

# STUDY GUIDE

## & DRAMATURGY

# A Note from the Dramaturg

## MAE WEST

One of a kind! Whether they liked her or not, and most people seemed to, there is little question that this short (5') Brooklyn-born nonpareil had a host of admirers back in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. This was a woman who symbolized 'sex,' when it wasn't even considered nice to speak the word in polite conversation.

She received her theatrical training in the hey-day of vaudeville in the early 1900's, first performing, singing and dancing at the age of 5. She jumped from vaudeville to Broadway at the age of 18.

Eventually she began writing her own plays, the first of which was entitled, what else, *SEX*. The play was very popular with the public, but not so with the critics or the city officials, who raided it, closed it, and jailed Mae for eight days, charging indecency.

Her next writing/starring effort was called *THE DRAG*, whose subject was homosexuality, and it never even made it to Broadway. After three or four more fairly popular and successful Broadway shows, written and starring her, she penned and headlined in her best known effort, *DIAMOND LIL*. This brought her to the attention of Hollywood.

Paramount Studios talked her into signing with them in 1932, throwing in, as an enticement, what in those days was a rarity, the prototype of a motor home. She was an immediate hit with the movie-going public, but not with the screen censors, who had taken control of what audiences were watching at that point. By 1933 she was voted the eighth most popular star in Hollywood, and, by 1935, only William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper publisher, made more money than Mae that year in the entire country.

It's also safe to say that Mae West saved Paramount from going into bankruptcy during the depression years. Her popularity began to wane in the 40's, and, soon, this master (mistress?) of the double entendre left movies for 25 years. During that period she made numerous appearances around the country in *DIAMOND LIL* and occasional radio and television appearances, before returning to the silver screen in *Myra Breckinridge* in 1970.

Mae West died in 1980 at the age of 87. No doubt about it, one of a kind!

~ Bruce Follmer

# About the Playwright

## CLAUDIA SHEAR



Claudia Shear is an American actress, playwright, and writer. Some of her most famous works include the plays *BLOWN SIDEWAYS THROUGH LIFE* and *DIRTY BLONDE*, both of which she wrote and starred in. *BLOWN SIDEWAYS THROUGH LIFE* is based on Shear's experiences of having worked 64 different jobs, including a nude model, waitress, Wall Street proofreader, and Italian translator. In the original Broadway production of *DIRTY BLONDE*, she played Mae West and was nominated for the 2000 Tony Awards for both Best Play and Best Actress in a Play. She has also written for such publications as *The New York Times* and *Vogue* and has acted in films including *It Could Happen to You*, *Living Out Loud*, and *The Opportunists*. Most recently, she wrote the libretto for the new musical adaptation of *Tuck Everlasting*, which premiered at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta in early 2015 and is set to open on Broadway in April 2016.

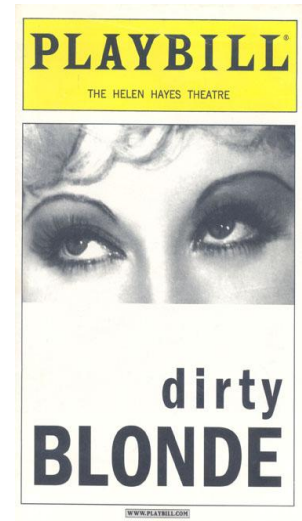
# About the Show

## DIRTY BLONDE

DIRTY BLONDE premiered off-Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop in early 2000. It opened on Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theatre on May 1, 2000 and ran for 352 performances, ending on March 4, 2001.

The many roles demanded by the script were played by only three actors. Shear played the roles of Mae West and Jo, while Kevin Chamberlin and Bob Stillman together played 17 different roles. In an article from *The New York Times*, James Lapine, the director of the production, said that the reason the show was written for only 3 actors was because “[That’s] the whole fun of it, frankly, was how few actors we could get away with up there. Claudia and I both pictured the show as a minimalist *tour de force*. How large a painting could we paint with as few colors as possible?”

Dirty Blonde was nominated for the 2000 Tony Award for Best Play.



