analysis because it conflates Tucker’s onstage persona and offstage love life, a core issue for understanding Tucker’s appeal to audiences. Her onstage persona was less about emasculation than about challenging men to match her own level of hypersexuality. And that was an over-the-top, all-in-good-fun, dirty joke. Tucker believed:

Folks wanted a belly laugh every so often. They wanted to let their hair down and unbutton their vests and be natural. They wanted to laugh about sex. Sex was funny, not necessarily intense and tragic the way the playwrights such as Ibsen made it out to be.\textsuperscript{54}

Tucker’s playful attitude about sex and her persona as a fat, older woman who had a shamelessly healthy sexual appetite made it possible for audiences, both male and female, to relax and feel as if they were insiders with Tucker and her naughty jokes. Tucker sang and joshed about a topic that was usually avoided in proper public discourse. By developing a close, familiar relationship with her audience, Tucker was able to create a “free zone” where the unmentionable could be acknowledged and laughed about.

But Tucker’s hypersexualized persona also revealed her real-life compromised femininity. Her personal life, including three failed marriages and the child that she abandoned to family, was well publicized and known to her audiences. And so, the sexual aggression in her performance persona was conflated with her personal failures in romance and love, as well as her uncompromising professional ambition. In real life, no man ever was masculine enough to compete with or satisfy Tucker. In the long run, her personal failures haunted and humanized her performance persona, revealing the bravado

\textsuperscript{54} Tucker, \textit{Some of These Days}, 54.
of Sophie Tucker, the Red Hot Mama. Both onstage and off, Tucker was always “a pal” rather than an ideal, or fantasy, lover for male audiences. In fact, many friends, fans, and fellow performers called her “Mom.” Ultimately, her stage persona, and resulting successful career, overwhelmed her identity as a woman. She claimed that the “greatest obstacle to [her] happiness as a woman [was her] success as an entertainer.” At her Golden Jubilee celebration, she thanked her colleagues for their affection and love, which she considered compensation for the personal love that she never found.

By the 1940s, Tucker had become a well-loved popular entertainment institution. She published her best-selling autobiography in 1945, was honored for her philanthropy by the Jewish Guild in 1947, and celebrated her golden jubilee in show business with a lavish celebration and testimonial in 1953. Tucker had always performed in cabarets and nightclubs; even when she was appearing in musical revues and vaudeville, she often doubled up with engagements at nightclubs after working a full day or evening in vaudeville. But by the mid-1940s, she appeared almost exclusively in nightclubs, claiming that she had created the perfect niche for her act. Nightclubs provided her with a handsome income, a venue that supported her performance style, and a devoted audience that adored her despite her increasing age and resultant loss of voice.

The Sophie Tucker collection at the American Jewish Archive has numerous photos and notes to and from Tucker that are signed “Your pal,” “to Mom,” and “from Mom.” Jerry Lewis and his family, as well as other celebrities who considered Tucker a “mom” are well represented in the collection, but lesser known fans and entertainers represent the bulk of the memorabilia.


Tucker’s golden jubilee celebration, which was organized by a group of fellow performers, was actually four years shy of her fiftieth year in show business.
Tucker had always depended upon supperclubs and nightclubs as a steady source of income. As early as the mid-1910s she began to perform on a regular basis at Reisenweber’s in New York. By 1918, their 400 Club Room had been renamed the Sophie Tucker Room and Tucker had negotiated an extremely favorable contract; her band was paid directly by Reisenweber's and her salary included fifty percent of the cover charges and ten percent of the gross receipts. Three years later, her contract was even more attractive, with a guarantee of $2,000 weekly, fifty percent of the cover charges, and twenty-five percent of the gross receipts for two nightly dinner shows. In 1944, when Tucker made the move to exclusively nightclub performance, she started with a year-long tour around the country, performing in nightclubs and roadhouses for $3,000 a week; that tour also marked her first Las Vegas appearance.  

Nightclubs also supported Tucker’s performance style in a way that other popular entertainment venues could not. Early in her career, when vaudeville managers attempted to censor performers, Tucker purposely cultivated cabaret venues where the content of her act and her suggestive performance style were encouraged rather than censored. Although Tucker was adaptable, performing on stage, in film, and on television late her career, she acknowledged that television was not her medium: “I look to (sic) big, too fat, too ugly on that screen.” Most importantly, Tucker appreciated the intimacy of the nightclub venue, which facilitated her relationship with her audience.

