

Topsy's Revenge

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An amateur radio dj interrogates the euthanization of his favorite childhood circus elephant, Topsy. In this comedic historical fiction account of circus animal acts, we will incorporate journalist and radio theatre styles to reveal new ways of looking at dominant forms of history.

SCENE 1

INT. STUDIO ROOM

SFX: Radio Intro music plays, then fades as MARCONI begins to speak.

MARCONI

Good evening ladies, gentleman, and all those listening on the new frontier of communication: the radio. Or as my folks call it, the funny box! On today's program, we have a variety for ya. We're gonna start with a new jazz track, then bringing some church to your living room, and finally, a special report dedicated to the beloved circus elephant: Topsy.

Marconi gives a weighty sigh.

MARCONI

(on-air voice)

We're starting with a smooth track published under Such Sweet Thunder from the jazz septet arrangement fresh out of the famous borough of Harlem: its Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers with "Smokehouse Blues."

SFX: Clack of him putting down his headphones

MARCONI

(monologue voice)

Y'see, the boss slid this story on my desk, this 'Topsy death,' and I didn't like what I read; I couldn't fix to speak it on the air. I went back and forth - say it! Don't say it! - Until I couldn't take it no more! So, to shake the cobwebs out I went to grab a drink, get outta my own head about it. I stepped into the Paddy Wack Pub to pick myself a bone... What I found was the truth...

SFX: Warble sound

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers "Smokehouse Blues" plays in the background. It's a seedy bar. It's loud.

There's rambunctious voices and tapping glasses and we hear the tap tap tap of Marconi's leather shoes towards the bar. Slow "Jelly Roll" like jazz playing in the background. Marconi sees a guy hunched over his lager at the bar, head stooped, snapping his fingers to the music. He looks like he's worn the leather of the seat to his particular dimensions. He's wearing a trenchcoat and mutters to himself a bit, to the music.

Marconi calmly stands by the seat next to him at the bar.

MARCONI

(heavily)

You looking for company?

JOHNNY

"Looking for company?" What are you, one of those queers?

MARCONI

The only thing that's queer around here is the way you're dodging my question.

JOHNNY

Question? I got a question for you- Who sent you?

MARCONI

You wanna know who sent me? Topsy.

SFX: Faint elephant trumpeting.

MARCONI

(Future)

At the mention of Topsy, he straightens up. He grabs his arm.

JOHNNY

Ain't nobody said that name to me in a long time. But you ain't getting a nickel outta me before payin' a dime.

MARCONI

Then let me buy you a drink.

JOHNNY

I'll be damned if I turn down a free drink, but keep your hands to yourself.

MARCONI:

(to barkeep)
Two lagers.

JOHNNY

Top lager! And make it three!

SFX: Thump of pints

MARCONI

Cheers.

SFX: Clink of beers.

SFX: Chugging sound. Big sigh.

MARCONI

(curious)

What's a matter with that cheers of yours, bub? It's a little weak.

JOHNNY

(Riled up)

Weak? What, you wanna arm-wrestle, macho man?

MARCONI

I don't want no trouble; I didn't think I struck a nerve.

JOHNNY

Naw, naw you wanna arm-wrestle a crippled man, make him feel small. You wanna know why my cheers is weak? You wanna know so bad? I'll show ya!

SFX: shuffling of clothing/sleeve

MARCONI

(under his breath)

I thought I'd have to buy you another drink before you start showing me-

BAR GAL

UUUUGGGGHHHHHH!

SFX: Thud as bar gal falls on the ground

PUB FELLA 1

MY GOD! Put that thing away!

BARKEEP

I keep telling ya Johnny, put that freak arm away!

MARCONI

My god... What happened to you?

JOHNNY

(drunken flourish)

Y'see, I was the CONEY ISLAND CIRCUS, all three rings were my districts, and I was the mayor.

PUB FELLA 1
You were a ringmaster!

PUB FELLA 2
And you yelled like a girl!

JOHNNY
(ringmaster/presentation
voice)
Ladies and gentleman... SHUT UP!

MARCONI
(confused)
Well, I've been looking through the
papers for a story I've been
working on, and reports claim that
she was a bad elephant; that she
trampled three men into red and
pink pancakes.

JOHNNY
Well, forget what you've heard
about topsy! She was a diva, but a
damn good performer. She sailed in
from the Far East, a little gray
runt, but she had big dreams! See,
her mom was a Southern belle
teaching the carpet-bagger babies
their letters while paps got some
shrapnel in his knee and kept the
whisky flowing, even if it meant
beating it out of uh, Topsy!

