



Mae West Live: "SEX, The Drag, and 1920s Broadway"

Author(s): Marybeth Hamilton

Source: *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 82-100

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146217>

Accessed: 25/03/2015 08:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *TDR (1988-)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Mae West Live

SEX, The Drag, and 1920s Broadway

Marybeth Hamilton

Mae West. The name brings familiar images immediately to mind: the platinum hair, the swaying hourglass figure, the ironically murmured invitation to “come up and see me.” Few movie voices are as instantly recognizable; few performance styles as widely, and amusingly, imitated. From a movie career that spanned only ten films, West made herself into an enduring cinema legend—a performer who continues to fascinate a decade after her death.

Over the past five years, in the course of researching West’s early stage and film career, I’ve been struck not only by the strength of that fascination but by its social and political breadth. Throughout her long career onstage and in films, West drew a remarkably diverse range of fans, many of whom held widely varying interpretations of her ironic humor. To feminists (from French novelist Colette to film critic Molly Haskell), West’s tongue-in-cheek swagger signaled her disdainful rejection of traditional modest femininity. To gay men, in contrast, it was the essence of camp, a playful enactment of the theatricality and artificiality that sustain *all* sex roles. And, although West became famous for battles with censors, she exerted an appeal to some social conservatives, who viewed her humor as an agent of moral enlightenment, a gentle satire of and corrective to Hollywood’s overemphasis on passion.

In short, Mae West’s fans were united in their adoration for her but blatantly disagreed about her comedy’s real meaning. That wealth of disparate, even contradictory, interpretations points to precisely what made West such a unique and powerful figure. Mae West could inspire such a breadth of reaction from such a wide range of fans because she was no ordinary sex symbol. What made her screen performances unique was not so much her sexuality as the aura in which she clothed it: a hint of good-humored self-mockery, a touch of irony, a suggestion that she was not simply playing a sex symbol but parodying one too. If her fans still disagree about the “real” Mae West, the reason lies in that enigmatic style: the suggestion, embedded within her screen performances, that more is going on than lies on the surface, a vague something that is left up to the viewer to interpret. West’s performances seem to be infused with some sort of a joke—but it is up to the viewer to supply her own punch line.

The Drama Review, 36, no. 4 (T136), Winter 1992

That such an open-ended style should form the basis of West's appeal would not surprise many analysts of mass culture. Historian Peter Bailey, for example, in his study of the British comic strip "Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday," has argued that 20th-century mass culture works by taking intriguing but socially divisive entities—class, sexuality—and investing their treatment with a deliberate ambiguity, an open-ended quality that allows a diverse public to read its meaning in a variety of ways (Bailey 1983).

In West's case her own enigmatic persona developed out of the social and sexual tensions of New York City in the 1920s—and, more specifically, out of the need to negotiate the sizable and varied middle-class public flocking to the Broadway stage. In 1928 West created a Broadway hit with her self-scripted play *Diamond Lil* (brought to the screen in 1933 as *She Done Him Wrong*). West played Diamond Lil, a scarlet woman on the turn-of-the-century Bowery, and in doing so introduced the persona on which she built her career—a wry and humorous dance-hall madam, devastatingly sexy to all the men around but seemingly amused by her own allure. That play brought West critical raves and a broad spectrum of fans—by all accounts spanning divisions of gender, class, and generation, from the morally conservative to the sexually adventurous.

This essay explores the roots of West's performance style and the resonances it carried to its Broadway audience. To make those resonances clear, we must look, not at *Diamond Lil*, but at the two years that immediately preceded it. *Diamond Lil* brought Mae West a mass public for the first time, but it did not rocket her from obscurity to stardom. West had been a household name in New York since 1926, a full two years before *Diamond Lil*, but she was famous, or rather notorious, with a very different type of renown. From 1926 to 1928, West was known throughout New York as a pornographer, infamous for her association with two sensational (and, according to many, obscene) productions.

In 1926 Mae West was an ambitious actress who had failed to find legitimate work. At age 32 she was a 25-year veteran of the popular theatre but her name was virtually unknown. The last few years had been particularly dispiriting. After repeated failures in vaudeville and musical comedy, West seems to have become a featured player on the Mutual Burlesque Wheel (or Circuit) between 1922 and 1925 (Tuska 1973:30–31).

That she did so indicates just how far her career had plummeted. Burlesque in general was avoided by all ambitious legitimate performers, and the Mutual Wheel carried the greatest stigma of all. Founded in July 1922, it gained instant notoriety through cheap, sensational revues flaunting no-holds-barred lewdness—in the words of one chronicler, "such feverish shimmying and shaking," "cooching and undressing," as had never been envisioned in burlesque theatres before (Zeidman 1967:92–98).

Having sunk so low in the popular theatre, in April 1926, West embarked on a last-ditch effort to gain mainstream Broadway success and, in so doing, began an adventure that would make her one of New York's most infamous celebrities. On the strength of financial backing put together by rather dubious means, West rented a theatre, hired a director, and with what little money remained, staged a play she had written especially for herself, a tale of a Montreal prostitute to which she gave the provocative title *SEX*.

The play was unanimously panned by New York's theatre critics, all of whom predicted its immediate failure and some of whom called for police intervention. Yet despite this condemnation—or rather, no doubt, in part because of it—*SEX* became one of the major hits of the 1926 season, playing to mostly full houses until forced to close in March 1927.



1. In *Diamond Lil* (1928) Mae West once again played a prostitute—as she had in *SEX* two years previous. No performance shots exist of her earlier “realistic” and more risqué work on Broadway. Here we can see that Mae West’s self-mocking, draglike experimentations are already put into practice in this never-raided and long-running show. (Photos courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the Performing Arts Research Center, New York Public Library)

West’s production of *SEX* was sufficiently sensational in itself to have guaranteed its creator citywide notoriety. But West topped her reputation in early 1927, writing and staging a play in which she herself did not appear, but which she proudly advertised as her own work. She billed the play as a “homosexual comedy-drama,” and called it *The Drag*. Throughout January 1927, *The Drag* played a series of widely publicized preview performances in Connecticut and New Jersey; by early February, against the united opposition of theatrical producers, antvice reformers, and public officials, it stood poised on the New York City limits, making loud preparations for a Broadway run. But the premiere was prevented by the police.

