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We strive to keep this list up-to-date and accurate. If we have left anyone off, please let us know immediately and accept our apologies!

About the New School for Drama

The creative home for the future of performing arts. **Agile. Engaged. Innovative. Multi-disciplinary.** The New School for Drama is home to a dynamic group of young directors, writers, actors, creative technologists, and award-winning faculty. With a core belief in rigorous creativity and collaborative learning, our programs embrace civic awareness across performance disciplines to create work imbued with professionalism, imagination and social context. For more information, please visit

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ON HER SHOULDERS
New Perspectives Theatre Company
and The New School for Drama
present

SEX

by Mae West



Directed by Aneesha Kudtarkar
Dramaturgy by Celia Braxton

Wednesday, June 18, 2014

The New School

Wollman Hall, 65 West 11th Street
New York, New York



The New School for Drama

Women have been writing plays and contributing to the Western Theatrical Canon for 1,000 years.

How many of the plays or playwrights can you name?

Total plays by women produced in commercial and regional theatres in the U.S. have remained below 20% for most of the 20th Century and now into the 21st. Yet many of these plays have been the most successful of their time, earning greater awards and box office income than their male counterparts.

At the first reading of this series, Rachel Crothers' *A Man's World*, **ON HER SHOULDERS** surveyed the audience about their knowledge of the play and/or the playwright. Given that our audience is generally composed of theatre practitioners and those with an interest in women in theatre, the numbers were still shocking: only 40% had ever heard of Rachel Crothers; just 21% had read any of her plays, and only 7% had seen a production of one of them.

With a general audience, we can imagine that these numbers would be even worse!



The goal of ON HER SHOULDERS is to remedy this situation. By presenting staged readings of plays from across the spectrum of time and place, with contemporary dramaturges adapting them for modern audiences, we are making it impossible to deny or ignore the great tradition and value of women's contribution to the theatrical canon. Through our reading series we intend to motivate producers and directors to champion and produce these brilliant plays in New York and regionally, and to incite audiences to demand to see them.

In making history visible, we also shine the light on today's women playwrights and see their work as part of a continuum a thousand years long. They stand on the shoulders of giants—and in restoring our foremothers to their rightful place, we elevate all women playwrights.

Play in Context, the dramaturgical and scholarly presentation component for all of the readings, is sponsored in part by the League of Professional Theatre Women, a not-for-profit organization promoting visibility and increasing opportunities for women in theatre since 1982. www.theatrewomen.org



ON HER SHOULDERS is also aligned with the goals and projects of 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists. This grassroots initiative was launched in August 2009 to work toward 50% representation for women playwrights and directors by the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage in the U.S.

NEW PERSPECTIVES THEATRE COMPANY (NPTC) is an award-winning, multi-racial company performing in the Theatre District and in communities throughout New York City. Our mission is to develop and produce new plays and playwrights, especially women and people of color, to present classic plays in a style that addresses contemporary issues, and to extend the benefits of theatre to young people and communities in need. **Our aim is not to exclude, but to cast a wider net.** Now in its 22nd season, notable NPTC productions have included *Richard III*, starring Austin Pendleton; *Exhibit #9* by Tracy Scott Wilson (1999 **Audelco Award**); *Jihad* by Ann Chamberlain (**OBR Award for Best Production**); *The Taming of the Shrew* (**OBR Award for Best Production**), *Admissions* by Tony Velella (**10 Best Plays Backstage**); the U.S. premiere of *Visit* by renowned Argentinean playwright Ricardo Monti; and the New York Premieres of Vaclav Havel's *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, OBIE-Winner Stephanie Berry's *The Shannequa Chronicles* (produced with Blackberry Productions), *Lemon Meringue Façade* by Ted Lange, and *MOTHER OF GOD!* by Michele Miller (Finalist, Princess Grace Foundation Award).

www.nptnyc.org

Hamilton argues that *SEX* was West's "last-ditch effort to gain mainstream Broadway success." There is evidence that she was working in burlesque between 1921 and 1926. West had worked in burlesque in her late teens, but by the 1920s, the genre had become rougher and much more identified with pornographic sex than before World War I. Robert C. Allen, in *Horrible Prettiness*, describes early-1920s burlesque featuring striptease in the fight to maintain its working class male audience in the face of cheap movie prices. Film scholar Jon Tuska has presented evidence that West was not only working in burlesque, but on the lowest "wheel" or circuit, of burlesque. The Mutual Wheel ran explicitly sexual shows, with coochie, or shimmy dancing, strip tease, and quite possibly prostitution activities by many of the performers.



