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Playing it Fashionably Queer: Mae West's Performing Sexuality

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Abstract: “Marriage is a fine institution, but I’m not ready for an institution.” With this challenging innuendo, the American actress and author Mae West offers an insight into gender performativity and heteronormativity through marriage in a period, the “Roaring Twenties,” in which sexual and gender politics could not be put into scrutiny. Her vamp persona and the elaborated iconography that she crafted on her character gave birth to a meticulous semiotics of the body that eventually undermined the American social context of the time fostering on the one hand, an image of heterosexual desire, and on the other hand an appealing icon to a gay market. This article ventures a queer-oriented perspective on West’s charismatic character and on the intertwined effects that tie semiotics to body language, especially focussing on the plays *Sex* (1926) and *The Drag* (1927).

Keywords: queer, stage, sexuality, heteronormativity, body, homosexuality.

*I generally avoid temptation
unless I can't resist it.
(Mae West, 1892–1980)*

1 Roaring twenties: queers are here!

The early 1900s reflected contradictory reactions to the social upheavals that occurred in America, especially in a city like New York in which interactions between race and social class ordinarily undermined the cohabitation of several communities. In this light, the gay world in New York during the “Roaring Twenties” show complex and idiosyncratic connotations as a result of the “sexual identification” brought forth by groups of gay people who, in the previous years, would not have dared lead a private and a public life within the same city. The majority of gay communities lived in working-class immigrant

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neighbourhoods and the most famous and renowned gay nightclubs and drag dance halls were located in Harlem. As George Chauncey's detailed work on gay urban life *Gay New York* (1994) highlights "indifference or curiosity – rather than hostility or fear – characterized many New Yorkers' response to the gay world for much of the half-century before the war,"¹ and this curiosity highly contributed to a massive proliferation of queer artists and entertainers performing on disputed stages. By far the most detailed collection of personal and private diaries and official archives, Chauncey's urban survey on the one hand records the changing order of gay male communities in New York and, on the other hand, examines the relationships between the "gay city" and the "straight world." Moreover, Chauncey fosters a thorough description of the multifaceted terms used to "define" homosexuals from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, according to which

"gay" described both homosexual men and those simply taking on effeminate qualities, with or without participation in homosexual relationships, and was often used in "straight settings" as a way for queer men to identify one another verbally. "Fairy" identified particularly effeminate homosexual men, whereas "queer" generally applied to men interested in homosexual relationships but not in effeminacy, although it could also refer to any man who expressed a nonnormative sexuality.²

Thus, in the same city, New York, different languages and jargons intermingle to express the growing awareness and increasing visibility of the gay subculture. Indeed, as Butler and Glover state,

[t]o the police, doctors and anti-vice campaigners gay men were "inverts," "perverts," "degenerates" or sometimes "homosexuals" or "homosexualists," while the men would identify themselves variously as "faggots," "fairies" or "queens," words that had many more subtle inflections than when they were used homophobically as insults or as terms of abuse.³

The struggle for the right to represent "different" sexualities also in performance arts led the emerging gay subculture to experience censorship, especially when performance artists used their bodies as "persuasion" props of artistic and political display. On several occasions, the American actress Mae West under-

¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 2.

² Ariel Nereson, "Queens 'Campin' Onstage: Performing Queerness in Mae West's 'Gay Plays'," *Theatre Journal* 515 (2012), accessed August 28, 2014, www.academia.edu/4501057/Queens_Campin_Onstage_Performing_Queerness_in_Mae_Wests_Gay_Plays.

³ David Glover and Cora Kaplan, *Genders* (London: Routledge, 2009), 121.

went censorship for her plays staged on Broadway, in that they were considered obscene and offending. Indeed, according to the “Comstock Laws,”⁴ an anti-obscenity legislation passed in America at the end of the nineteenth century which became the template for similar regulations on sexuality, West’s plays *Sex* (1926), *The Drag* (1927), and *The Pleasure Man* (1928) were defined as receptacles of lewd language and sexually explicit material and, therefore, not proper to be presented on stage. In a period in which homosexual actors were forbidden by law to display gayness and sexually-oriented issues, Mae West, well-known for her faith in free speech, purposely wrote her plays to promote gay rights and sexual freedom, to the point that her voice overshadowed the bigoted “respectability” of the conservatives. With her outrageous and challenging vocabulary, West subverted the stability of a social system that pretended to ignore the presence of “other” sexualities in order to exorcise their free manifestation. Moreover, Mae West offered an insight into gender performativity and heteronormativity through her plays in an era, the “Roaring Twenties,” in which sexual and gender politics could not be put into scrutiny. Her vamp persona and the elaborated iconography that she crafted on her character gave birth to a meticulous semiotics of the body that eventually undermined the American social context of the time fostering on the one hand, an image of heterosexual desire, and on the other hand an appealing icon to a gay market. This article ventures a queer-oriented perspective on West’s charismatic character and on the intertwined effects that tie semiotics to body language, especially focussing on the plays *Sex* (1926) and *The Drag* (1927).

