

Mae West, 1893-1980: The Wild Woman of Film and Stage

Her rich voice and sexy jokes made her an important figure in American popular culture. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
22 November 2008

VOICE ONE:

I'm Barbara Klein.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about film actress Mae West. She was also a writer, producer and businesswoman. The sexual nature of her life and art represented her liberal and often disputed ideas. Her funny jokes have become part of the language of American popular culture.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



Mae West

Mae West was born in Brooklyn, New York in eighteen ninety-three. Her father, John West, had several jobs but started his career as a competitive fighter. Mae's mother, Matilda, played an important role in developing her daughter's career as an entertainer.

Mae started to perform in local theater groups as a young child. By nineteen-oh-seven she was part of a national vaudeville tour that performed across the country. Vaudeville was a theatrical show with several entertainers performing songs, dances and jokes. Vaudeville was very popular in the United

States during the early nineteen hundreds.

When Mae West was about eighteen years old she started performing on Broadway, the famous theater area of New York City. She appeared in many musical shows such as "Hello, Paris" and "A la Broadway." For the next fifteen years she sang and danced in both Broadway and vaudeville shows.

VOICE TWO:

In the middle nineteen twenties, Mae West started to write, produce and act in her own plays. She also started to create the sexual jokes that would make her famous -- and also get her into trouble. Her first Broadway play was called "Sex."

The play was very popular, but soon closed temporarily. City officials put Mae West in jail for more than a week. The police arrested her because they said the play was not moral. Mae West knew that this incident would make her a national success --- and it did.

Serving time in jail did not stop West from writing more plays or causing new disputes over their sexually suggestive subject matter. In fact, she said that she learned from her jail experience. She said the people she met in jail influenced the characters she later created.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Mae West wrote many kinds of theatrical productions, but some details remained the same. Her humor was often sexual. But her jokes had two meanings. Her statements were humorous and intelligent because they could be understood in two different ways. She was also funny because she greatly overstated her sexy nature and love for men. Mae West always played the role of a young and strong woman. She also made sure that she always had the biggest role. She wanted everyone to know she was the star and she was in charge.

VOICE TWO:

One of her most famous plays was called "Diamond Lil." Mae West made careful choices when writing this play so that it would be popular with a wide audience. She set the play in a famous New York City area called the Bowery. Audiences knew the history of this dangerous area. West also had the story take place in the late nineteenth century. She knew that the clothing from this period looked good on her large and curvy body. She thought that older people would like the time period. Female audiences would like her rich clothing. And younger people would like the play's action and sexy style.

West plays a singer named Lil who works in a saloon, a public drinking place. She walks around in very tight, shiny dresses. She has shiny, golden, wavy hair. She wears diamond jewels and large hats. She has many lovers and adventures.

VOICE ONE:

"Diamond Lil" was a big success. It was performed more than three hundred times on Broadway. Then it was performed all over the country. Lil became the most representative example of Mae West's characters. It was a role she would play many times in her life.

"Diamond Lil" shows the way Mae West appeared in many of her productions, and even in real life. Mae West once said: "It isn't what I do, but how I do it. It isn't what I say, but how I say it, and how I look when I do it and say it."

VOICE TWO:

After the stock market crash of nineteen twenty-nine, Mae West faced a difficult period. Many theaters could no longer remain open in this time of economic depression. She also had to deal with legal battles over the disputed subjects of her plays. Her latest musical was a failure on Broadway. And, in nineteen thirty her mother died. It was soon time for Mae West to make a change.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen thirty-two Mae West moved to Hollywood, California to start her film career. Her first film was called "Night After Night." At first, Mae West had refused to be in the film because she was not satisfied with her character. But the producer allowed her to rewrite parts of the story. West helped give the film a special humor and excitement.

The next year she starred in the movie "She Done Him Wrong." This was the film version of her successful play, "Diamond Lil". But making this movie was not easy. The Hays Office had forbidden several of Mae West's plays such as "Diamond Lil" from being made into movies. The Hays Office was in charge of enforcing a severe production code. This code controlled what was considered morally acceptable subject matter for American movies.

VOICE TWO:

To make this movie, the producers changed the name of the play and its characters. And Mae West brought her intelligence to the film. She created sexy statements that the Hays Office had to accept. Instead of direct sexual comments, she perfected her sexually suggestive jokes.



In this film, Cary Grant plays the role of Mae West's main love interest, Captain Cummings. This is one of Cary Grant's earliest roles. He soon became a big Hollywood star. In this scene from the movie, Mae West makes her most famous statement. Her character, Lady Lou, is in love with Captain Cummings. She is trying to get him to "come up and see her."

LADY LOU: "You know, I always did like a man in a uniform. That one fits you grand. Why don't you come up sometime and see me...I'm home every evening."

CAPTAIN CUMMINGS: I'm busy every evening.

LADY LOU: "Busy? So what are you trying to do, insult me?"

CAPTAIN CUMMINGS: "Why no! Not at all. I'm just busy, that's all. You see, we're holding meetings in Jacobsen's Hall every evening. Anytime you have a moment to spare, I'd be glad to have you drop in. You're more than welcome."

LADY LOU: "I heard you. But you ain't kidding me any. You know, I've met your kind before. Why don't you come up sometime, huh?"

CAPTAIN CUMMINGS: "Well, I..."

LADY LOU: "Don't be afraid, I won't tell. Come up, I'll tell your fortune."

VOICE ONE:

This movie made Mae West a great success. "Why don't you come up and see me sometime" became one of the most famous statements in film history. For a period, she was one of the highest paid female entertainers in America. Some experts say her movies helped save the production company Paramount Pictures from financial ruin. Audiences all over the world either loved or hated this wild woman.

Mae West both starred in and wrote her next film, "I'm No Angel." She played a circus performer. As always, her character drives men crazy with desire. When the film opened, it broke records for attendance and profits. Here is Mae West performing the theme song of this movie.

(MUSIC: "I'm No Angel")

VOICE TWO:

Mae West continued to make films – and trouble -- throughout the nineteen thirties and early forties. Critics say this was the most exciting part of her career. They say that after this period, she only repeated herself. While she had offers for films, she refused to play the role of an older or weak woman. West continued to act on stage, wrote books and appeared on television.

At the age of eighty-five she starred in a film called "Sextette." Not surprisingly, Mae West played a sexy woman that men could not resist. Some critics dismissed the film. Others praised her spirit for never surrendering to old age on film. Two years later, Mae West died at her home in California. She was eighty-seven.

VOICE ONE:

Mae West remains one of the most famous and liberated actresses in American film and stage history. She used her yellow hair, playful voice, and shapely body to create a whole new kind of Hollywood star. She was a strong woman who kept careful artistic control over her work. Her independence, humor and sexy nature continue to influence performers today.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This program was written and produced by Dana Demange. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Barbara Klein. Join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.