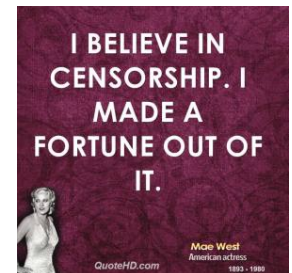
The *Herald Tribune* called *SEX* an "exhibition of complete frankness...not sex, but lust—stark, naked lust." "She cavorts her own sex about the stage in one of the most reviling exhibits allowed public display," said the *Daily Mirror*. "She undresses before the public, and appears to enjoy doing so." A scene in the last act, with the stage directions "they kiss," and "they kiss again," is described by the *Times* as "a torrid love scene," a reaction hinted at by other reviewers. Critics generally reacted as though West had brought a real brothel on stage. Perhaps she knew whereof she spoke.

But this is not why *SEX* was closed by the police 41 weeks after it opened. As a 1928 *Times* article, "The Story of Mae West," states, *SEX* became quite a fad, with many of the best people seeing it two or three times. And it was cleared by a "functioning play jury" in the summer of 1926. No. *SEX* was actually closed to prevent West opening her next show, *The Drag*.

The Drag tells the story of a wealthy young man of prominent family who marries to hide his homosexual nature. The plot follows the result of this deception on his family and his personal life, leading finally to his murder. Descriptions of the rehearsal process make it clear that *The Drag* was what we now call devised theatre – at least partially. Sixty young men were chosen from a crowd of auditioners solicited at a gay nightclub. Rehearsals for *The Drag* were improvisations aimed at capturing real language and mannerisms, while creating two authentic party scenes for the play. (Hamilton) This authenticity was what had been so successful in gaining an audience for *SEX*.

The presence on Broadway of the growing gay subculture, using actual gay performers who were encouraged to exaggerate their more outrageous behavior on stage, might have left Broadway exposed to the raunchiest burlesque, then relegated to the city borders...changed the audience mix...destroyed the economics of an important and thriving industry! If successful, *The Drag* would have destabilized the fragile developing highbrow/middlebrow theatrical mystique!

The theatrical establishment and anti-vice communities came together quickly in early 1927. The Wales Padlock Act banned any depiction of gay or lesbian love on stage. Theatres housing such performances could be padlocked for up to a year. On February 9, 1927, after several riotous previews of *The Drag* in New Haven and Newark, *SEX* and two other plays—both on homosexual themes—were closed down. *The Drag* was locked out of the city. But within a year, Mae West had figured out that making fun of the censors would get her farther, faster, than sex itself..



SEX AND SCANDAL:
"Queer Fear" on Broadway, 1926
by Celia Braxton



SEX, by Mae West, is best known for two things. First, it was written and produced by the film queen of sexual irony and camp; and second, it was shut down by the police, with Ms. West and the rest of the cast carted off to jail.

According to Marybeth Hamilton in her article, "Mae West Live," West often said the play was shut down because Broadway and its supporters could not handle discussion of sex as an activity, that the word "sex" had not before been used in the newspapers to indicate anything other than what we today would call "gender," and that no newspaper would accept advertisements for the play using its actual title.

In fact, *SEX* was regularly advertised under its own name in mainstream newspapers. The play ran for nearly a year before it was closed down. Nor was it the only play on Broadway that season or for several seasons past that dealt with sex or prostitution. The controversy around Mae West's *SEX* was part of the culture war that roiled around jazz, homosexuality, and the nature of American theatre during the 1920s.