On 9 February 1927, New York’s vice squad raided *SEX* and two other Broadway productions, charging all three with public obscenity. Under pressure of an impending trial, West had little choice but to abandon *The Drag*. This did not, however, improve her fate in court. As *SEX*’s author, coproducer, and star, West was found guilty of writing and staging an obscene production. In April she entered the Women’s Reformatory on Roosevelt Island to serve a ten-day sentence (Eells and Musgrove 1982:73).

To any diehard Mae West fan these events are well known. Over the course of her long career, West turned her Broadway arrest into part of her public mythology, portraying her jailers as she would always describe her Hollywood censors—as puritanical killjoys who could not see the humor of her good-natured, ironic mockery of sex. But the facts themselves tell another story. In 1926 Mae West was a very different performer than she would become only a few years later. As we shall see, when West cre-

ated *SEX* and *The Drag*, ironic self-mockery could not have been further from her mind.

SEX starred West as Margy Lamont, a tough, bitter, imperious prostitute who presides over the roughest brothel in all of Montreal. Over the course of three acts, the play follows Margy from Montreal to Trinidad to the plush suburbs of New York, where she travels in pursuit of money, adventure, and sex. The plot is relatively convoluted—an absurd and at times incoherent blend of comedy and melodrama—and I need not attempt to describe its intricacies in full. For my purposes, the crucial moments of the play are those on which, above all others, its notoriety rested—Acts I and II, when we see Margy in her element, the reigning whore in a cheap Montreal brothel and the presiding entertainer in a sleazy Trinidad nightclub. In these largely comic scenes, Margy herself is always the focus, bantering suggestively with her sponging pimp, enflaming the lust of her male customers, and dismissing unwanted admirers with derisive comments on their sexual prowess.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the amount of condemnation that critics heaped upon *SEX*. These were not simply negative reviews, dismissing the play in the vocabulary of dramatic criticism, in terms of structure, technique, and execution. *SEX*'s critics all but abandoned that vocabulary and used terminology that made clear their fundamental revulsion at what they had seen onstage. One typical example came in the *New York Daily Mirror*, on 30 April 1926 under the headline “*SEX* an Offensive Play. Monstrosity Plucked From Garbage Can, Destined to Sewer.” The reviewer continued: “This production is not for the police. It comes rather in the province of our Health Department. It is a sore spot in the midst of our fair city that needs disinfecting.”¹

The *Daily Mirror* was a tabloid, and thus habitually given to hyperbole. Yet in making their case against *SEX* even the more restrained papers employed a vocabulary of infection, disease, and filth. The script, wrote the *New Yorker*, on 8 May 1926 was composed of “street sweepings;” the play, argued another critic, left the viewer afflicted with “that ‘dark brown’ taste which results from proximity to anything indescribably filthy.” The reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* was somewhat more subdued, but he too came to essentially the same point. “*SEX*,” he wrote on 27 April 1926, was

an ostensible reflection of the underworld as it is supposed to exist in Montreal and Trinidad. A world of ruthless, evil-minded, foul-mouthed crooks, harlots, procurers and other degenerate members of that particular zone of society. Never in a long experience of theatre-going have we met with a set of characters so depraved.[. . .] All the barriers of conventional word and act that the last few seasons of the theatre have shown us were swept away and we were shown not sex but lust—stark, naked lust.

SEX, in short, created a furor, but one that Mae West in subsequent years was never at a loss to explain. *SEX*, she argued, had appeared at a time when Broadway shied away from all mention of physical passion. The legitimate theatre in 1926 did not present sexual subject matter, West asserted—it did not, for that matter, even employ the word. Before she used “sex” as a play title, it had never appeared in the mass media, at least not to indicate physical acts. (Its only usages, West claimed, had been in medi-

cal journals, or as a synonym for gender—"the fair sex," "the gentler sex.") No city newspaper, she asserted, would advertise her play under its real title; instead, they ran notices for "Mae West in That Certain Play" (Eells and Musgrove 1982:62).

The truth, however, as one might guess, is more complex than West paints it. She did not introduce sex to Broadway. By 1926, Broadway abounded in plays dealing with sexual relations, including prostitution: the 1925/26 theatre season, for example, featured such hits as *The Shanghai Gesture*, the story of China's most successful madam; and *Lulu Belle*, the tale of a mean, merciless, unrepentant mulatto hooker seducing black and white lovers from Harlem to Paris. Advertisements for *SEX*, with the title appearing in large, boldfaced capitals, did appear in every New York City newspaper; moreover, they did so alongside ads that more than outshone them in garish suggestiveness.

This was, it must be noted, a relatively new state of affairs, and one that was provoking no end of criticism from New York's clerics and civic reformers. Ever since the mid-19th century, when the "legitimate theatre" first marked itself off as a discrete genre of public entertainment, distinct from variety theatre and melodrama, it had geared itself specifically toward a middle-class public. Not only had its ticket prices catered to such patrons (discouraging poorer ones), but its content had as well. Until the early years of the 20th century, the legitimate theatre specialized in decorous, sentimental, desensitized productions tailored for a Victorian middle class that found any staged representation of sexuality to be dangerous and degrading.

But by World War I, a new generation of middle-class patrons began to fill Broadway theatres—a generation that harbored much less suspicion of sexual expressiveness. By the 1920s, the old genteel productions had by no means disappeared, but far more producers catered to the younger crowd by offering distinctly racier fare. Indeed, though productions like *The Shanghai Gesture* and *Lulu Belle* aroused comment (and vigorous protest from social reformers), they were common enough to be perceived as part of an established Broadway genre, the "sex play."

With those facts in mind, we must interpret critics' response to *SEX* in a different light than that suggested by West. Broadway critics in the 1920s were, no less than audiences, a product of this generational change: they were accustomed to sexually expressive plays, in many cases praising them; and they prided themselves on their urbane sophistication, their bemused tolerance for even inept producers' infatuation with sex. Their response to bad sex-plays was typically ridicule, not condemnation. Moreover, they were capable of responding to these productions as theatre, of analyzing them in the terms of dramatic criticism, with attention to structure, technique, and execution.

