

## Scholar's Choice

### ***The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls: The Movie***

2009

Starring Jools and Lynda Topp

Directed by Leanne Pooley

Produced by Arani Cuthbert

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### **Scholar's Choice: *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls: The Movie***

The recently released documentary *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls: The Movie* (2009) has quickly become an important cultural text in Aotearoa New Zealand. It opened on April 9, 2009 and immediately broke records for best opening day and weekend in New Zealand's movie history. For readers to get some sense of this documentary, it is worth watching the trailer (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>) which provides a tantalising peak into the life story, so far, of the Topp Twins – much loved New Zealand entertainers. But the documentary does more than chart life stories, it highlights major social and political movements that helped shape national discourses of what it feels like to be a 'Kiwi' (the term 'Kiwi' is used by people – of all ethnicities and social classes - who feel they have a New Zealand national identity). I have chosen this documentary for this scholar's choice essay because it links with a number of discourses that inspire my work on how emotions such as 'pride' shape people and place. *Untouchable Girls* illustrates the fluidity and partiality of subjectivities (both individually and collectively) and the ways in which subjectivities can be challenged and contested without humiliation.

While the documentary genre is not generally known for its capacity to engage emotions (but see Smaill 2008), *Untouchable Girls* is worth exploring because of the way in which emotions – such as joy, pride, pleasure, sorrow and shame - shape expressions of place and subjectivities. The emotionality of this documentary (Ahmed, 2004) provokes New Zealand audiences to 'feel', laugh and cry, at our contradictory 'Kiwi' subjectivities. As such *Untouchable Girls* performs affective labour and specifically, emotions give meaning to the various subject positions, relationships and 'geographies of care' (Lawson, 2003) within the documentary.

Numerous reviews of the documentary give some sense of its popularity and ability to capture 'a nation': "This film deserves to receive the amount of love and dedication put in to creating it and will, just like the Topp Twins, make a real difference in whichever circles it travels in"; "A great mix of laughter and heart-felt emotion"; "Very funny, very moving" ... guaranteed to leave the theatre with a spring in your step and a song in your heart"; "Funny, poignant, courageous ... See it"; "Heart-warming ... It's a hilarious musical romp ... this film will leave you feeling proud to be a New Zealander"; "10 out of 10 brilliant entertainment, everyone will love it, the best Kiwi film in years" (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

So, who are the Topp Twins and why are they loved by so many? Comedy writer Paul Horan explains:

I was at the Montreal Comedy Festival ... and I remember a guy from New York saying to me 'So New Zealand, who's the big comedy act in New Zealand?' I said 'Oh some yodeling lesbian twins', and at that point he turned and said 'Oh look there's someone I know' and ran off. Because they [the Topp Twins] on paper, they shouldn't work, on paper they should be commercial death. But they totally deliver to the audience. Time and time again (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

This is perhaps the most intriguing and fascinating thing about the Topp Twins. They are, quite possibly, the world's only country and western singing, yodelling, acting and dancing lesbian twin sisters. The combination of these qualities, as Horan notes, would usually marginalise performers, yet they have attained a unique and popular status within New Zealand culture, and beyond. The twins tour in New Zealand and overseas at festivals such as the Michigan's Women's Music Festival (USA), Edinburgh Fringe Festival (Scotland),

Montreal Comedy Festival (Canada) and the National Country Music Muster (Queensland, Australia). They have been support acts to groups such as Split Enz, Billy Brag, and Midnight Oil. They have also become stars of their own television show 'Don't adjust your twinset' (Television 3, 1996 - 2000). The television series showcases and develops a number of their Kiwi characters, including Camp Mother and Camp Leader, the Bowling Ladies, 'posh socialites from old money' Prue and Dilly Ramsbottom, and very popular Ken and Ken.