David Savran has pointed out in *Highbrow/Lowdown*, how ubiquitous jazz was during the 1920s, not just on radio, or in cabarets, speakeasies, and vaudeville, but in Broadway musicals as well. Broadway critics and playwrights during the 1920s, however, were entangled in a post-colonial attempt to create an American theatre that would measure up to the Europeans'. Jazz, suddenly always everywhere, elided boundaries of class and culture. As playwright J. Hartley Manners described it, "bodies writhe and intermingle and brains rattle in skulls as the ghastly jiggling procession circles under blazing lights to the cheap deafening 'music(!)' of the tire-less orchestras." (qtd. in Savran, 5). Because of jazz, the difference between highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities was no longer clear.

In *SEX*, jazz plays a large part. Act Two, Scene One ostensibly takes place in Trinidad, but actually recreates a New York nightclub, complete with contemporaneous jazz numbers and Mae West doing the shimmy. *SEX* brings jazz and its "ghastly jiggling procession" on stage literally, unapologetically situating sex for money squarely within the East Coast white establishment. Two successful prostitute dramas on Broadway that season carefully removed their (non-white) heroines from New York, to Shanghai or Paris. In both plays, the prostitute pays the price of her fall. But West's Margy LaMont, a working class white woman, brings it home. She starts in the rough world of Montreal's red-light district as an entrepreneur selling sex for money, with plans for business growth. Mae West, through LaMont, brings the "shimmy" to the Broadway dramatic stage with the authority of the burlesque performer Mae West had no doubt been for the previous five years. The character ends up in Westchester county and – spoiler alert! – she does not die.



ON HER SHOULDERS

presents
SEX
by Mae West

Directed by **Anesha Kudtarkar**
Dramaturgy by **Celia Braxton**

CAST
(in order of speaking)

Stage Directions
Rocky Waldron/Jones/Jenkins
Manly/Jimmy Stanton
Curley/Condez/Robert Stanton
Agnes/Marie
Dawson/Captain Carter/Policeman
Margy LaMont
Lieutenant Gregg
Clara Stanton

Caitlin Doyle
Jason Wilson
Colin Fisher
Beethoven Oden*
Amy Klewitz*
Arisael Rivera
Liz Powers
Federico Trigo*
Anne Fizzard*

* Member AEA

Please join us after the reading for a Play in Context discussion and a glass of wine

ANESHA KUDTARKAR (Director) is a Dallas native and graduate of Southern Methodist University's BFA program where she received the Garland Wright Award for Directing Previous directing credits include: *One Universal You* (Alvin Ailey Auditorium), *Happy Hanukah* (INTAR's American Nightcap), *Gruesome Playground Injuries* (The Studio @ 620) *Living Out*, *Animals Out of Paper*, and *Ninety* (SMU). Most recently Anesha was Directing Fellow at Westport Country Playhouse for the 2013 season. She has been part of the administrative team at Signature Theatre, Stage West, Circle Arts Theater, and a teaching artist for Big Thought: an organization committed to bringing creativity to everyday learning. She has also worked as a teaching artist for the Highland Park-based theater group, Jesters, that focuses on making new plays with an acting company of special needs adults. She is a resident director with NPTC's Women's Work Short Play LAB.

CELIA BRAXTON, Ph.D. (Dramaturg), is the Senior Dramaturg for NPTC's Women's Work Project, for which she co-leads a team of resident directors developing full-length scripts by 4-8 writers per season. Elsewhere, she has helped devise numerous one-person shows, including initial work with Stephanie Berry on her Obie-winning *The Shanteequa Chronicles*, and a dance/drama adaptation of *Macbeth* with the Avalon Theatre of eMotion. Celia has presented at numerous academic conferences. Her *NETJ* article, "'Home, Sweet Home': *The Drunkard*, Domesticity, and the New Theatrical Audience," contextualizes the play within the climate of developing domestic ideology. She is working on a book examining the reinvention of the professional and cultural role of the actress in the United States in the final third of the nineteenth century. She teaches at Queensborough Community College and LaGuardia Community College.

AHEAD OF THE CURVE!

by **Melissa Attebery**



Rarely do people think of Mae West as a writer. She's primarily remembered for her voluptuous figure, sexy innuendos and sharp wit, but she was a free-thinking, independent and bold woman long before those qualities became first fashionable, then fundamental. In fact, she was one of the first female American writers, and actors, to demand and receive creative control over her work.