But *SEX*, clearly, was different. With *SEX*, critics' carefully wrought tone of urbanity disintegrated, replaced by one that sputtered with talk of disease, infection, and filth. Something more complex than "prudery" was at work here. Reviewers did not simply hate West's play; they were incapable of responding to it in terms of their trade, incapable of responding to it as theatre. Indeed, that it was not theatre was precisely the point. Remember the distinction that the *Herald Tribune* reviewer had drawn: that West's play presented "not sex but lust—stark, naked lust." Critics' words continually implied that *SEX* was no theatrical representation of a brothel, but that it uncomfortably resembled a real one; that it was not merely about sex, but was somehow a literal presentation of it, a "sore" that fell in the province of the Health Department or vice squad. It did not belong on

Broadway, wrote the theatre journal *Variety* on 28 April 1926; rather, it suited another neighborhood, another class. It was, the journal argued, “a nasty red-light district show.”

Critics labeled *SEX* as offensively “realistic,” a word whose meaning is always hard to pin down. We can more readily penetrate the controversy if we depart from their vocabulary—if we investigate not its “realism,” but its style of representation, and the meanings and resonances that theatrical style carried. *SEX* shocked critics because it presented sexuality in a style that “legitimate theatre” scorned. It created its brothel by drawing on “illegitimate” sources that, in the context of Broadway, made it unusual and distinctly unnerving.

In part, *SEX* took its unsettlingly “authentic” tone from its humor. The play did not really have much of a plot. The first act was particularly loose in construction. Set in a Montreal brothel, it gained what coherence it had not by any development of character or situation but by a series of comic sketches: rapid-fire exchanges between Margy Lamont and her pimp, her fellow prostitutes, and her male customers—exchanges laden with leering double-entendres and punctuated with unmistakably graphic gestures. In one of *SEX*'s most notorious scenes, a customer named Lt. Gregg loomed provocatively over Margy while explaining what it was that he had waited three months to give her.

GREGG: Oh, I've got something for you, wait until you see this, wait until you see this.

MARGY: Well, come on and let's see it.

GREGG: You'll get it, you'll get it. I don't mind telling you I had an awful time saving it for you. Why, all the women were fighting for it.

MARGY: It better be good.

GREGG: It's good alright. It's the best you could get, but you've got to be very careful not to bend it.

(West 1926:I, 15)

In speaking the final line, Lt. Gregg accompanied it by what one critic described as “a Rabelaisian gesture to indicate a certain anatomical virtuosity” (Nathan 1972 [1928]:90). After completing the “Rabelaisian gesture,” Lt. Gregg reached into his pocket and pulled out Margy's gift—an ostrich feather.

This style of humor, marked by rapid-fire comic banter, transparently sexual double meanings, and graphic physical movements, characterized one type of theatre above all: the burlesque show. Nearly all of the critics who condemned *SEX* mentioned just that resemblance. To understand how damning such a comparison was, it is necessary to turn to burlesque history, to see the kind of seamy associations it held for anyone who knew even a little about theatrical performance.

By the 1910s and '20s, burlesque had firmly established itself as the outcast of popular theatre—insofar, as it was regarded as theatre at all. It had taken root in urban areas of the United States in the late 19th century, a mishmash of suggestive songs, dances, and comedy sketches that became a fixture of working-class, male-oriented entertainment districts like New York's Bowery, alongside concert saloons and variety theatres. But unlike variety, which under the flashier name of vaudeville was able to tone down its performers, move to central shopping and theatre districts, and broaden its appeal to a middle-class public, burlesque never managed to “class itself up.”

Indeed, if anything, burlesque sank in social status in the early 20th century, drawing an audience that middle-class observers regarded as the most dissolute and degraded of the male working class. In the 1910s and '20s, burlesque in New York largely remained outside the Broadway mainstream, concentrated instead in lower-class areas associated with an underworld of drugs and prostitution. Because they prided themselves on their ostentatious wickedness, on showing what was unshowable in respectable entertainments, burlesque theatres from the 1910s on were periodically investigated by the Committee of Fourteen, a group of New York social reformers intent on combating the spread of commercialized vice. To many observers in the 1920s, burlesque theatres seemed little removed from brothels, and burlesque actresses themselves were widely assumed to be prostitutes (Zeidman 1967; Sobel 1931; Hartt 1909:7; Edwards 1915:46).

Burlesque humor and the associations it carried were part of what gave *SEX* its offensive appearance of "realism," but an even more important factor was Mae West herself. Critics were riveted by West's performance—riveted, however, not with pleasure, but with a kind of horrified fascination. Over and over in the words they used to describe her—"raw," "crude," "unvarnished"—one senses critics' discomfort at finding themselves faced, not with a conventional theatrical portrait of a prostitute, but with something that came uncomfortably close to the real thing.

West gave this unsettling depiction in part by her plainspoken definition of prostitution as an economic, and specifically working-class, activity. Margy Lamont was clearly, unmistakably a working prostitute, explicitly linked, as all real-life prostitutes were, to the cash nexus fueling the urban vice economy. She took money for sex, and West's play made no attempt to gloss over that fact. To the contrary. Much of its "repellent" humor turned on just that circumstance, dwelling on it with a kind of gleeful relish. Take, for example, the following moment, when Margy responds to a rival prostitute's accusation that she has stolen one of her customers, Sailor Dan from Kansas.

MARGY (*flipping through her customer book*): Sailor Dan from Kansas, Sailor Dan from Kansas—oh Sailor Dan from Kansas. Yeh Sailor Dan from Kansas, flat feet, asthma, check came back, o, baby, I'll make you a present of that bird, he's yours. (West 1926:1, 12).

Jokes like this made glaringly clear the fundamental reality of prostitution: a meeting of bodies and an exchange of cash, and often (as the bounced check reminds us) very little cash at that. It was a jarring truth, at least in a theatrical context. For while prostitutes had long been depicted on the legitimate stage, they had assumed a relatively romanticized form that had obscured the reality of what they did, its place at the bottom of the economic order, and its nature as paid labor.