BAR FELLA 1
That was you Johnny!

BARTENDER
Quit anthropomorphizing animals to
project your trama on the
clientele!

MARCONI
What're you mean? What does Topsy
have to do with your arm?

JOHNNY
I swung at her... and she swung back.
All those rounds in the ring.

MARCONI
(sternly)
You were mistreating that poor
elephant.

JOHNNY

Mistreating? You act like there's some manual for keeping an elephant. You whip it into shape and you get results. It's called common sense.

MARCONI

Common sense ain't so common, I see.

JOHNNY

Eh, what do you know? Coming in here, making judgements! Picking round places you ain't got no business.

MARCONI

Oh I got business.

MARONCI slams some money on the counter.

MARCONI

Here's enough for those pints, you drunk.

MARCONI (FUTURE)

He swings at me with that busted arm of his, topples outta his seat, and splats on the pub floor.

Chorus laughs at the man on the floor.

SFX: Thump of hands as Johnny pulls himself.

JOHNNY

What're ya looking at? Huh?

There's a commotion. Things are thrown at Johnny, whose protests to the humiliation grow weaker and more feeble.

JOHNNY

(angry into pleading)
Hey! What are ya doing? Huh? Stop that! Quit throwing things at me - Ahhhh!!!

There's laughter, clattering of glasses, and a faint carnival sound with a small elephant's cry.

MARCONI

Uh, I-I gotta get outta here... I gotta-gotta get back to the...

SFX: Rising warble noise into sharp cut.

MARCONI

Annnnd we're back. You're listening to WJZ's "Circus of America" with your host, Tony Marconi. We've got a sermon from above, delivered by none other than Father Charles Coughlin.

INSERT CHARLES COUGHLIN: 21:27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB4majyySnI>

MARCONI

But I was last night.

SFX: Warbling

MARCONI

After stumbling out of the bar, I was thinking less with my noggin and more with my Johnson and found myself in the Tenderloin red light district; that land-bound Amazon isle only three dollars an hour for heaven on earth: provided by Madame Curie's top shelf cuddlers. Go in. Unwind. Unload. And leave. Instead, I got a rather "stimulating" conversation...

SCENE 2

SFX: Thunder clap! Throughout, there is moderate rain.

INT. BEDROOM/BORDUOIR

It's a red room with velvet drapery and a big bed.

SFX: DOOR-KNOCK

ELLIE:

(seductively)
It's open.

SFX: Door Creaks Open

MARCONI drunkenly stumbles in and hits a little drawer.

ELLIE

Whoa big boy!

MARCONI

Ah, sorry, it's been a hard night.

ELLIE

Already?

SFX: Marconi gives a short sigh, longing to be understood.

SFX: ELLIE beacons him (clicking noise). Pats the bed (cloth moving sound)

ELLIE

Come, come here and take a load off, stud.

MARCONI sits down next to her.

SFX: shift of cloth. Mattress springs creak. Unzips jacket. Shuffle of bed. Flick of a lighter. Breath as a cigarette is inhaled and exhaled.

ELLIE

Now tell me. What's on your mind?

ELLIE massages MARCONI's shoulders, looking a little like she's feeling him up for bumps.

MARCONI

Ahhh...

ELLIE

Mmmmm, you're tense, huh?

MARCONI

You ever get that feeling? Like you're on a tight rope, balancing truth with common sense?

ELLIE (GUARDED)

Everyday. Walking the line between being a classy woman like my mama raised me and being a woman of the night. It ain't peaches and cream, I'll tell you that much. But now, what makes you think truth's more important than putting food on your plate?

MARCONI

Topsy.

ELLIE

Topsy?! Now I remember that my no-good-daddy would drop me off at Coney Island and shmooze all the sun out of the sky in those dusky brothels. I'd sit there and I'd watch Topsy and those clowns all day.

ELLIE turns her head away.

ELLIE

It's a shame the way those media-men made a circus out of her death.

MARCONI

...all those news people telling her
story slant...

ELLIE

Ain't that just the way. They love
stripping a misunderstood woman of
her dignity.

MARCONI

That's not all that's getting
stripped tonight.

ELLIE

I sure hope not. Come here, you
drunk hunk.

SFX: STRIPPING! Clothes ruffling I guess.

MARCONI

Whoa whoa whoa!

ELLIE

I gotta make sure your whistles are
clean. There's something going
around, you know.

MARCONI

I do know. What do you know?

