

The Humor of Mae West

Researched for and presented to Quest Club

December 9, 2016

By Marilyn Moran-Townsend

“Give a man a free hand and he’ll run it all over you.”^①

In the history of Quest Club, there may never have been a more bawdy opening line, but what better way to begin the story of the humor of Mae West.

In our time together, I hope to illuminate our understanding of where Mae’s humor comes from; why it is remarkable; and throughout, we will have a participatory experience certain to leave us all laughing, maybe a bit shocked, or both.

In researching this topic, I found a number of good books, articles, and even Mae’s movies. At the end of this paper, I will share a montage of Mae moments. Meanwhile, I hope to keep you entertained with some of Mae’s more famous photographs onscreen, with their sources listed below.

Where did Mae West’s humor come from?

Mary Jane West was born in Brooklyn, New York on August 17, 1893. The future sex symbol was said to have gotten her looks and her figure from her mother, who was a lingerie model before marrying and having children. Her father, “Battlin’ Jack”, was a prizefighter. Their first daughter died before Mary Jane was born, which helps us understand why her parents doted on their second daughter so much.^③

Mary Jane began as a singer and dancer. Her journey to actress and comedienne is a fascinating one. Let’s join Mary Jane on that journey. She made her first public appearance

with a church solo when she was only 5 years old. She loved all of the attention from that first performance, prompting her lifelong love affair with the limelight.④

Mary Jane's performance development had the enthusiastic support of her parents. Her father loved how she was able to imitate the adults who visited the house. He built Mary Jane a stage in the basement so she could rehearse at home. He went with her to her performances, and he even served as the ticket-taker.③

As Mary Jane grew up, she became more a student of the stage than of academics. Since truancy laws weren't really serious in those days, Mary Jane missed a lot of school.④ Her spotty education didn't seem to bother her. Said Mary Jane: "I speak two languages: Body and English."②

At age 14, using the stage name Baby Mae, she joined the vaudeville circuit and turned professional with the Hal Clarendon Stock Company. She was quite the hit with audiences because she was able to portray a wide variety of characters. But she was also considered scandalous by the more conservative members of the audience because she would appear onstage dressed as a man or in blackface.④ This was clearly a time for Mary Jane to experiment with what was or was not acceptable to audiences.

Among the earliest influences on Mary Jane's act were the female impersonators Julian Eltinge and Bert Savoy. She observed their over-the-top costumes and overt sexuality and made it her own.④ "I didn't discover curves. I only uncovered them."②

How tall do you think Mary Jane West was? Only 5 feet...shorter than me! But this little package of dynamite appeared so much larger than life with a stage trick. She decided to wear her mother's oversized hat. To hold the hat in place, Mary Jane kept her hand on the back of her head while she draped her other hand on her hip, and thus began her signature stage presence.③

In 1909, Mary Jane partnered with vaudevillian Frank Wallace and on April 11, 1911, she married him at Milwaukee City hall. A janitor who had been emptying spittoons served as the witness. Mary Jane was just 17. She thought it would be good for her career to be married, but

she shocked Frank by demanding her own room on her wedding night and made it clear that she had no intention of living with him in a traditional home setting. She immediately realized her marriage was not compatible with her career and lifestyle, so she asked Frank to keep their marriage a secret and did not tell her parents. "Marriage is a great institution. I'm not ready for an institution yet." In fact, she never actually lived with Frank and went on to have many other relationships throughout her career, while still secretly married. She finally filed for divorce in 1942 and obtained the decree the following year. ③④

Back to 1911, a very big year for Mary Jane. Besides her marriage, this was the year she made her Broadway debut under the stage name Mae West in a revue entitled *A Le Broadway*. The show closed after only 8 performances. But the *New York Times* critics noticed Mae and her "snappy way of singing and dancing." ④

Mae had a small role in her next project, *Vera Violetta* with Al Jolson, but one of the show's main songs "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-Der-E" would become a standard for her. ④

In 1918, Mae West won her first big role, playing Mayme in the revue *Sometime*. In this production, she introduced a new dance called "The Shimmy," making her a favorite of the Jazz Age. ④

