

MAE

"Come on up and see me sometime!"

Image from a Cracked Mirror

JACOBA ATLAS

Part One of Two Parts

"Mae West is ageless. She hasn't changed in 30 years. She looks as if she invented sex yesterday, not in the twenties." James Bacon, syndicated Hollywood columnist, 1972.

Mae West isn't ageless, but then no one really is. The legend that's grown up around the woman writer Richard Schiekl calls "the biggest blond of them all" is formidable, perhaps a more potent fantasy than any other living star possesses, Deitrich and Garbo notwithstanding. Carefully shielded from daylight, ensconced in a perpetual perfect setting, Mae West is a phenomenon who keeps on going. She'll be 82 this August, and no doubt a spate of articles extolling her youth and vigor will greet the birthday celebrations. But what will they tell us of the woman behind the facade?

I first went to interview West after the collapse of *Myra Breckinridge*. Like almost everyone else, I was in awe of the woman — her movies, her witticisms, her whole presence seemed to indicate one of the last of the great champions. The interview that ensued was not what could be called a rude awakening, but it was an awakening of sorts, only the better descriptive word would be "sad."

Like almost everyone else, I had been lulled by publicity handouts and writers like Jim Bacon: Mae West was not only indestructible, they said, but totally sure of herself, with a sense of humor to boot. Certainly part of that proved true. She is astonishingly youthful, vigorous and the humor is intact; yet there is a pathetic streak that flashes through an atmosphere that includes a woman dressed like a too rich wedding cake, who, despite her wit and intelligence, placed photographs (and an article in *National Enquirer*) of herself and Raquel Welch before me to indicate that she was sexier than the 30-year-old cheese-cake beauty.

There was, of course, no way to confront West with comments

about the impropriety of impoverishing old age by making compete with youth: like Alfred Hitchcock and Frank Capra, Mae West answers any question with the same answers she has given many times in the past. She is not interested in breaking new ground in interviews and certainly that is her prerogative. But where is the woman?

Robert Fryer, who produced *Myra Breckinridge*, once said of Mae West, "The only time I've seen her turn into a tigress is when someone knocks someone she likes. She is as loyal as a lamb." It is true that some small-minded historian would have to pile through more quotes than Watergate has produced to find an unkind word about this woman. Despite her "sex-pot" image, her personal actions are above reproach, not in terms of some trumped-up phony sexual morality, but the good old-fashioned "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" morality that is rarely in rich supply in Hollywood.

Therefore, the sadness I felt at meeting and talking to West was not based on any personal transgression, rather it stemmed from the fact that here was this terrific woman who readily admits to her age and then turns around and insists that she is the same woman she was when she was 26. My question is, why in the world would she want to be that same woman?

With Mae West, as with so many other stars of that era, the legend overcrowds the person, and the cult of the screen personality takes over. That's fine for the audience, but one wonders what the consequences are for the person herself. Certainly Mae West has avoided much of the traumas of other "sex symbols" like Marilyn Monroe and Jean Harlow, but then some people have severely questioned West's claim to that dubious title.

She always seemed to me to be the ultimate nonphysical sex-symbol — it was her manner, her humor and her words that were sexy, not necessarily that "Big Ben hour glass" figure, the marcelled blond hair or the lopping, hand-on-hip walk. Also, despite the

satin and lace clothing, the soft flowing hair and the painted nails, there is nothing traditionally feminine about Mae West.

To be sure, it's that very lack of helplessness and coyness that has made her a heroine to women's liberation and sent women's groups scurrying back to her films for an expression of open female sexual needs. But her films lead directly to a quandary: she's no Norma Shearer, thank God, but just who and what is she?

Close friend and associate Stan Musgrove calls Mae West "the screen's first leading man" and further credits her with opening the way for other "leading men" like Rosalind Russell and Katherine Hepburn; but one wonders. Russell and Hepburn, whatever their self-assurance or forcefulness, never played it like West, who played it, as someone suggested, like "a men's locker room joke."

There was even a nasty, subterranean rumor floating around that Mae West was not a woman at all, but a man in drag. That kind of statement is fed by her self-proclaimed affinity to "gay boys" as she calls homosexuals. Says West, "Gay boys are taking over the business. They do a heck of a job imitating me. Why? I saw exaggerated things and they like to repeat them. Gay boys are really female souls in male bodies. I like them, they're good kids." Her second play, produced after *Sex*, was *The Drag* and starred a bevy of female impersonators.

A British critic cites the following description of female impersonators as the perfect description of Mae herself, "A good drag act should express the assumption that a man makes a better woman than a woman. There are two ways in which this can be achieved: by a display of extravagant glamour or by caricaturing female characteristics, making them appear ridiculous or even faintly disgusting." Mae West does all that.

She lives in well-protected splendor in Ravenswood, an elaborate old apartment complex on Rossmore, which until



very recently she owned. To enter her small, all-white apartment, one must pass two security checks. Once inside the apartment, the omnipresence of the past becomes immediately evident.