*Untouchable Girls* brings together archive footage of protest movements, home movies, interviews with prominent comedians, musicians, the twins' parents, the twins' partners, and even New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark (1999 – 2008), as well as 'mock documentary' moments when the twins' 'characters' talk about the twins. The film's affective power, therefore, goes beyond the seated audience in cinemas to circulate in and impact on public culture. The documentary plays back to New Zealanders half a century of cultural change through political protest – such as Māori land rights and occupations, the Nuclear-Free New Zealand movement, anti-apartheid protests during the 1981 South African Springbok rugby tour, support for the 1986 Homosexual Law Reform bill – and the twins were there, with a microphone, a song and a deep commitment to social justice. Revisiting these times of uncertainty and change shows the twins' care and sense of responsibility for people and the documentary illustrates the way in which emotions of joy, pride, shame and sorrow have power to transform lives. The Topp Twins take seriously collectively-held emotions and values as expressed so vividly in their song and chosen title of their documentary: 'We live in a world that doesn't care too much, you've got to stand up, you've got to have guts. We are untouchable, but we touch, we're untouchable touchable girls' (*Untouchable Girls*, performed in *Untouchable Girls* 2009).

*Untouchable Girls* flows chronologically; early in the documentary the twins' mother 'Jean' and father 'Peter' are interviewed. They reminisce about the twins' love of rural dairy farming life which fostered their passion of country music and their 'down-to-earth' attitudes to life. Jean comments: 'they were really outdoor girls. They hated being inside. They hated having to make beds'. 'They loved the animals', Peter chimes in as the documentary takes us to footage of young New Zealanders in a pet competition at an A and P (Agriculture and Pastoral) Show. Proud children lead lambs and calves sporting competition ribbons around a ring and the twins' song 'Feels like Calf Club Day' plays over this rural scene. In a country that still imagines itself to be rural (yet 86% of New Zealand's total population lives in urban areas (Statistics New Zealand, 2009)) these images undoubtedly provoke nostalgic feelings for New Zealand's pioneering colonial past. The memories may also trigger feelings of idealised childhoods. Yet there were no 'gender' rules growing up in the Topp household. Jools and Lynda milked cows, constructed fences and made hay.

Playing music – busking in city streets or in cafes – was the beginning of their national profile and in their public life they were 'out and proud' lesbians from the start. Charmaine Pountney, a retired feminist scholar who was interviewed in the documentary, remembers:

When I was young the only role models for lesbians were women who had murdered or had been murdered or women who had committed suicide. Poor sad twisted people. And nobody could call the Topp Twins sad or twisted. So they're bringing into the open that healthy cheerful rural cowgirl image.

[They've] just made a huge difference to a lot of us (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

‘We were massively radical at the beginning [of our performance careers]’ the twins admit. They wrote songs for every political protest of the late ‘70s and during the ‘80s. They wrote and performed lesbian and women’s rights songs at the 1977 International Women’s Convention in Hamilton and in their early twenties, ‘with a guitar each and a highly political repertoire’, they moved to Auckland where they became a familiar sight busking on Friday nights. They were so popular they gained a cult following and several hundred people would flock around them as they sang, played guitar and spread political messages about the country.

They reached wider audiences when New Zealand’s Student Arts Council supported a nationwide ‘anti-nuclear’ tour. Archive footage in *Untouchable Girls* shows hundreds of small sea craft attempting to stop the docking of a US nuclear powered war ship. The main concern of the day was whether the ships were also nuclear armed and US policy was to ‘neither confirm nor deny’. The protest against nuclear powered vessels coincided with a lead up to a general election and the twins directed their singing towards politicians, advocating a nuclear-free stance. They wrote a song warning the newly elected Prime Minister in 1984 – David Lange – to keep New Zealand nuclear free:

You got a lot of backing from the people at home

They wanna make the Pacific a nuclear-free zone.

You better stick to your guns ...

If Lange backs off he’s in a lot of trouble right now, lots of trouble, lots of trouble.