Despite these early successes, Mae was dissatisfied with the quality of the roles she was being offered, so she began writing her own plays under the pseudonym Jane Mast. ④ Her writing was clearly designed to spice things up. "Virtue has its own reward, but has no sale at the box office." ② The first of Mae's own plays, *Sex*, premiered on Broadway in 1926. The description of the play on every poster said "the story of a bad little girl who was good to the navy." The play featured four prostitutes, two pimps and several johns. Mae played the lead as prostitute Margy LaMont. The play ran for more than 300 performances before it ended, and it's estimated that more than 300,000 people saw it. When it ended, it wasn't because of too little public interest. It was because the play had attracted the attention of New York officials who found the title and the play highly objectionable and ordered the theatre raided in early 1927. The entire cast, including Mae West, was arrested and indicted for violating morals charges. ④

The Sex trial was held on April 19, 1927. West was convicted and ordered to serve 10 days in jail on what is now known as Welfare Island. She was released 2 days early for good behavior. She said she was well-treated and had dinner with the warden and his family. She remained unrepentant, telling reporters that she had worn silk panties the entire time she was in jail. And this: "I enjoyed the courtroom as just another stage but not so amusing as Broadway." The 8 days Mae spent in jail actually did much for her career.④

Mae's next play took on a new and even more scandalous topic. Entitled *The Drag*, it was about the world of transgender males in New York City. While meant to be a comedy, West courageously mentioned many of the problems facing the transgender community at that time, including drug use and beatings by some members of law enforcement. But the dark subjects in *The Drag* was just too much for the 1920s public and the play ran less than a month before closing.④

On April 9, 1928, Mae West opened her new play, *Diamond Lil*. It was her first Broadway hit and the show that really made her a star. One iconic scene from the play is Mae in a bed shaped like a swan.④

Mae's mother fell ill while Mae was on tour with *Diamond Lil*. Mae got home before her mother passed, but Mae was heartbroken. Her mother had been her most stable influence and her biggest fan throughout her life. Mae might never have come out of her depression had it not been for career.④

Long before feminism was a thing, the 20-something starlet brought a tough presence to the stage that was almost unheard of among actresses of the period. For that, she could credit her father who, among other things, taught her to box as a young girl. Says West, "I was the first liberated woman, you know. No guy was going to get the best of me, that's what I wrote all my scripts about." Also says West: "Women told me I inspired them to stand up and walk on their own two feet, not just lie on their backs. I let people know that women like sex, too, and that's a good thing, not a bad thing...I can't say I had a mission, but it turned out that way."④

When the 1929 depression hit, Mae turned her attention to the Big Screen. Her debut was in *Night After Night*. She got great reviews, including this one: “Mae stole everything but the cameras.” In her very first scene, Mae spoke a line that would go down in screen history. Mae was at the restaurant coat-check when the coat-check girl exclaims, “Goodness, what beautiful diamonds. Mae grins and says, “Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie.” (3)

The nation was falling for Mae. She became the “It Girl.” Her clothes which accentuated her hourglass figure, and her glamorous style were being copied all across the country. The national infatuation was much more than skin deep. Mae was admired for being smart, tough, funny and optimistic. In the early 1930’s, that just what our country needed. In so doing, she also turned the stereotype of women over 35 on its head. In those days, 35 was over the hill, and that is how older women were portrayed onscreen...as unattractive and stodgy. This was definitely not how the country saw Mae West! (3) In fact, when Paramount Pictures signed Mae, she was nearly 40. This was an unusually late age for a woman to begin a movie career. But she wasn’t playing a sweet young thing. She played the parts of a sexually secure and liberated woman who knew no age boundaries. (10) Said Mae: “I’ve been in more laps than a napkin.” (2) Mae made Paramount Pictures very rich but also very busy defending her improvisational remarks. (3)

Her movie *I’m No Angel* was so popular that the Paramount Theater showed the film almost 24 hours a day for a month. Her next film, *She Done Him Wrong* was not only terrific for co-star Cary Grant’s career, it received an Oscar nomination for Best Picture. (4) These two movies made Mae the most famous woman in the country. (3) And the richest. In 1935, West was the highest paid woman and the second-highest paid person in the United States (after William Randolph Hearst). She earned \$480,833 that year. (7) (3) Attributed to Mae West is this sentiment: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor. Believe me, rich is better.” (2)

Movies were also a real turning point in Mae’s use of humor. She said, “My comedy was a gradual thing. I didn’t start putting in all those wisecracks ‘till I started pictures. When I wrote *She Done Him Wrong* in 1933, the studios and the censors wouldn’t let me do certain things – there’d be children in the audience – and so with everybody weakening my drama, I figured I

had to put some other element in. I used humor so I could do and say what I wanted and get over the sex. And then they started classifying me as a great comedienne.”④