Fields contends that with the death of vaudeville and the advent of film, radio, and

58 Fields 81, 96, and 205.

television, nightclubs were the last remaining venue for a shared experience between
performer and audience:

Performers often acted as hosts to patrons, a familiarity
that could not be achieved in theatres. Such actors became
known as “friendly entertainers.” They might greet customers
at the door and seat them. They might engage in casual conversation . . .
The physical proximity between patrons and performers added a
sense of freedom and improvisation to the entire proceedings. . . .
If patrons came to believe that they were a part of the performance,
they enjoyed it even more thoroughly. 60

The nightclub setting was ideal for Tucker’s intimate audience relationship. She
developed one-on-one relationships with audience members and engaged in spontaneous
repartee with the audience during her shows. 61 Reviewing her opening show at the Latin
Quarter in 1965, Variety confirmed her iconic status as a nightclub performer:

Sophie Tucker is the grand beldame of the niteries. . . .
She personifies authority and stature and, more importantly,
has an innate ability to communicate and project in the great
traditions of the profession. She’s out for fun, and so is the
audience coming to see her.” 62

At that time, Tucker was eighty-one years old and had been performing for fifty-eight
years, with the last two decades dedicated solely to nightclubs. 63

60 Fields 73 and 212.

61 The Sophie Tucker scrapbook collection at the American Jewish Archives has
hundreds of photographs of Tucker posed with other entertainers, patrons, and fans in
nightclub settings. Often, Tucker is seated at the table, appearing to be settled in, as if
she has joined the party for longer than a snapshot.

62 Variety, 20 October 1965 qtd. in Fields 25.
Tucker’s longevity and faithful audience base can be attributed to her business savvy and personality rather than singing ability. She acquired strong business support and long-term stability through her relationship with the William Morris agency. She was his first client and remained with the agency, which handled her bookings and salary negotiations, throughout her career. Even so, Tucker did not relinquish primary responsibility for self-promotion and marketing. Instead, she took on a labor-intensive task of cultivating and preserving a solid audience base through the development of one-on-one relationships. Tucker was famous for her address book that included everyone she met who showed any interest in her. She explained, “I would drop them cards from time to time to keep that interest alive. When I was booked to play their town again I would let them know in advance and tell them to be sure to come and see me.”

Tucker’s notes, numbering in the thousands, were personally handwritten (fig. 5.10). In 1963, critic Norton Mockridge summarized, somewhat sarcastically, Tucker’s relentless self-marketing:

> [O]ver the years, the off-stage Sophie has become something of a performing IBM machine, mechanically perfect and not terribly unlike a cash register. . . . After each night’s performance, she dons an old wrapper and sits out in the lobby selling copies of her biography . . . and she still sends thousands of postcards to her mailing lists in every city saying: “Sophie Tucker, the greatest performer of them all, will be in your town on such and such a date.” And the cards are signed, “Sophie Tucker.”

63 That was Tucker’s last performance. She collapsed backstage after the show that night and died of lung cancer three months later.

64 Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 42.

Figure 5.10. Tucker keeping up on her promotional correspondence, Brighton, England, 1952. (Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
Mockridge’s commentary infers that Tucker was driven by financial ambition and ego, milking the last drops of public interest in Tucker during the later years of her career. He was wrong on both accounts.

Undoubtedly, one reason that Tucker continued to perform and promote herself well past retirement age was so that she could continue her extensive charitable work. Tucker contributed to a wide variety of organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Her Golden Jubilee celebration alone raised $150,000, which was distributed to Negro, Catholic, Episcopal and Jewish Theatrical Guilds, the Will Rogers Memorial Hospital, the Motion Picture Relief Fund, and the American Guild of Variety Artists’ Welfare Fund. The proceeds from the sale of her autobiography went to her own foundation, which distributed several million dollars to charities around the world, including the Sophie Tucker Playground Camp in Israel. Tucker raised bonds for the new state of Israel, funded the Youth Center at Beth Shemesh in Israel, established a free maternity clinic at a Jewish hospital in Denver, funded youth summer camps in New Jersey, and donated money to numerous hospitals, youth organizations, and actors’ homes. When Tucker died in 1966, the estimated value of her estate was between $500,000 and $1,000,000; she left $30,000 to the Sophie Tucker Foundation and an additional $10,000 to the Hebrew Home for the Aged in her hometown of Hartford. Tucker’s substantial philanthropy was one manifestation of her outgoing, generous personality.

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As the aging Tucker continued to perform her Red Hot Mama persona in nightclubs, she remained extremely popular, but her audience base changed substantially.

One critic could not determine the reason for Tucker’s continued success:

Sophie Tucker’s appeal as a show personality is difficult to analyze. She cannot sing. That is, in the accepted manner of singing which requires the vocal chords to change range in agreement with the composition of a song. It has been some time since Sophie could boast of an hour-glass figure. And today, she does not syncopate or snap as much as she used to do.  

Although neither this critic nor Mockbridge understood Tucker’s appeal, her die-hard fans did. Fields identifies the last two decades of her career as Tucker’s glory days, in which “nearly everything she said and did became constant reminders of her contributions to popular theatre and philanthropic organizations.”

Tucker continued to incorporate news songs and costumes into her act, but they now good-heartedly lampooned her career-long Hot Mama persona (fig. 5.11). For instance, for a 1959 Las Vegas appearance, Tucker introduced a new Jack Yellen song, “I’m a Wild Wicked Woman from the Badlands,” dressed in a sequined cowgirl outfit, complete with boots, hat, and toy six-shooters (fig. 5.12).