We like what you say

We like what you hear

But just remember the people put you there (Lotta Trouble, performed in *Untouchable Girls* 2009).

The documentary cuts to an interview with Billy Bragg, an English singer-song writer and political activist. Appreciating the twins' radical politics, he notes: 'you wouldn't realise how political they are until you scratch the surface and I think that sensibility was something that shone through. [They are an] anarchist variety act!' (*Untouchable Girls* 2009).

Anarchy, mixed with nationalist discourses, is highlighted in the documentary when the twins are shown performing at an Australian folk festival. Audience participation is a trade mark of the twins' live performances and Lynda makes her way towards one man to ask where he's from – he replies 'Boston, Massachusetts'. She exclaims loudly: 'Boston, Massachusetts! I suppose you think you know everything, do ya?', a question that is clearly appreciated by the Australian audience. Lynda tells the audience: 'He says that "I know those shoes don't go with that top"'. Going with the crowd, she then remarks 'You Americans are in the shit, aren't you?' Jools joins in: 'Yeah, even lesbians don't like Bush', to which the crowd roars. Comedy writer and performer John Clarke (well known in New Zealand as the character 'Fred Dag' a parody of male New Zealand farmers) notes that 'they're prepared to do almost anything – they're relatively shameless and that's a good thing to be. And to know how far you're prepared to go, and how far people are prepared to go with you. I think they're deft judges of that and they do it on the run!' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). It's easy to understand why these scenes 'work' in the documentary. Citizens from 'down-under' gang up on 'super-powers' such as the US. Upsetting global discourses of centre and periphery mean it's a guaranteed laugh when smaller nations make fun of larger nations. Yet the trademark of the twins'

humour is, as John Clarke remarks, 'shameless'. They punctuate nationalist humour with a lesbian joke – defying usual entertainment conventions - and get away with it.

The twins' preferred musical genre – country and western – also defies usual conventions. It's not quite 'country', and it's queered, as their lyrics illustrate: 'we sing country music, it keeps us good and gay, there sure seems a lot of us turning out this way' (Country Music, performed in *Untouchable Girls* 2009). Each performance is not quite prepared and all are different. These differences resonate with the audience who appreciate the spontaneity created through and by them. 'They're also having a very solid old as the hills, old fashioned good time' (John Clarke in <http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). Furthermore, the musical genre country and western, is, as Billy Bragg notes 'the most redneck, the most gender specific of all popular culture. To use that as a way of pushing forward gay rights is so subversive. But they're not taking the mickey, that's the key thing. That's who they are' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

The emotive power in this documentary is the way in which performances challenge fixed notions of gender and sexuality, alongside practices that are embedded in New Zealand's national psyche, such as farming. The twins cross-dress to become 'Ken and Ken' and play with, disrupt, and admire, Kiwi farming and sporting masculinities. Ken (Moller) is 'a fourth generation sheep farmer from the Wairarapa ... Ken's best mate, Ken Smythe, is a 'Townie' not used to the great outdoors. A failed TV sportscaster he longs to commentate on the Big Match one day' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). The Ken and Ken are 'good Kiwi blokes' – practical, easy-going, 'no fuss', and likeable. The Kens have become so popular that they are regularly invited to attend and emcee at farming



conferences and A and P Shows. The documentary shows the Kens playing rugby – a pre-match entertainment game - at Hamilton's rugby stadium.

It is with a great deal of irony that viewers are reminded that 28 years ago the twins (as themselves) joined anti-apartheid protests against the South African rugby team tour of New Zealand. The tour was also an opportunity to address the issue of racism in New Zealand while showing solidarity with the oppressed black majority in South Africa. Along with 5,000 other protesters, the twins occupied the rugby pitch, halted the game, chanted 'the whole world is watching', and held up posters that simply said 'Shame'. Riot squad police surrounded the protesters and 30,000 rugby fans made their anger visible and audible. I am reminded of Probyn's (2004) analysis of shame arising from a desire to 'fit in', and at the same time, a feeling of being 'out of place'. Probyn (2004, p. 328) notes that shame is indicative of how the 'contagiousness of collective affects works to expose any breaches in the borders between self and other'. The documentary shows the shame of racism, at home and away.