The only color relieving the whiteness is flaked gold and occasional touches of pale pink satin. A white piano dominates one corner of the living room, complete with a famous nude statue of Mae West and the ever-present heart-shaped chocolate box, filled with goodies. The flowers are fake, and the blinds are drawn against the sun. The furniture is covered with plastic, as if it were left over from some Molly Goldberg set.

West herself made an entrance, tottering on small feet, taking tiny little steps as if she were made of porcelain and one false move would send her shattering to the floor. Margaret Mitchell's description of Aunt Pitty pat in *Gone With The Wind* could not have been more appropriate. She was, however, smiling and friendly, gracious within the limited sphere of an interview and eager to talk, although not to be taped. "I

won't allow those things," she said pointing to the small tape recorder. In the old days reporters took notes!

To be sure, there is nothing senile about West. Alert and interested, before I left she had discussed what kind of soap I should use on my face and admitted her beauty secrets. "I never smoke or drink," she warned. "I wash my face with bottled water and good Castile soap. I apply a little lanolin oil, cocoa butter and rosewater on my face in the morning and at night and leave it on for one hour. I clean my face with vegetable oils — a little coconut oil: I steam my face too." Georgette Klinger couldn't offer better advice.

She sat ramrod straight during the interview, her blond hair never moving, her long white gay nineties-type dress without a wrinkle. She was Mae West as if Mae West had been embalmed too many years ago. Images of imitators kept flying through the air — Edie Adams, Debbie Reynolds, Barbara Streisand in *Hello Dolly* — where was the woman to whom

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MAE

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they gave the sincerest form of flattery?

That Mae West moved and sauntered, and I searched in vain for the woman she might have become, a woman grown comfortably old the way actresses Dame Edith Evans, Cathleen Nesbitt and Sybil Thorndike had grown comfortably and elegantly old. There was none of it; instead I felt almost as if I had wandered into Bette Davis' lair while she was perpetually playing that grotesque child-star in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Sure, all this negativism sounds like bad faith considering the age of the woman and her considerable accomplishments. But that is right to the point. In a time when youth is idealized beyond all justification, it is somehow doubly disturbing to see a woman who was above the "common horde" bending to the ultimate corrupting illusion.

But then, Mae West is nothing if not contradictory. For instance, she is the woman who is credited with creating such moral outrage that the Hays Office — Hollywood Censor — was formed to stop her. The Hays Office censored, rewrote and condemned many of her films, yet right now Mae West believes we need a national censor. "As for censorship I say yes, there should be a censor. There must be a limit, too much is too much. 'Have we gone too far?' Yes. 'I walked out of *Last Tango in Paris*. People have abused their freedoms."

She is made up to look like a distorted mirror image of her former self, and yet she says, "Marilyn Monroe was synthetic, a copy of me. But I O.K.'d her for my life story. (Note: *It was never filmed.*) She was pretty and I liked her, but she was manufactured."

Despite the American Medical Association's claim that double thyroids are impossible and totally undocumented,

West states emphatically, "I have all this energy because I have a double thyroid. There are only 12 people in the world with this, and it gives me twice the energy other people have." Harmless enough certainly, but it keeps a facade impenetrable in an age when the truth about this remarkable woman might be far more fascinating.

No one can deny that she's issued more "bon mots" than any wit since Oscar Wilde and certainly more than Hollywood ever saw even in the heyday of Dorothy Parker, and despite her *Sunset Boulevard* trappings, she is right there with perceptive insights. For instance, "Life's unpredictable, but you can count on glamour to see you through hell." (Could that hell include her own old age?)

Or, "I've never had children. They take a lot out of you, mentally, physically, psychological-



ly, but they also give you strength." Any woman who has debated the contradictions of procreation and womanhood would echo that sentiment. She also warns against Los Angeles water ("I never drink it"), the evils of salt ("There's enough natural salt in the food we eat"), and all in all Mae West is one of the best advertisements for health food and self-control.

Her famous phrases are now part of daily usage at most, and known by all film fans at the very least. Who can forget, "I used to be Snow White, but I drifted"; or, "Between two evils I always pick the one I haven't tried before." Her screen debut is legendary: swaying into a night club, covered with diamonds, she listened while a hat check girl gasped, "Goodness, what beautiful diamonds" — to which La West replied, "Goodness had nothing to do with it," and

disappeared up a sweeping staircase and into history, as they say.

She also coined the phrase "tall, dark and handsome" to then pretty-boy ingenue Cary Grant. In almost a dozen films, Mae West has written every line of her own dialogue (and everyone else's with the exception of W.C. Fields in *My Little Chickadee*) and virtually directed those films as well — without screen credit, of course. She also saved a floundering Paramount Pictures from total bankruptcy, in much the same way that sound saved Warner Bros. from the same fate.