Margy, in contrast, was explicitly a sexual commodity, an ill-paid sex worker who traded her body on the streets. West made that fact unmistakable. As West embodied her, Margy was palpably from the lower orders: she spoke in working-class argot (assailing a female adversary as a "dirty charity"—"charity" being street slang for a woman who bartered sexual favors, not for cash, but for a "good time"); and she voiced a violent hatred of "decent folk"—of the supposedly "respectable" who sin on the side and who exhort the poor to uplift themselves while denying them the means to do so.

Margy is bitterly conscious of herself as a member of an oppressed class, and the grimness and harshness of her manner are reflected in the world

she inhabits. Her Montreal red-light district is a mean and unglamorous place, untouched by sentiment, charm, or romance. Rife with class antagonisms, it's the kind of place a middle-class person would feel distinctly uncomfortable upon entering. As a critic from the *New York Herald Tribune* noted on 23 January 1927, "It may be said of [Mae West] and *SEX* that they do not make sin attractive. The hell they picture is uninviting, a horrible place whose principal lady-viper has a tough hiss, an awkward strut and an overplump figure."

That last statement leads me to what is really the most crucial element in West's "unsettling" portrait of Margy Lamont. Her depiction of Margy's lower-class status would not have been nearly so disturbing had it not been reinforced by her peculiarly vivid handling of sexuality. By the time she took the stage in *SEX*, and probably even as far back as her vaudeville years, Mae West had developed a distinctive manner of moving and speaking on the stage. Entering a scene, she did not so much walk as ooze—moving with a controlled, deliberate slouch, her full hips swaying in a languid rhythm. She delivered her lines in nasal yet resonant tones that spilled from the corner of her mouth, lending every word an insinuating sexual toughness.

To anyone who has ever seen Mae West onscreen, all that might sound familiar, but in *SEX* there was a crucial difference: there was not the least hint of an ironic joke. There was no amiable self-mockery in *SEX*, no suggestion, either in the script or in West's performance, that she was parodying a sexy woman as well as playing one. Remembering this is crucial to understanding the startling impact of West's physicality; as contemporary reaction makes clear, West's sexual style, unmediated by self-mockery, evoked a lower-class world with nearly palpable, tangible force.

To understand how it did so, one has to look at the broader context of female sexual expressiveness on the Broadway stage. As I suggested earlier, Broadway did not shy away from such presentations. But its representation of female sexuality reflected the fashions and styles of a middle-class public, a public that was not nearly as comfortable with women's sexuality as it often liked to pretend, a public that prided itself on its sexual sophistication while remaining uneasy with eroticism's overt manifestations.

High fashion in the 1920s, for example, brought sexual expressiveness to the wardrobes of respectable women more directly than ever before, but conveyed it in restrained or teasing fashion—through bound breasts, a straight silhouette, and a slender, boyish body that evoked aloof sophistication or sporty independence rather than full-fleshed eroticism.

Middle-class entertainment, like middle-class fashion, reflected this unease. The Ziegfeld Girls from Flo Ziegfeld's *Follies* took the stage with their breasts bared, but they did so with an aloof, near-motionless elegance—a style that gave them a detached, aristocratic allure (Toll 1976: 317–19). *Lulu Belle*, in contrast, put its prostitute heroine emphatically in motion. But as portrayed by actress Leonore Ulrich she was a stylishly slim, buoyant, kinetically charged woman whose sexiness, through jazzy physical exuberance, emerged flapper-style.

What Mae West displayed in *SEX* was indeed, as critics charged, raw and unvarnished by comparison: eroticism conveyed through an insolent nasal hiss; an awkward, deliberate slouch; and the graphic undulations of her thick-set body. The heaviness of that body, clad in short and flimsy modern attire, was particularly crucial. In the 1920s, while a boyish silhouette defined respectable sexuality, a thick-set body like West's brought seamy and distinctly lower-class associations to mind: burlesque actresses, for one, who were widely equated with prostitutes and whose famously

overblown figures signaled their supposedly aggressive embrace of sensual passion.

Like a burlesque chorus girl, Mae West as Margy Lamont manipulated her full figure to convey a wide ranging sexual appetite, freely indulged and unabashedly savored. So convincing was she, and so unsettling, that most critics could not see it as a performance. While none accused West of being a prostitute herself, a few implied that she received actual sexual pleasure onstage—in their minds the most offensive “realism” of all. One disgusted *New York Daily Mirror* reviewer assessed West’s performance writing on 31 December 1926: “[She] cavorts her own sex about the stage in one of the most reviling exhibits allowed public display. She undresses before the public, and appears to enjoy doing so.”

If in *SEX* West brought the urban underworld alive with an unsettling realism, she accomplished the same, by different means, in her “homosexual comedy-drama,” *The Drag*.

West was not the first to bring homosexuality to the legitimate stage. In September 1926, four months before her play’s out-of-town premiere, Broadway saw the debut of *The Captive*, an American adaptation of Edouard Bourdet’s *La Prisonnière*. Emphasizing the psychic turmoil engendered by same-sex passion, Bourdet’s drama was restrained in the extreme. It focused attention on the anguish of the “captive,” a young woman tempted by lesbian desire. But the woman is never seen to act on that desire; moreover, her “captor,” her lesbian seductress, never appears onstage.

Bourdet’s drama quickly became one of the big hits of the 1926/27 season. Critics lauded its intellectual rigor and intense dramatic power, and spectators jammed the Empire Theatre. For her part, West composed *The Drag*, which she advertised as “A Male ‘Captive’” in an unabashed effort to capitalize on *The Captive*’s spectacular success. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, *The Drag* carried a very different focus from *The Captive*. Observing the crowds lined up for Bourdet’s drama, West surmised that they were interested not in intellectual rigor but in something far more sensational.