I'm No Angel has been blamed for the establishment in 1934 of the Production Code Administration, created to review risqué material. Later known as the Hays Code, Mae West ruefully remarked, “It’s hard to be funny when you have to be clean.”④

It was also a dangerous time to be making wisecracks. Political writer Robert Forsythe saw her as a symbol of Marxism because of the “frank and cynical way in which she shows the depths to which capitalistic morality has come.”④

The censors really had a field day with her next movie, *Klondike Annie*, in 1935. They cut more than 8 minutes from the film. Even with the cuts, several states banned it from being shown at all.④

West also set the gossips off when she scandalously became romantically involved with the African-American boxer Gorilla Jones. Interracial relationships were barred from movies and biracial marriage was illegal in California. When her apartment building refused to admit her new lover, she bought the building so that he could come in. They remained friends throughout Mae’s life.④

Paramount’s contract with Mae West ended and Universal Pictures saw a great opportunity. In 1939, they hired West to star in what became one of her most famous films: *My little Chickadee* with W.C. Fields. Their personal dislike of each other caused them to have real chemistry in the film.④

Another aspect of this fascinating woman is her interest in good and evil. She had been raised Catholic, she dabbled in the occult, and then she began following the Reverend Jack Kelly, A Universalist minister who emphasized the power of extra sensory perception (ESP). She enjoyed séances and regularly invited her friends to participate in them. She also followed the leader of the Spiritualist Science Church of Hollywood. West spent three weeks in a dark room with hopes of connecting with a life force beyond this world. She claimed to hear voices and

see visions, most importantly her mother, who told her, “There’s so much still to do....” These encounters seem to have boosted Mae’s energy and commitment to her career. ④

Now that we better understand the complicated history of Mae’s humor, let’s turn to our second question:

Why was Mae West’s humor remarkable?

For help in answering this question, I turned to the book *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar...Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes* by Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein. Here’s what the authors say that seems to apply to the humor of Mae West: “The construction and payoff of jokes, and the payoff of philosophical concepts, are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in similar ways. That’s because philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: To confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our worlds upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger.” ⑤

Author F. Scott Fitzgerald said Mae was “the only Hollywood actress with an ironic edge and a comic spark.” ③

Mae particularly liked to poke fun at people who were pompous or hypocritical. She took aim at double standards for men and women, especially double standards relating to sex. In *The Constant Sinner*, Mae uses humor to point out the ridiculousness of popular ideas in that day about white women and black men: that white women were pure creatures who disliked sex and that black men were animals who couldn’t be trusted with white women. *The Constant Sinner* was a challenge to bring to the stage because it was about an interracial relationship. So the production dressed a white man in black-face and wig, all of which was removed onstage at the end of the show to demonstrate to the audience that the male actor was really white. ③

Mae’s humor weapon of choice was the double entendre, a word or phrase open to more than one interpretation, one of which is usually risqué. ⑤ Remember that Mary Jane West grew up in vaudeville shows. Those shows were known for their double entendres; ④ what better way to attack double standards?

Here's a Mae West sample:

"I used to be Snow White, but I drifted." ②

The double entendre became Mae's humor hallmark. It was what everyone expected of her. Said West: "If I asked for a cup of coffee someone would search for the double meaning." ② Mae West's words and actions wouldn't be considered particularly shocking today, but they were in her day.

"Good sex is like good bridge. If you don't have a good partner, you'd better have a good hand." ②

"An orgasm a day keeps the doctor away." ②

"Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" ②

"A hard man is good to find." ②

For Mae West to come on the scene using humor with heroines instead of heroes was a case of perfect timing. You see, the world around Mae West was changing. Feminism was being reinterpreted. French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir released *The Second Sex* in 1949, declaring that "there is no such thing as essential womanhood," which she thought was a straitjacket imposed on women by men. Rather, women are free to create their own version of what it is to be a woman. ⑤ This was Mae West's specialty:

"All discarded lovers should be given a second chance...but with somebody else." ②

"I like a man who's good, but not too good – for the good die young and I hate a dead one." ②

"Personally, I like two types of men – domestic and foreign." ②

At age 51, when she performed in the play *Catherine Was Great*, she made the script her own with such wisecracks as "The Turkish situation interests me greatly, Prince Potemkin. Come around, and we'll talk Turkey." ③