West learned early on that her talent and good looks were an advantage. Her attitudes toward men were heavily influenced by her mother, a former corset and fashion model, who had once idolized performer and suffrage advocate Lillian Russell. West learned to use her sexuality to ally with or dominate men, and she saw marriage as an institution offering legal protection and

social acceptance, but robbing women of independence and sexual freedom. She married vaudevillian Frank Wallace in 1911 when she was 17, but kept the marriage a secret, never lived with him and eventually left him without divorcing until 1942. She only admitted to being married to Wallace when she was forced to do so when on trial for her play *Sex* in 1927. She may even have been simultaneously married to musician Guido Deiro, divorcing him in 1920.

Born in Bushwick, Brooklyn in 1893, West started in show business at age 5, entertaining at a church social, and at age 7, billed as "Baby Mae," winning the gold medal in a talent show. It was in Woodhaven, Queens, where West first performed in a bar, Neir's Tavern, which still exists today. Around the age of 13, she began performing on the vaudeville circuit, trying out various personas including a male impersonator, an eccentric country girl and a blackface coon shouter. Her trademark walk may even have been inspired by famous female impersonators during the



"Pansy Craze." Soon thereafter, she was performing as the sexy "Baby Vamp," and at 18 she introduced her audiences to the "shimmy," which she'd seen in a nightclub on Chicago's South Side. After her first appearance on Broadway in the 1911 revue *A La Broadway*, West was discovered by the *New York Times*—a "girl named Mae West, hitherto unknown, pleased by her grotesquerie and snappy way of singing and dancing."



With a tremendous wit and intelligence for writing dialogue, West started writing plays and first came to prominence with her production of *Sex*, which was shut down in 1927. West was sentenced to 10 days on Welfare Island (now known as Roosevelt Island) on obscenity charges. It's said that she received star treatment in prison, but she was sympathetic to her less

fortunate inmates, and when *Liberty* magazine paid her \$1,000 for an exit interview, she used it to start a Mae West Memorial Library for female prisoners.

This instinct to turn injustice into social good was a theme throughout her life, echoing later in the 1930s when one of her many boyfriends, the African-American boxing champion William "Gorilla" Jones, was barred by management from entering her apartment building in Los Angeles. West bought the building and lifted the ban.



In 1937 with her attorney

Her next plays, *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*, demonstrated her openness about homosexuality; but it was her 1928 play, *Diamond Lil*, about a racy, easygoing lady of the 1890s, that went from Broadway hit to Hollywood hit. Although she didn't arrive in Hollywood until she was (remarkably) almost 40 years old, she won the respect of Paramount Pictures on the basis of her talent. Unfortunately, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (commonly known as the Hays Office) had banned *Diamond Lil* as unsuitable for the screen. So, in 1933, West and Paramount made some changes and released the film as *She Done Him Wrong*. It was a huge success, garnering an Academy Award nomination for Cary Grant and saving Paramount from bankruptcy. Under the strict Motion Picture Production Code, West became an expert at evading the censors. She loaded future scripts with obvious material for them to cut, while slipping in double entendres that they would overlook.



1955 with Cary Grant, whom West claimed to have "discovered"

Ultimately, West's style was too much for Hollywood, and she turned back to the stage for the next few decades. She re-affirmed her stardom performing in Las Vegas in the 1950s and maintained her strong sexual identity well into her 60s. When the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s finally echoed the sentiments West had been championing for 50 years, West experienced a resurgence in popularity and was featured in the 1969 edition of *LIFE* magazine. A master at reinventing herself, she never stopped asserting her power as an artist and sex symbol, always insisting on playing a woman in her 20s. In 1980, after struggles with diabetes and other ailments, she suffered a series of strokes and died at age 87 in Los Angeles.



West in 1978

For us, West is remembered as more than just "the come up and see me sometime girl." She was an early supporter of the women's liberation movement, an early supporter of gay rights and wrote the Ur-text for Madonna and Lady Gaga. West once said, "You may admire a girl's curves on the first introduction, but the second meeting shows up new angles." Indeed she showed us new angles—repeatedly breaking barriers of gender and sexuality over an 80+ year career as a writer, performer, free-speech agent and entertainment entrepreneur.