2 Queering the stage: gender performativity and hetero(non)normativity in *The Drag* and *Sex*

In such a context, according to Chauncey, a specific brand of gay male began to emerge within the growing homosexual subculture in Greenwich Village and in Times Square that was defined as “pansy.” This term was referred to highly effeminate males whose behaviour clashed with the socially accepted demeanours of the “straight” man. Thus, in the 1920s, in the counterfeit hypocrisy of the purity movements, the voice of a woman, Mae West, scorched the silence of the “Speakeasies” through a vivid and theatrical representation of the gay male

⁴ In 1873, anti-vice leader Anthony Comstock proposed a legislation, which forbade performing, acting, and publishing obscene materials, thus siding with the “social purity movement” that professed a conservative behaviour on stage.

world on stage. West's sexual exuberance and sharp innuendoes inoculated Broadway's audiences with unconventional representations of the gay life and relentlessly she became the personification of scandal or – better yet – the incarnation of the “Queen of Babylon.” Her astonishing sex-appeal evoked feelings of desire, her physical abundance embodied a longed-for symbol of sensuality who could seduce, paradoxically, straight men and homosexuals, and tease theatre practitioners as well as conservative politics. Through her experimental and socially engaged representations, West succeeded in eclipsing moral codes by bridging the gap between hetero- and homonormativity.

In looking closely at the radical approach that Mae West brought into theatrical representations, the first element to notice is the fact that she incorporated performance into socio-political strategy, aiming at exerting her independent and creative spirit into her art form and, hence, into the world at large. West's plays provide insight into the ever-changing practises of gender relationships and pave the way to new perspectives on the interrelations between politics and performing arts.

Arguably, the whole range of plays produced and performed by West can be considered as anti-institutionalised activities presented by the author to undermine and, at the same time, to quibble with normative codes of behaviours.

Since drag and cross-dressing plays originated when the represented characters were excluded from the stage, these practises led to a “set of expectations” of what actors ought “to look like.” Indeed, in most cases, the first outcome of censorship was “curiosity.” People were willing to see queer characters on the stage, and plot required the inclusion of such elements that normativity proscribed. As it is presented, this assumption seems strange: homosexuals had to “queer themselves” to play their roles but, to a closer analysis, this is no different from women who dressed up wearing exaggerated breasts or enhancing other physical characteristics in order to appear “more feminine.”

There is another aspect to take into account. Drag performances, being impersonated in a limited range of demeanours, show such characteristics as exaggeration and hyperbole to criticise hegemonic discourses, which underpin social inequalities and oppression. That is the case of the two types of drag representations: “the glamour girl” and “the pantomime dame.” The former “makes fun of women because of their sexuality and the [latter] for their lack of it.”⁵ Hence, both stereotypes entail specific features so that the glamour girl is either submissive or predatory, whereas the pantomime dame can be portrayed

5 See Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

as either stupid or shrew. In any case, seen through this perspective, both characters are incapable of caring for themselves, politically as well as artistically. Both *personae*, for this reason, need to be represented – or better yet ruled – by “others,” that is to say by normative power. Drawing on this assumption, Mae West validated a more eye-opening reading of homonormativity in her plays: her female impersonations evoked a vehicle of homosexual self-expression or, more precisely, a means through which “posers” could strut about on the stage and reveal their “true” sexual identities.

West’s outrageous plays did not attempt to impress spectators through astonishing reproductions of female details and attire. The core thrill of her displays, technically, lay in the fact that she was not “acting,” rather she was expressing actual selves overcoming the limits of gender “canonization.” This point is fundamental in that putting on female clothes does not necessarily imply that the man who dresses as a female is a homosexual or, as suggested by Janice Raymond, “a man putting on women’s clothes is putting on parody.”⁶ Indeed, such a far-fetched conclusion leads us to West’s main interest in “deviant” sexualities and behaviours.