The Drag ostensibly told the story of Rolly Kingsbury, the son of a wealthy, respectable New York City judge married to the daughter of a Park Avenue doctor. Their marriage, the audience learns in the first scene, has problems, and by the end of the first act the audience learns why: Rolly is homosexual, involved with a set of flamboyant male friends. He married simply to hide his true nature from his family. For the remainder of the drama, the audience watches the consequences of Rolly’s deception: the unhappiness of his wife, the confusion of his heterosexual friends, and finally the death of Rolly himself, shot by a despondent young man named David Caldwell, Rolly’s former lover.

West prefaced the play with what might be called an “educational” prolog: two brief scenes involving an enlightened physician who argues that homosexuals are not criminals but victims of a disease, deserving compassion and pity. Under cover of that preface, West posed *The Drag* as a vehicle of sex education. Through the story of Rolly Kingsbury and David Caldwell, she ostensibly illustrated the tragic consequences of society’s cruel censure of what was in reality a curable sickness.

Having described that, I must stop and acknowledge what is probably no surprise: this ostensible message was pure pretense having nothing to do with what *The Drag* was actually up to. West dispatched her “educational” scenes so hastily that her audience could barely have had a chance to absorb what was said. With the exit of Dr. Richmond a scant five min-

2. Mae West’s Broadway hit *Diamond Lil* was made into the film *She Done Him Wrong* in 1933. With this film, she became a national star. (Photo courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the Performing Arts Research Center, The New York Public Library)



utes into the play, the “pity versus censure” debate disappears, to be resurrected only briefly at the play’s conclusion when the anguished David Caldwell returns to explain his murder of Rolly. The scenes centering on Rolly Kingsbury consumed perhaps half, if not less, of *The Drag*’s actual running time. These “educational” scenes provided a convenient pretense, but they were not at all what West knew her audience had come for.

The scenes that formed *The Drag*’s real focus showcased a large supporting cast of flamboyantly expressive homosexual men recruited from New York’s burgeoning gay underworld. This part of *The Drag*’s history never managed to make it into Mae West’s reminiscences. According to a writer for *Studio* magazine, in 1926 West and manager James Timony paid a late night visit to

a dimly lit Village hangout for chorus girls and boys. [. . .] Word got out that she was casting a play about homosexuals [. . .] and those kids really turned it on. [. . .] She did not stay long and before she left borrowed an order book from the waiter and personally wrote passes for everyone present, telling them to see her show [SEX] the following night and then stay for a regular tryout. (in Eells and Musgrove 1982:65)

From the tryout West and her director, Edward Elsner, assembled 60 male players for the supporting company and began afternoon rehearsals at Daly’s 63rd Street Theatre. At that point West was probably working with only a fragmentary script. To judge by reports that began to surface in *Variety*, such as the following from the 12 January 1927 edition, much of what audiences eventually saw in *The Drag* originated in the raunchy ad libs of her very uninhibited cast.

“THE DRAG” REHEARSING WITH SIXTY “VILLAGERS”

[. . .] Rehearsals are being held daily at the 63rd Street, with the chances that a good pre-gross might be rolled up if admission could be charged to watch the Villagers practicing.

[. . .] At rehearsals Elsner permits the “our sex” members to cavort and carry on as they like. Results are more natural and spontaneous.

Out of West’s “natural and spontaneous” rehearsals grew two lengthy scenes that formed *The Drag*’s highpoints. The first, lasting for most of the second act, presents a visit to Rolly Kingsbury’s apartment by four male friends—Clem, Rosco, Winnie, and “the Duchess”—in which the group discusses a party they are to attend the following night. Assuming (so the stage directions inform us) “artistic” poses, shrieking and giggling, and flourishing powder puffs, the men gather around the piano for a few musical numbers and needle each other with bawdy jibes delivered in affected, effeminate slang.

DUCHESS: Oh, my goodness. I’ve got the most gorgeous new drag. Black satin very tight, with a long train of rhinestones.

CLEM: Wait until you see the creation I’m wearing dearie. Virginal white, no back, with oceans of this and oceans of that, trimmed with excitement in front. You know I’m more the flapper type, not so much like a canal boat.

DUCHESS: Creation—ha! That old thing. I knew that three years ago. Oh, Annie.

CLEM (*very angry*): For Chris' sake sit. This big bitch thinks nobody has anything or looks like anything but her.

DUCHESS: Oh, shut up.

ROLLY: Say, how about a little drink?

CLEM: Yes! How about a little drink?

DUCHESS: I don't mind a little drink once in a while.

CLEM: Why you big Swede. You'd take it through a funnel if anybody would give it to you.

WINNIE: Funnel? That's nothing. I take it through a hose. Whoops! (West 1927:II, 4)

The real high point of the play, however, came in Act III, with the scene from which the play took its title. For a full 30 minutes, West showcased Rolly Kingsbury's "drag ball," an elaborate get-together for his uninhibited male friends. While a jazz orchestra played "hot" music in the background, the male supporting cast capered onstage, some dressed in women's gowns and some in tuxedos, and all, according to 2 February 1927's *Variety*, "rouged, lip-sticked and liquid-whited to the last degree." Between the group numbers came "specialty" songs ("How Come You Do Me Like You Do," "Goody-Goody-Good") performed by individual cast members, including one man "dressed as an Oriental dancer, bare legs and wearing only what amounts to a brassiere above the waist," who accompanied his singing with a suggestive "muscle dance." At moments, the musical numbers halted for snappy, burlesque-style comic bits—insults, jibes, and double-entendres on the subject of police raids and male lovers.

WINNIE: My but you're getting thin.

KATE: I am not. I can at least cling to a man without wearing him out. You're terribly fat.

WINNIE: Fat! I should say not. I'm the type that men prefer. I can at least go through the navy yard without having the flags drop to half mast.

KATE: Listen, dearie—pull in your aerial, you're full of static. I'm just the type that men crave. The type that burns 'em up. Why, when I walk up Tenth Avenue, you can smell the meat sizzling in Hell's Kitchen. (West 1927:III, 2–3)

To appreciate what West was up to, it is important to see that her supporting cast was not a group of otherwise isolated oddities. They were part of a New York City subculture that, while relatively well established, was still new enough to seem shadowy and mysterious to most heterosexual New Yorkers.