# Mae West's Career and Life

Mae West, born on August 17, 1893, was an American vaudeville performer, actress, playwright, singer, and screenwriter who worked in the business of entertainment for decades. She was well-known for her suggestive double entendres as well as for her sharp and quick wit.



She began to perform for audiences while she was very young. Her professional career began at the age of fourteen in vaudeville, working for the Hal Clarendon Stock Company. She performed under the stage name "Baby Mae", and had several acts, including performing as a male impersonator. She first performed on Broadway in 1911 in a revue called *A La Broadway*. She got her big break in 1918, performing in the Shubert Brothers' *Sometimes*, in which her character did the shimmy, which became a very popular dance move.

She soon began to write her own plays under the pen name Jane Mast. Her most famous plays include *SEX, THE DRAG*, and *DIAMOND LIL*. Both plays faced heavy opposition from government officials. While *SEX* was a financial success on Broadway, it was panned by critics and eventually shut down by the police. Mae was prosecuted on morals charges and spent eight days in jail. She had to pay \$14,000 in bail, not only for herself but for the rest of her cast as well. *THE DRAG*, which dealt with homosexuality, was never opened on Broadway due to opposition. However, in 1928 *DIAMOND LIL* became such a Broadway hit that Mae would revive it many times throughout her career.

In 1932, nearly at the age of 40, she was offered a motion picture contract by Paramount Pictures and made her film debut in *Night After Night*. One of the more famous moments in the film, and one that is also exemplary of Mae's wit, came when someone exclaimed, "Goodness, what beautiful diamonds!", to which Mae quipped "Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie". In 1933, she starred in *She Done Him Wrong* alongside Cary Grant. The film became both a financial and critical success. It earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture and it is often credited with saving Paramount from bankruptcy. That same year, she and Grant again starred together in *I'm No Angel*, which was one of her most popular films. In the late 1930s, she and Paramount parted ways, and Mae began to work for Universal



Pictures, but by this time, Mae's movies had begun to experience a decline in popularity, so much so that she was put on a "Box Office Poison" list. She continued to do an occasional film until, in 1943, she starred in *The Heat's On*, which was produced by Columbia Pictures. It turned out to be both a critical and box office failure. The film's failure had such an effect on Mae that she wouldn't work on another film until 1970. She was never able to repeat the success she had early in her film career.

Mae West continued to work on Broadway, in the film industry, and in Las Vegas, where she had her own show, until her death on November 22, 1980 from complications of a stroke that she had suffered while getting out of bed. She is buried at her family mausoleum at Cypress Hills Abbey, Brooklyn. Because of her contribution to the American film industry, she was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 1560 Vine Street. She was also inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame for her work as a stage actor.

## The Men in Mae West's Life

Throughout her life, Mae West developed many relationships with men. Some relationships were professional, some romantic, and others both.

Mae West met Frank Wallace while they were both performing in vaudeville. They were married in 1911, when Mae was still younger than 20 years old. However, Mae insisted that they keep their marriage a secret. In 1935, word got out about their marriage. For a few years, Mae publicly denied that they had ever been married. In 1937, she admitted that they had been legally married, but stated that they had never lived as man and wife, insisting that they had lived in separate bedrooms. During their marriage, she had also arranged for Wallace to have a touring show of his own so that she wouldn't have to live with him. They officially divorced in 1943.



Mae West and Jim Timony  
[collection of Damon Devine]

Guido Deiro was a piano-accordion star, whom Mae also met in vaudeville in 1913. They became romantically involved, and would schedule their work so that they could travel together when on tours. There is a lot of uncertainty as to whether they were ever married, but a lot of her biographers claim that they never were. They split in 1916.

Jim Timony was an attorney who became Mae's manager for 25 years. He met Mae in 1916. They became lovers and remained a couple until the mid-1930s when Mae became an

established movie star. They ended their romantic relationship on friendly terms and continued to remain close until Timony's death in 1954.