Mae's humor didn't always play well. She was involved in a radio scandal on Sunday, December 12, 1938 when she appeared on the Chase and Sanborn Hour hosted by Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. The advertising agency asked her and emcee Don Ameche to do an Adam and Eve satire. The show created outrage among religious and women's groups because of Eve's desire for carnal experiences and her enthusiasm about giving up her virginity for pleasure. The show caused NBC to ban the mention of Mae West's name over its stations and declared her an unfit radio personality. She did not reappear on radio for another decade. But editorials came to Mae's defense under such headings as "The Woman Always Pays." ⑧

By 1949, West was back on the radio, appearing with Perry Como on The Chesterfield Supper Club. Once she was back in favor, Mae West received her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in the early 1950s. ④

Mae's playful one-liners have become part of our culture today. She is one of the most quoted women ever. For instance, Mae's motto "So many men, so little time," has been the springboard for many jokes and bumper stickers. Mae's description of a desirable man as "tall, dark, and handsome" has also become a part of American culture. Her famous catch-phrase "Come UP and see me sometime" illustrates Mae's truth, "It's not what I say, but how I say it." ③

Mae West said it best when she quipped: "When I'm good, I'm very good, but when I'm bad, I'm better." ③

Mae West was mentioned in two Cole Porter songs ③, "You're the Top":

You're a boom,

You're the dam at Boulder,

You're the moon,

Over Mae West's shoulder.

...and “Anything Goes”:

If low bar you like,

If old hymns you like,

If bare limbs you like,

If Mae West you like...”

Mae West was most certainly memorable. American pilots during World War II affectionately named their inflatable life vests “Mae Wests” in honor of two of the actress’ most distinctive features, and if a parachute failed to open completely, especially if it appeared to split in two like a giant bra, it was said to have “Mae Wested.” (4)

One of the most popular objects of the surrealist movement was the Mae West Lips Sofa by Salvador Dali. (10)

Mae West was known for laughter and longevity. In 1954, 61-year-old Mae performed a night club act full of sexy songs, one-liners, fancy costumes, and muscle men. The show only lasted 39 minutes, but it was a hit. She toured in this show for 5 years. During that time she recorded her first album, *The Fabulous Mae West*. She revived one of her hit songs *Come on Up*, and she sang a humorous duet “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” with Rock Hudson at the Academy Awards in 1958. In 1959, she released her best-selling autobiography *Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It*. (3)

In March 1960, at age 67, Mae appeared on the Red Skelton Show, doing a mock interview about the three men who were NOT included in her book. And at age 71, she appeared in an episode of the “Mr. Ed” show. At 84, she made her last film, an adaptation of her play *Sextette*. In 1967, the Beatles persuaded her to allow them to feature Mae on the most famous album cover of all time, the cover for *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. West refused at first because she said she simply wouldn’t qualify as a member of a “Lonely Hearts Club.” (3) Even

into the 2000s, the Broadway play *Dirty Blonde* by Claudia Shear explored the phenomenon of the legendary Mae West. ⑨ And in this year's October issue of *Reader's Digest*, Mae West's humor made the Top 101 funniest quotes ever with this zinger: "Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before." ② She was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame; and the American Film Institute named West 15th among the greatest female stars of classic American cinema. ⑩ She died on November 22, 1980, at age 87. ③ Playing on one of her own lines, the minister presiding over her funeral service praised her life and her charity, saying "goodness had everything to do with it." ④

If you wish to thoroughly enjoy yourself, two of the books for recommended reading from this research are *The Legendary Mae West* by Tabatha Yeatts and *American Legends: The Life of Mae West* by Charles River Editors.

Time to leave 'em laughing!

It's my pleasure to now share with you a two-minute collection of some of Mae West's most memorable lines and scenes from her films. (MP4 video) ⑪

To sum up this journey through the life and times of Mae West, Mae's humor came from supportive parents and a vaudevillian background. What made it remarkable was that the queen of wisecracks, innuendo and double entendre provides a useful lesson in out-of-the-box thinking. When Mae West could no longer confront censorship head-on, she created a work-around, with humor that defied and confounded the censors. "I believe in censorship," Mae said. "I made a fortune out of it." ⑥ And in a time when women were not to worry their pretty little heads about business, Mae amassed her fortune by charming her customers and the media while hiding how smart she was in plain sight.

It is my hope that Mae West is smiling as I conclude this Quest Club paper with her own words: "I wrote the story myself. It's about a girl who's lost her reputation and never missed it." ②

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Sources:

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