When the character Kate spoke of strolling through Hell's Kitchen, he referred to only one among many New York City neighborhoods—including Harlem, Greenwich Village, and the Tenderloin south of Times Square—that since the end of the 19th century housed a network of gay bars, bathhouses, and other meeting places. New York was not the only American city to see the rise of a gay underworld during those years. As newspaper accounts, medical case histories, and personal correspondences testify, gay life took root in major centers across the nation, as gay men and women staked out urban spaces and established institutions in Washington, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco (Chauncey 1986; D'Emilio 1983; Katz 1970).

Why the sudden growth of what was a distinctly new type of community? Certainly, it was not that homosexual desire had never before existed. Even looking at American history alone, one finds numerous prosecutions for homosexual behavior, of both women and men, as early as the Colonial period.

But, as historian John D’Emilio points out, homosexual behavior is not the same as homosexual identity. It was not until the late 19th century that a complex set of social changes enabled individuals to turn homosexual desire into a personal identity, a way of life they sought out with others like themselves. Those years saw the creation of an ideological climate in which sexual desire was separated from procreation and “personal life” distinguished from work life, with “personal life” identified as the site of the authentic self. In that climate, men and women with homosexual desires saw those desires as defining who they were. In the relative anonymity offered by cities, they constructed a homosexual identity and a distinctive social life. By the early 20th century, New York’s homosexual population was more than a group of disparate individuals who happened to be drawn to members of their own sex. It was, in the words of a correspondent of British sexologist Havelock Ellis, “a community distinctly organized—[with] words, customs, traditions of its own” (in Katz 1970: 52).

The Drag showcased those “words, customs, traditions,” exploiting them to intrigue and titillate mainstream theatre audiences. West’s characters laced their raucous banter with geographically specific references to their community’s distinctive pastimes. The Duchess spoke of “cruising” Central Park and Riverside Drive; Clem described sashaying around Times Square; and others made reference to summer excursions to particular New York coastal resorts.

Specific words and phrases were also part of the novelty the play offered. Addressing each other as “molls,” “queers,” and “queens” and describing themselves as “gay,” West’s characters brought spectators in contact with a large and colorful in-group vocabulary organized around gender reversal and rife with specific sexual overtones. When, for example, Clem pursued a burly and presumably straight Brooklyn taxi driver, another character leered knowingly, “Rough trade, dearie”—from which the audience could infer that “rough trade” designated a heterosexual, working-class male who, for a price, indulged in homosexual sex. Much of this slang has entered the mainstream in the past decades—so much so, in fact, that we must make an effort to sense its foreignness to 1920s ears. So odd did the jargon sound to many that several reporters covering *The Drag*’s out-of-town tryouts felt obliged to act as translators—particularly when it came to the play’s “mysterious” title.

Finally, West spotlighted the novelty and outrageousness of gay life by encouraging her cast to “play up” and exaggerate what was already a distinctive in-group style. Characters like Clem, Winnie, and the Duchess were markedly, flamboyantly effeminate. They minced when they walked, postured suggestively when they stood, and assumed “artistic” poses when they seated themselves in chairs. Many of the male characters had feminine names; others referred to themselves as “women” and “girls” and addressed their fellows with feminine pronouns. Not only did their slang evoke “womanish” images—so too did the tone in which it was delivered: shrill, giddy, and affected, punctuated with bitchy insults and hysterical shrieks.

WINNIE: Oh, you look gorgeous. What a lovely robe. I have one just like it. Oh.



3. In 1926, Mae West rented a theatre, hired a director, and staged a play—SEX—which she had written for herself. This tale of a Montreal prostitute, pictured here, was wildly successful—despite bad reviews—but the production was raided and closed by the vice squad on 9 February 1927. Found guilty of obscenity, Mae West was thrown in jail for ten days. (Photos courtesy of The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Arts Research Center, New York Public Library)

CLEM: Sit down and shut up.

WINNIE: Oh, for goodness sake.

CLEM: I want you to meet the Duchess.

ROLLY: Oh, the Duchess, yes. I think we have met before. I just can't remember where.

DUCHESS: It must have been my apartment on Riverside Drive.

CLEM: Your apartment on Riverside Drive? What are you doing? Trying to make us think you're a kept woman?

WINNIE: Oh, Oh (*screams*). (West 1927:II, 3)

For anyone encountering it 60 years after its premiere, this aspect of *The Drag* can be hard to stomach. And, indeed, no one would deny that the play, with its shrill and preening homosexuals and mincing drag queens painted a one-dimensional portrait of New York City gay life. Depth of

characterization was not what West was interested in; nor, for that matter, was she concerned with the dignity of those she presented. She was, without question, exploiting them, using them for the fascination she believed they held for the public.

But it is important to see that West sought to do so by drawing out behavior that did play an important part in 1920s gay reality. As historians are just beginning to document, that early gay community had moments of public visibility in the 1920s. And while the “drag queen” may not have represented the whole of gay culture, he did set the pace for gay public life in the 1920s, far more than he does today.

The drag queen and his effete, flamboyant though conventionally attired brother, exemplified what historian George Chauncey has called “the culture of effeminacy,” the distinctive style of behavior and mannerism that dominated gay public interaction since that community’s beginnings in the late 19th century. Chauncey’s investigation of New York’s early gay community suggests that, far more commonly than in later years, gay men found in affected and “womanish” banter, even feminine pronouns, the clearest means of participating in a gay social world. He writes:

More gay men in the 1920s than today *did* adopt effeminate mannerisms: they provided one of the few sure means of announcing one’s sexuality. But acting like a “fairy” was more than just a code; it was the dominant role model available to men forming a gay identity, and one against which every gay man had to measure himself. (1986:29–30)

For some, effeminacy became a way of life, a persona both public and private by which they announced their sexual tastes; for others, it was a style adopted to fit the occasion, set aside for work but put on after hours for New York’s vital homosexual nightlife. At night, effeminate style set the tone, particularly at what became New York’s largest gay social event in the 1920s—its series of drag balls, held six or seven times each year at Harlem’s Rockland Palace, the old Madison Square Garden, and the Astor Hotel, and often attended by thousands (Chauncey 1986:29–30).