ELLIE

I know I gotta turn down three
busters in the last week. Coming up
in here with that scaly bumpy skin.

MARCONI

Look like a... like a... like the skin
of an elephant?

ELLIE

Shore does, and we can't be
catching that. You know how these
things start. We don't cut it here,
it spreads to the whole town. And
by the time the news gets ahold of
it-

MARCONI

And by the time the news gets ahold
of it... its too late.

ELLIE

You think the folks at the funny
papers can throw their weight
around? That they stop death before
we notice? They're just vultures,
waiting to dive headfirst into some
red meat.

MARCONI

I'm getting a hankering for some meat right now.

SFX: ELLIE's flopping on the bed.

Ellie giggles.

ELLIE

(teasing)

Oooh! You devil!

SFX: mattress springs creak. Fades out as CHARLES COUGHLIN fades in.

INSERT CHARLES COUGHLIN: 27:02 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB4majyySnI>

SCENE 3

INT. STUDIO ROOM - NIGHT

SFX: Warble sound grows until Marconi begins talking.

MARCONI

And now, the special report on the 25th anniversary of the death of beloved circus elephant: Topsy. I... uh (warbling sound) I... sorry folks, I'm... just getting a little emotional (warbling sound)... a little zapped... (bigger warbling sound)

SFX: warble builds through until sharp cut when Quincy starts speaking.

SFX: Clop of shoes. Squeak of door. Thud of door.

QUINCY

Alright Phony Marconi. You get the report?

MARCONI

Boss, this isn't what happened. This isn't what I found in my research.

QUINCY

(incredulous)

Research? It's the entertainment column. We're not some eugenics project. You're supposed to write about the anniversary of Topsy's tumble!

MARCONI

That's not the complete story.

QUINCY

Yes, it is. That's what you're gonna be reading on air.

MARCONI

But sir, there are dire questions to be answered.

QUINCY

Save 'em for after the broadcast.

MARCONI

You're asking me to fill my listeners ears with cotton courtesy of General Electric. Why was his shock plate used to electrocute an elephant filmed on his camera?

QUINCY

You're a good report, Marconi. But you don't wanna bark up this tree.

MARCONI

Why don't we break the real story about what's spreading in the streets? On their hands and bodies, those poor-

QUINCY

You're the one whose gonna be poor if you don't read that script. Jesus, Marconi. What's gotten into you?

MARCONI

Why was Topsy electrocuted?

QUINCY

She was a bad elephant.

MARCONI

She's an animal! Who are you to dictate her morals? What would you do? Shipped from Timbuktu to Tallahassee, your tusks still nubs, unable to defend yourself against the drunken carnies. What would you do?

QUINCY

You said it, it's a damn animal!

MARCONI

And so are we! This isn't
entertainment anymore, this is
coercion! I want the truth!

QUINCY

Boy, you don't know what it takes
to print those papers you put your
pretty little words on. You don't
know who cuts the checks, whose wax
seals we need slapped on every
story. The truth is bigger than you
can imagine! Bigger than some
elephant!

MARCONI

What's bigger than an elephant?

Long pause.

QUINCY

Money.

MARCONI

That's what this is all about?

QUINCY

Yes. Now get on the air and go read
that script or you're clearing your
desk tonight.

SCENE 4

SFX: Echoing over and over: "Now go read that script" from Quincy.

MARCONI

(shakily)

No... I can't... I can't...

MARCONI

(exhausted)

Ladies and gentlemen, today is the
anniversary of the death of our
beloved Topsy. But her death was no
showcase of innovation. It was - it
was the same thing we've been doing
to each other since the dawn of
time. Stabbing. And maiming. And
blaming. that which we don't
understand.

SFX: (Feedback slowly building)

SFX: Hammering on the door.

QUINCY
MARCONI!!!

SFX: Hammering

MARCONI
(devolves into madness)
And the consequences are all around us. The hatred, spreading around like a disease, making us callous and misshapen and cold to each other. We're losing our hearts, 25 years now. It's-

QUINCY
MARCONI!

MARCONI
(mentally breaks)
And you only hear about it once its too late. It's all.. Ha. ha ha. Aha ha ha ha ha. HAHAHAHAHAH. It's all gone- it's all gone- its all gone turvey. Tuuuurrrrryyyy.
Toooooopsy!
Tooooopppppppssssyyyyyyyy!

MARCONI
TOPSY! NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

SFX: As Marconi's voice fades in the static, the circus music scratchily plays, then winds down like a record slowing down.

THE END.