Māori musician and activist Mereana Pitman was at this protest in Hamilton. She remembers that the twins were very visible, fearless and trustworthy:

We would all sing, to provide encouragement to the people ... there was never a time that we didn't trust them. That was an unusual relationship at the time for Māori activists. Pākehā (non Māori) people were the butt of our activism. But they, [Topp Twins] were not included in that. They knew where the boundaries were (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

Jools explains in her typical understated way: 'In any political movement there is always some music and a song that maybe makes people feel brave or strong or gives them

a sense of freedom. People will listen to a song before they will listen to a speech a lot of the time' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>).

*Untouchable Girls* cuts back to present-day life for the twins – another entertainment job at an A and P Show where they feel comfortable in their country and western roles. Even here, in rural New Zealand, the documentary 'queers' space and bodies by adding an excerpt of the Kens talking about the twins as lesbians. Ken (Moller) says 'I've seen those Topp Twins playing at A and P Shows, but they're no bloody good to us. Nah, no bloody use. Me being a ladies' man of course. Yeah, they're bloody useless, aren't they? They're like tits on a bull, really' (*Untouchable Girls* 2009). In this satirical moment Ken is referring to the twins (and all lesbians) being of 'no bloody use' to heterosexual men, like himself. The documentary moves to the politics of the 1986 Homosexual Law Reform bill. and Prime Minister (1999 – 2008) Helen Clark discusses the difficulties of putting forward this legislation: 'I think the Topps being so proudly who they were helped make [gay] issues more mainstream. It couldn't be sidelined, it had real people, good people, like the Topps associated with it. That helped carry the day' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). This was a bitter fight in New Zealand and feelings of hatred surfaced, as shown through archive footage of a Member of Parliament Norman Jones. He fronted many meetings in 1985 and 1986 opposing the bill and there's no denying his visceral hatred of homosexuality as he shouted to a crowd: 'do not vote to legalise sodomy in this country ... you [gays] are down the drain, you go back into the sewers where you come from' (*Untouchable Girls* 2009). During this time, however, the twins celebrated with much joy what it meant to be queer in New Zealand. The heady days of political activism are not over for the twins and the audience is reminded that the personal is always political and public for the twins. The documentary shows Jools in hospital having treatment for breast

cancer. This is a tender and moving piece of filming, particularly as Lynda contemplates the possibility of life without Jools: 'I had one brief moment when I thought well what if I lose her and that freaked me right out. It was just like I would be nobody' (<http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). They joke together later: 'We thought about writing a song about it, but cancer is the hardest word to rhyme with!' (Lynda Topp in <http://topptwins.com/tv-and-film/untouchable-girls>). Jools and Lynda have turned their attention to campaigns to raise awareness about breast cancer.

*Untouchable Girls* engages with the personal and public antagonisms and celebrations of political, social and sexual relations. This documentary embodies the 'social processes that continually construct and deconstruct the world as we know it' (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002, p. 4) and is a useful 'text' to think through contradictory feelings and subjectivities of nationhood, and to perhaps move towards ideas of collectivities and cultures of caring. Even for the Kiwis that have not seen the documentary, it has generated numerous discussions in multiple spaces across New Zealand. *Untouchable Girls* has produced an affective economy that may give way to ethical relations. It reminds us how emotions have the power to transform lives, from the body to the nation. What it means and feels like to be a New Zealander coalesces in and around *Untouchable Girls* which makes visible cultures of difference, while warmly sending up subjectivities that are usually associated with exclusionary politics. By the end of the documentary it became very clear to me that New Zealanders' sense of belonging to and in the nation is expressed through emotions such as pride, pleasure and joy, shame, and sorrow.

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