As concerns homosexuals, such stereotyping of “inverted” identities represented the crucial example of how culture aimed at maintaining social, political, and economic control over audiences. In this light, it would be worth introducing Hans Robert Jauss’s “horizon of expectations” theory, whose core concept deals with the assumption that audiences “perceive” and “interpret” a text according to a predefined set of expectations. This theory claims that people who experience the same culture also share pre-set understandings of what is plausible, possible, or impossible. These expectations can be classified in two subgroups: the first refers to literary norms and conventions of a specific period and includes style, genre, and literary texts; whereas the second pertains to everyday experiences and to the socio-cultural world of both a community and an individual. Moreover, Jauss distinguishes three kinds of experiences that can be based on productive aesthetic praxis, receptive aesthetic praxis, and communicative aesthetic praxis. To Jauss, communicative aesthetic praxis is fundamental in that it can change people’s beliefs and free their minds.⁷ Accordingly, Jauss’s “horizon of expectations” can foster a challenging perspective on how West’s far out performances contributed to re-shape the queer stereotype on the stage. In this light, before analysing West’s plays, a brief introduction on

⁶ Janice Raymond, “The Politics of Transgenderism,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing*, eds. Richard Ekins and Dave King (London: Routledge, 1996), 215–217.

⁷ See Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward An Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

American censorship could offer an overview on the social background in which she conceived her theatrical production.

Part of the censorship exercised over the stage was due to the flourishing studies in the scientific fields of sociology and psychology according to which homosexuality represented a “social disease.” On this premise, American psychologists and psychiatrists classified homosexual impulses and behaviours as psychopathic, perverted, deviant, and dysfunctional. When West started her challenge to put under scrutiny the American rigid set of sexual rules and behaviours during the 1920s, Broadway was a public site in which the stage became the pretext for a stiff censorship to foster politicians a valid venue to enforce moral codes. Shocking and titillating heterogeneous audiences, West sensationally carved out her way to star transgressive sexualities on stage and perform gay roles, thus recognising the presence of non-normative lifestyles. Thus, if on the one hand West’s plays determined the fall of the “horizon of expectations” institutionalised by the American authority, on the other hand they became surprisingly popular in that they suggested an inevitable wave of changes in the social pre-set system. This is also demonstrated by the fact that West’s performances

aggravated the moral arbiters of Broadway in two key ways: first, her own performance of female sexualities pushed the conventions of the increasingly popular “sex plays” beyond any decorum they could claim. Unsurprisingly, despite their unsavoury content, sex plays were wildly popular. [...] West’s other offence was her staging of female impersonation and other queer identities that went beyond popular vaudeville conventions and alluded to lifestyle, habits and performance traditions that were shaping New York’s social landscape in ways that dramatically challenged the status quo.⁸

West’s tendency to challenge class rules and moral codes contributed to diffuse “anxieties” about queer performances, in which both potentially deviant spectatorships and gay contents cooperated in undermining the straight and legitimate state regulations on playhouses and theatres. Indeed, as Andrea Friedman argues, “[s]ince the 1920s, government officials had used the production of plays about lesbians and gay men to expand their regulatory power over the legitimate theatre.”⁹ These anxieties were the result of the breaking of the “horizon of expectations” which, to some extent, apparently offered the audiences a “sound” certainty on social behaviours.

⁸ Nereson, “Queens ‘Campin’ Onstage,” 517–518.

⁹ Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 97.

In this ambiguous background, West's works played a crucial role not only because they were the first to be tried according to the "Wales Act,"¹⁰ which defined them as "lewd representations," but also because they represented one of the main causes for its inception. Undoubtedly, West was well aware of her flamboyant and transgressive behaviour and as she maintained in an interview for the *Guardian*, when the interviewer asked her "How do you feel about censorship?," she replied:

"I *believe* in censorship! If a picture of mine didn't get an X rating, I'd be insulted. Don't forget, dear – I *invented* censorship. Imagine censors that wouldn't let you sit in a man's lap. I've been in more laps than a napkin! They'd get all bothered by a line like "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you happy to see me?"¹¹

As these lines show, West deliberately inverted the role of censorship to the point that, instead of preventing her from trespassing the line of decency, the bans on her plays became the trademark of her theatrical production.