Mae West, for her part, put those drag balls under the Broadway spotlight. Though she presented her play as an exercise in sex education, in reality she highlighted not a conventional story that aimed to illuminate, but a jumbled mishmash that aimed to intrigue—a random assortment of songs, dances, and racy one-liners bearing little connection to the play’s supposed plot and focusing instead on her players’ “real life” practices: their distinctive slang, their habitual customs, and their characteristic style.

This may not sound like conventional theatre—and, indeed, most of West’s Broadway colleagues refused to dignify it by that name. But in fact there was commercial precedent, however lowly, for the kind of entertainment West offered in *The Drag*. Since the turn of the century, sensational and suggestive gay performers had been a staple of certain New York nightlife districts, as entertainer Jimmy Durante could attest. Durante got his first job as a pianist in a gay bar on New York’s Bowery; after the club was raided in 1905, he went to work at Diamond Tony’s, a rundown saloon on Coney Island. As he remembered in 1930, Diamond Tony’s drew its public with entertainment not too dissimilar to that offered in *The Drag*.

At our place and Jack’s [the club across the street], the entertainers were all boys who danced together and lisped. They called themselves Edna May and Leslie Carter and Big Tess and things like that. You know. Just like the first joint I worked in. When they had sung their

numbers, they sat at the tables the way hostesses do today, “spinning their web,” as they called it. Some of them were six feet tall and built like Dempsey, so it was never very healthy to make nasty cracks.

Outside of the queer entertainers, our place was no different from most of the others. The usual number of girls hung out there, and the customers were mostly on the level; that is to say, they were not interested in our entertainers any more than they would have been in the freaks that filled the Surf Avenue sidewalks.

It was a tough enough joint, but it didn't bother me, even if I was only fifteen. The Bowery, where I was brought up, isn't any sort of Sunday-school picnic, and I had seen enough to get acclimated to almost anything. (Durante and Kofoed 1931:54–55)

Since the turn of the century, concert saloons on the Bowery and Coney Island had brought members of New York's gay underworld onstage as a standard part of their entertainment fare. And they were not alone—Bowery burlesque houses did the same. In burlesque, the effeminate and suggestive “nance” (as gay men were termed in underground slang) became a fixture of each evening's entertainment, offering patrons ribald amusement in company with cootch dancers and raunchy comedians. By 1910, if not before, “nance humor” of much the sort that Mae West's play would offer had become, in *Variety's* words, in the 2 February 1927 edition, “a staple of low comedy.”

But an important distinction separated West's endeavor from burlesque and the concert saloon. The latter had been concentrated in the Bowery and Coney Island, which were distinctly stigmatized areas of the city—neighborhoods regarded by the middle class as debased, corrupting territory, where social interaction revolved around alcohol, drugs, and male and female prostitution. Bowery saloons and burlesque halls offered underworld entertainment to underworld audiences—shows where entertainer and audience shared membership in a world the “respectable” strictly avoided. This underworld entertainment, in short, drew a very limited patronage: working-class men, a few slumming gentlemen, and virtually no women who were not prostitutes.

Mae West was up to something different: she was attempting to showcase that same sexual underworld for a mainstream public in the heart of New York's most celebrated theatrical district. She explained her project, if rather obliquely, in January 1927, attempting in the midst of a citywide furor to legitimate her unusual theatrical style. She was quoted in the 1 February 1927 edition of the *New York Morning Telegraph*:

There is one play which we never grow weary of seeing. That is the great show of life as it flows along. *The Drag* is the second of what I am calling “comedy-dramas of life.” The first is *SEX*, which is playing in New York.

The Drag and *SEX*, West claimed, were “comedy-dramas of life.” She may well have invented that label on the spur of the moment, but nonetheless it pinpoints the factor that made her style of theatre stand out. What distinguished both plays was their appearance of staging “real life,” of bringing the sexual underworld onstage. *The Drag* did this in an obvious fashion, offering its audience not actors depicting homosexuals but homosexuals themselves. As for *SEX*, West was not a “real-life” prostitute, but she did all she could through her characterization and performance style to replicate a real woman of the streets. Moreover, the style of humor of both

plays clearly followed the lead of burlesque. As audiences knew from vice investigations, burlesque's provocative actresses were often prostitutes; its suggestive, effeminate comics were often gay men. Burlesque did not so much represent the underworld as it was itself an underworld product, drawing no clear line between the stage and the street, between sexy performances and sexual acts, between the theatre and the disorderly house.

The Drag and *SEX* followed in that burlesque tradition, staging, West wrote, "the great show of life as it flows along." By "life," she meant sensational nightlife: racy, flamboyant urban experience of the type whose intrinsic drama was being accentuated in the 1920s by vice investigations and by photographic coverage in the newly flourishing tabloid press. Her "comedy-dramas of life," again like burlesque, offered intimate, seemingly candid glimpses of the urban underworld, bringing their audience face-to-face with the shadowy terrain of crime, drugs, and offbeat sexual practice.

West created *SEX* and *The Drag* by drawing directly on the rawest elements of working-class culture: its "men-only" theatre, its underworld streetlife, its class resentments, and its sexual styles. This was not an intentionally political act—West was, from all accounts, colossally uninterested in politics. It was performed with an eye fixed squarely on the box office. The sensational success of *The Shanghai Gesture* and *Lulu Belle* revealed an eager middle-class market for racy tales of prostitution; *The Captive*, in turn, had proved that fascination extended to homosexuality. *SEX* and *The Drag* were products of that cultural moment: shrewd pieces of exploitation by a would-be celebrity capitalizing on theatrical trends—convinced that if audiences flocked to the ersatz realism of *Lulu Belle* they would come in droves to the real thing. As West allegedly told one of *SEX*'s backers when he expressed hesitation about the play's rawness, Broadway audiences *wanted* "dirt"—and, she added emphatically, quoted in the *New York World* on 31 March 1927, "I'll give it to them!"

Mae West was in a position to "give it to them" more authentically than most Broadway performers. Not only was she an urban working-class product, abundantly experienced and interested in sex, more important, she had firsthand knowledge of the pornographic stage. Her experience on the Mutual Burlesque Wheel taught her how to craft Margy Lamont in unnervingly lewd fashion. Whether real prostitutes acted like Margy was irrelevant—the point was that burlesque depicted them that way, and burlesque was itself a part of the sexual underworld, a medium in which "reality" was hard to distinguish from "theatre."