During her later days, Tucker became a nostalgic icon for older, successful Jewish immigrant audiences. She performed throughout the country, but concentrated

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68 Fields 212.
69 Fields 232.
Figure 5.11. Tucker in a Las Vegas costume late in her career.

(Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
Figure 5.12. Tucker costumed for “I’m a Wild Wicked Woman from the Badlands,” Las Vegas, 1959. (Photo courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives)
her long runs in New York City, Las Vegas, and Miami Beach, where her niche audience lived and vacationed. For example, in 1954, she completed a 14-week contract at Beachcomber in Miami Beach, filling the club for two shows nightly and earning $7,200 a week.\textsuperscript{70} And she returned to Miami Beach on a regular basis. In voicing her preference for nightclubs, Tucker explained that an entertainer with a friendly audience had “the most valuable asset in the whole of show business” because there was “a wonderful stimulation in playing to people who know you.”\textsuperscript{71} Her comments are doubly germane as respects her last two decades, because she and her niche audience understood that they came from the same immigrant background and experience. By the 1960s, Tucker was one of the few remaining Jewish immigrant performers who was still actively working in show business. For her Jewish audiences, Tucker was emblematic of their own American success stories. Like her, they had faced the challenges of coexisting in two cultures, their old world Jewish tradition and their new American home. Tucker’s embodiment of a Jewish and American identity spoke to her generation’s unique experience of assimilation. Like Tucker, her well-heeled audiences had successfully created a place for themselves in American society and succeeded in their careers. At the same time, they managed to preserve a sense of community, based on common experience, and their Jewish identity. In her golden jubilee speech, Tucker had claimed that show business would never see a generation like hers again. Equally true, America would probably never see the phenomenon of her generation’s mass immigration again. Tucker’s

\textsuperscript{70} Fields 227.

\textsuperscript{71} Tucker, \textit{Some of These Days}, 102.
performance persona of a Red Hot Mama and a Yiddishe Mama succeeded over the long term because she tapped into and nurtured the cultural duality of the immigrant experience.
In the post-Victorian society, American women made rapid progress in their pursuit of greater social, economic, and political agency. Many women rejected the Victorian notion that women’s proper sphere should be limited to the home and domestic concerns. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, increasing numbers of young women went to college, worked in business and social services, moved to the cities, lived independently, delayed marriage and motherhood, and eventually demanded full and equal citizenship with men, specifically the right to vote. Despite all those changes, deeply entrenched cultural ideas about gender roles and women’s proper place in society continued to coexist with, and often override, women’s advances. It was still a man’s world and women were expected to accommodate and support men’s privileged position. Most people, both men and women, continued to accept the idea of women’s “natural” inferiority and need for male protection through marriage. Even when women attained new levels of responsibility, achievement, and success, they were still evaluated and valued based on their appearance and fulfillment of their traditional feminine roles as attractive, supportive wives and mothers. Women who did not comply with those expectations, either by choice or default, lived in the eye of the cultural storm. They, more than the compliantly traditional women, had to consciously negotiate for their place.
in a society filled with gendered cultural anxieties about the changes in women’s status that they represented.

Ideas about femininity and women’s sexuality were at the core of those cultural tensions. Victorian versions of constraint and modesty had been replaced by modern expression and immodesty. In entertainment, male impresarios and managers commodified female sexuality as a part of visual spectacle. Beautiful, young, alluring, and compliant femininity was one aspect of the new, modern woman that the established, male-dominated society could easily accommodate. Nontraditional femininity, including assertive or noncompliant women, was not. Nontraditional women immodestly confronted, challenged, or manipulated the assumptions about male privilege and female inferiority for their own personal gain.

The femininity of all the women included in this dissertation was suspect due to their noncompliance with the traditional, expected performance of a submissive, passive, and visually pleasing femininity. They would have typically been excluded from careers in popular entertainment due to their physical appearances, including age, body size, ethnicity, and race, which stood in direct contrast to the narrow definitions of acceptable femininity onstage: youth, a slender form, and WASPish beauty. But in varying degrees of success each of these women found a unique way to manipulate, finesse, or counter the ideal as means of creating a niche for herself in a business that resisted her presence. Their struggle to attain visibility, credibility, and viable careers as working women in entertainment reflects the challenges faced by American women of the era, who were striving to establish careers and attain new levels of participation in public life. The nontraditional women’s position in popular entertainment was emblematic of the
prevailing position of women in American society: their subordinate status, the social constraints and cultural ideologies imposed upon them, the necessity of ongoing renegotiations for autonomy and self-definition, and the strategies and tactics used by women to achieve a measure of agency.
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Tales of Manhattan, dir. Julien Duvivier, perf. Charles Boyer, Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers, Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1942.

Trixie Friganza in My Bag o’ Trix, 1929.

Unidentified Film-Excerpt, Sophie Tucker Sings When I’m Alone. 194-.


Theatre and Popular Entertainment History


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**Social and Cultural History**


**Historiography**