But she does not, or cannot, relax into her current self. Her skin is smooth and soft, attractive at any age and, yes, astonishing at 82; but her constant invitation to visiting journalists to touch it for themselves smacks of pitiful need for out-

side reassurance. She's a tireless worker for charity, but her refusal to meet people on neutral ground bespeaks of a woman who can only function on a well-staged forum.

Her comments about the necessity for sex right through "old age" are admirable ("age has nothing to do with sex, sex is a frame of mind, and let me say I've got a very good mind"), but her entourage of muscle men makes a travesty of comfortable, adult sexuality.

Eluding the wrinkle-inducing sun, Mae West seemed mummified, a liberated woman who could cope with everything but that most fundamental human challenge — the passage of time. A remarkable woman, somehow rendered sad in her pursuit of a persona that bares little relationship to present reality or to what is and was fundamentally her most outstanding attributes: a keen mind and a quick wit.

Next week, Mae West's own words, 1974.

CORDOVA

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Masculine females (women, straight or gay, who scored high in masculinity behavioral characteristics on the inventory) scored high as predicted on the independence tests but curiously fell ambiguously in-between the androgynous and feminine females on the nurturing measurement. "Accordingly," says Bem, "it remains unclear as to whether the behavior of the masculine females conforms to our hypothesis (that she, like masculine males, will be independent but not nurturing)."

Scores of the feminine females, however, did not result according to prediction. While it was true that feminine females scored low on the independence variable, it was recorded they scored similarly low on the nurturing variable! "In other words," says Bem, "across the two experimental situations, feminine females can be said to have 'flunked' both critical tasks, and consequently, it is they who seem to have the most serious behavioral deficit."

Those who are familiar with feminist writings will perhaps not find this later result too surprising. Unlike the popular myth which projects her as all giving, the highly feminine female is herself deprived of a healthy self-love and consequently has little to give a kitten, a child, a man, or herself. Speculating on reasons for the feminine

females' low nurturing score, Bem hypothesized that the absence of male pressure to act like she was nurturing might have allowed the feminine female to lapse into her natural behavioral response — no response.

Although Bem's experiments point to many avenues for further research, it is now clear there exists a category of people (androgynous) whose personalities do not fall into the known stereotypes. These people, research indicates, have a wider capacity to handle life situations with the necessary, rather than role-prescribed, responses. In short, Bem and I suggest an individual's ability to cope with the world is a better measurement of mental health than HIS/HER rigid adherence to a set of behaviors that don't get the job done.

Bem's experiments support popular notions about the wifeless husband who freaks out when his kids won't eat Cherrios for dinner and the Max Factor cover girl who can't find a telephone listing for The Job Market. Fortunately for the human race, there are those of us (usually referred to as weird, nonexistent, out of step, mismatched, ball crushers, faggots, bitches, etc.) who can do both.

Next week, some interesting yardage on what happens to the high school stud and femme fatale when the football game is over.

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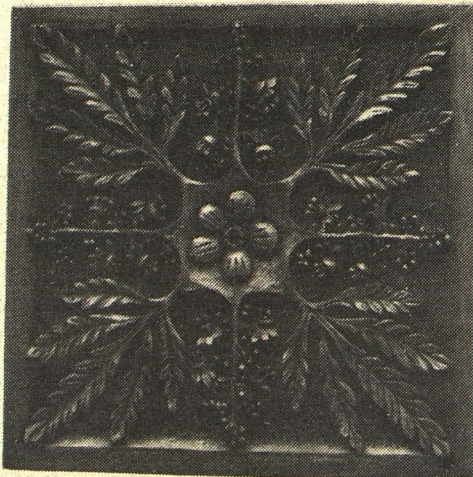
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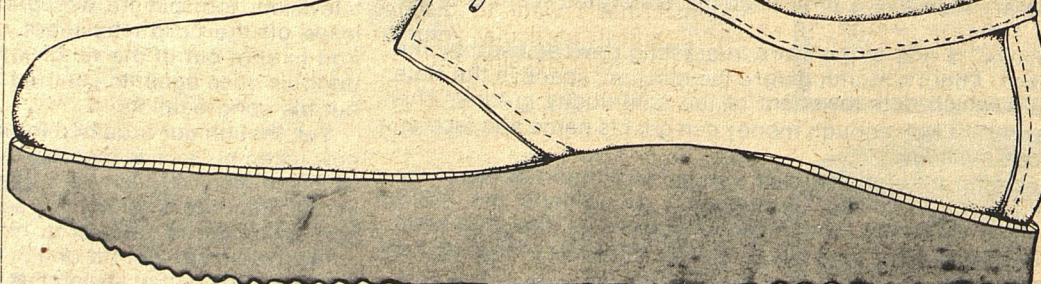
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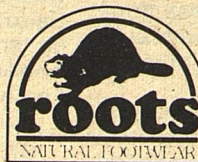
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