Ed Hearn was a homosexual actor whose career spanned over 40 years and included 350 films. Mae and Hearn collaborated on two films together and she cast him in her play, PLEASURE MAN. Hearn and the rest of the cast of PLEASURE MAN were arrested twice on the grounds of indecency and he and Mae defended the play in court.



Joe Frisco was a performer in vaudeville who was known primarily as a jazz dancer and later a successful comedian. His bowler hat, his huge fat cigar, and his stutter, which he successfully implemented in his comedy acts, were his trademarks. He and Mae helped each other in their work and he would sometimes serve as her chaperone.

Paul Novak was one of the muscle-men in Mae's Las Vegas and touring shows towards the end of her career. Despite being 30 years her junior, they eventually moved in together and remained romantically involved until her death in 1980.



W.C. Fields was a comedian, actor, juggler, and writer. He had a reputation for being misanthropic and a heavy-drinker, His acts, especially his comedy, were influenced by this persona that he would put on. He and Mae starred in *My Little Chickadee* together, but the two of them did not get along, especially after Universal gave both Mae and Fields equal credit for producing the screenplay of the movie, even though Mae had written nearly the entire screenplay and Fields had contributed only one scene. They loathed each other and never worked together again.

# Censorship

Censorship tactics in the 1920s and 30s usually consisted of police raids on theaters and the arrest of actors, which is what happened to Mae and the cast of *SEX*. There were also initiatives to pass laws that would enforce censorship, such as a bill in 1927 that proposed to put Broadway theaters under the control of the New York Board of Motion Picture Censorship. Boycotting was also another way tactic to implement censorship; many groups would boycott plays and theaters that they found vulgar.



As one of the more controversial stars of her time, Mae West encountered numerous problems with censorship, particularly on Broadway with her plays *SEX* and *THE DRAG*. Mae was constantly pressured by anti-vice societies attempting to prevent productions of her plays on Broadway. As previously mentioned, Mae and the cast of *SEX* were arrested, not only because they were performing *SEX*, but also as a way to dissuade Mae from attempting to produce *THE DRAG* on Broadway.

In an interview with Dick Cavett, Mae explained that "newspapers wouldn't accept the ad [for *SEX*]" and that instead they would advertise it as "'Mae West' and that certain play". She also talked about how people would come up to her and tell her to "not bring that play [*THE DRAG*] into New York, because we are not equipped' ... they figured they'd have a lot of riots and excitement going on".

Despite the problems with censorship Mae experienced, she continued to promote herself as a sex symbol, as a "dirty blonde", and to brandish her suggestive humor and wit. In fact, she used the negative press to her advantage in order to fuel her career. In another example of her wit, Mae was asked what she thought about the many attempts to censor her, to which she replied, "I believe in censorship. I made a fortune out of it".



# Homosexuality, Cross-Dressing, and THE DRAG

Throughout her life, Mae was an avid supporter of gay rights. Her play THE DRAG, was censored because of the open portrayal of homosexuality. Mae claims that her inspiration for writing THE DRAG came from some of her gay friends who told her that they wanted to be able to be more openly expressive about their sexuality. As a result, not only did Mae write THE DRAG, but she also cast only homosexuals in her failed production.

Ultimately THE DRAG was never able to open on Broadway because of the homophobia and censorship of the city officials and theater critics, but Mae continued to help and support members of the homosexual and cross-dressing communities throughout her life.

Meanwhile, the homosexual and cross-dressing community regarded her as an icon because, not only did she actively help them but, from their perspective, she also broke gender stereotypes and prejudices. She was bold with her humor and with her sexuality, which Shear describes as being very masculine. Thus Mae was as much a drag symbol as she was a sex symbol.

## Celebrity Worship and Obsession

Many have claimed that a central theme of DIRTY BLONDE is the idea of celebrity worship and how the play seems to celebrate it. However, in an interview with *Salon.com*, Shear stated that she never really considered the play to be celebrating celebrity worship, but rather to be celebrating plain old obsession. She said that Charlie's obsession just happens to be a celebrity and, "To me obsession is a grand thing, and I don't mean where you get into madness, but obsession in its most wonderful way is very pure, because it is something that does not involve you and your ego".