West's strategy paid off, despite the critics. When *SEX* opened, few critics doubted its immediate failure: no audience paying \$3.00 per ticket, they asserted, would be interested in smut. But within days of the play's premiere, newspapers reported that fans were storming the box office—fans, moreover, of a very different social stratum from the usual burlesque crowd. Robert Benchley, writing in *Life Magazine* on 20 May 1926, noted:

The sudden rush to see *SEX* is not confined to the canaille. The agencies are hot after tickets, and each night soft purring limousines roll up with theatre parties of gentry, out "just for a lark."

SEX's fans came from the respectable, even elite, end of the social spectrum. And they included well-groomed, upper-middle class women no less than upper-middle class men—three times more women than men, according to one police report. Their patronage turned the play into a genuine phenomenon. By their enthusiasm, they made *SEX* into a craze, a Broadway fad, an arena for middle-class theatregoers to parade their adventur-

ousness and daring. Critic Stark Young, writing in the *New Republic* in 27 June 1928, recalled the months after its premiere: "Who does not know how frequent or chic [. . .] it was to say that this show was fine, grand, swell, the best in town, I take everybody, etc.?" (1928:145, 146).

So *SEX* had its public and a larger one than any critic anticipated. Yet despite that fact, the play was never a mass success. *SEX* became what we would term a cult hit, drawing a young, affected, self-consciously jaded crowd—*Variety* called its members the "Broadway weissenheimers"—people bemused by the novelty of real dirt on Broadway. That kind of appeal could only last so long; and, indeed, *Variety's* records indicate that attendance had begun to flag by early 1927, before the police raid in February sent it skyrocketing once more.

It's no surprise, I think, that *SEX* should have drawn a limited public. Both *SEX* and *The Drag* were raw and unvarnishedly staged plays by a working-class actress fresh out of burlesque. For Broadway's largely middle-class public, West's plays were the theatrical equivalent of a slumming excursion; and while that indisputably recommended them to some, many less adventurous theatregoers shied away—just as they would have balked at venturing into the back alleys of Harlem to seek out rough, frank blues alongside a black clientele. But those same theatregoers might have gone to Harlem's Cotton Club, where risqué lyrics were somewhat more circumspect and where black patrons were banned. Or they might have gone to one of Texas Guinan's nightclubs, lavishly decorated places that, with their dim lighting, velvet-canopied ceilings, and fourteen-year-old chorus girls, unmistakably suggested brothels, but that tempered those associations with crazy circus-style antics: encouraging patrons to play leapfrog, for example, and dressing the orchestra in clown suits.

In short, while many of New York's nightlife patrons would not have gone to the real thing, they might have gone to its glamorized or caricatured imitation, where they could let loose among their own kind in a safer, less threatening setting that glossed over discomfiting matters of sexuality and class. That commercial strategy—presenting a romanticized underworld, a sanitized slumming excursion—lay at the heart of 1920s New York's most successful nightlife amusements. They retained a tantalizing air of wickedness that still lured the adventurous, but they contained elements to reassure the more reticent as well.

This is the context that encouraged the creation of the self-mocking Mae West of *Diamond Lil*. That persona and that play put this commercial strategy into practice. In *Diamond Lil* West again played a prostitute, queen of a sensational urban underworld marked by white slavery, drug dealing, political corruption, and murder. But this time the milieu had a very different feel, a glamorous and sentimentalized turn-of-the-century red-light district, a lighthearted underworld completely free from class antagonisms. Lil herself was far more likable than Margy; she was also no longer recognizably working class; and, as West played her, she teetered on the verge of parody, thus giving spectators the chance, if they so chose, to dismiss the sex and sensationalism as a good-natured joke.

In *Diamond Lil* West capitalized on her newfound notoriety and encouraged her audience to think she had been kidding all along. It is no accident that, in so doing, she created her first mass Broadway success and the persona on which she would build her career. With the faintly tongue-in-cheek *Diamond Lil*, West gave the public a very different figure than the woman who had created *The Drag* and *SEX*. Lil was provocative, yet enigmatic; sexual, but somehow not serious; or, in West's own words, "a little bit spicy, but not too raw."

Note

1. References for many of the quotes from reviews that I cite in this article are incomplete. All reviews not listed in the references were found in the *SEX* clipping file at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the Performing Arts Research Center, New York Public Library.

References

- Bailey, Peter
1983 "Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday: Comic Art in the 1880s." *History Workshop* 16 (Autumn):4-31.
- Chauncey, George
1986 "The Way We Were: Gay Male Society in the Jazz Age." *Village Voice*, July 1:29-30, 34.
- D'Emilio, John
1983 *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the U.S., 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Durante, Jimmy, and Kofoed, Jack
1931 *Nightclubs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Edwards, Richard H.
1915 *Popular Amusements*. New York.
- Eells, George, and Musgrove, Stanley
1982 *Mae West: A Biography*. New York: William Morrow & Co, Inc.
- Hartt, Rollin L.
1909 *The People at Play*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Katz, Jonathan
1976 *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Nathan, George Jean
1972 [1928] *Art of the Night*. Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press.
- Sobel, Bernard
1931 *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc.
- Toll, Robert
1976 *On With The Show*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuska, Jon
1973 *The Films of Mae West*. Secaucus: The Citadel Press.
- West, Mae
1926 *SEX*. Unpublished manuscript held in the Mae West Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- 1927 *The Drag*. Unpublished manuscript held in the Mae West Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Zeidman, Irving
1967 *The American Burlesque Show*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc.

Marybeth Hamilton was born in California and received a PhD in history from Princeton University. She now lives in London, where she writes and lectures on American popular culture. Her book, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Popular Culture, and American Sex*, will be published by Harper Collins in 1993.

TDReadings

See the special issue, "Women and Performance," vol. 24, no. 2 (T86), June 1980, and the issue on "Actors and Acting," vol. 20, no. 3 (T71), September 1976.