Relentlessly, *Sex* and *The Drag* became "scapegoats" banned by the "Wales Act" because they were guilty of highlighting how the combination female embodiment and gay argot entailed a further, subtle, and ambiguous relation between the stage and the changing society of New York City. Besides, other factors were at stake in this perverse and intricate relationship: body power and normativity. On this premise, it would be worth focussing on the plot of the plays *The Drag* and *Sex* to retrieve the specimen of West's performativity through non-normativity.

The Drag deals with the life of Rolly Kingsbury, an "inverted" man who has married a woman, Clair Richmond, whose father is a psychiatrist. Another character, David, Dr Richmond's patient, suffers because of an unfortunate love affair with a "mysterious" man. As the play proceeds, the unknown man is revealed to the audience: Rolly, Clair's husband. Clair is often alone in that Rolly spends his time working and visiting his gay friends. Grayson, one of Rolly's colleagues, takes care of Clair and the pair starts a love affair, which will lead to conflict between the two male characters. As one day Clair is not at home for the weekend, her husband gathers his companions and arranges a drag ball. During the celebration, David's madness overtakes him and he kills Rolly.

10 The Wales Act was an amendment to New York's state obscenity law. According to it, a play could be judged obscene even if it showed an element that was to be found as such. It also forbade any reference to homosexuality in speech or representation on the stage. Actors who were found guilty of having played homosexual roles could have been arrested. Moreover, plays found to be obscene could be padlocked for a year.

11 Charlotte Chandler, "Interview with Mae West in Ravenswood Apts," *Hollywood*, 1979, accessed August 20, 2014, www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/sep/21/greatinterviews.

Initially, Grayson is found guilty of the murder. In the meantime, to cover up the truth, Rolly's father, a judge, announces that his son has committed suicide.

West purposefully casts Rolly's father as a judge, Rolly's father in law as a doctor, and the play begins with a discussion on homosexuality between the two men, in order to stage a serious display on the legality of homosexuality and its medical/psychological implications. The author here significantly "plays" with the audience's expectations on a double level, as she seems to "legitimize" juridical control on homosexuals, whilst she indirectly advocates a deeper insight into gay identities. This double perspective finds its roots in Michel Foucault's theory, according to which the juridico-medical relationship represents a form of "biological power" that the same institutions exert by means of the human body to "shape" subjects who are useful to their interests and needs. This assumption is shown in the following speech in which Clair's father and father in law discuss on the concept of law:

DOCTOR: All a judge thinks of is his law. Everything he does is measured by the law, and when he gets through measuring there is nothing left to measure.

JUDGE: It's nonsense! What do you know about law?

DOCTOR: And what do you know about fact? You base everything on theories—hypothesis. When it comes to facts, you're groping.

JUDGE: And what is your whole profession but theory?

DOCTOR: Theory nothing, we work on fact.

JUDGE: You theorize before you find the fact...¹²

The two characters, as these lines suggest, stick to a rigid structure of knowledge production that can only create judgments based on the parameters of its own internal logic. The difference is that law is considered as a thoroughly subjective and human institution, whereas science is seen as an empirical observation of the natural world around us. Hence, West suggests that the question of homosexuality cannot be seen as a mere struggle between legal and medical discourses, rather as a consequence of their colliding, a metaphor of how societies interpose medical discourse to legitimize their interests, and consequently, the way medicine handles social demands.

Moreover, the play includes statements and medical reports on homosexuality "diagnosed" as a disease and, at the same time, a sort of gay-friendly perspective envisaged by Dr Richmond who speaks compassionate words,

¹² Mae West, *The Drag* (1927), accessed August 20, 2014, <https://books.google.it/books?isbn=1136041982>.

advocating sympathy for homosexuals. Again, this double-entendre stresses West's effort to extirpate sexual taboos from the "horizon of expectations" of her spectators, by apparently sticking to institutionalised norms. As suggested by these lines,

Dr Richmond advocates pity rather than fear and disgust toward the homosexual David claiming: "Take that poor devil in there – you'd say send him to an asylum [...] and yet the man has done no wrong. He's only born to be – a sexual invert" (107). [...] While Dr Richmond appears sympathetic, his aim is to make the homosexual legible, to explain and clarify his sexual drives in order to eliminate them.¹³

David, in the previous scene, voluntarily describes his life with Rolly using "heteronormative" speeches as, for instance, "No normally married couple were happier than we were."¹⁴ By defining his queer life through heteronormative terms, David expresses his thoughts making no distinctions between straight and gay men. Thus, the language and discourses on homosexuality uttered by Dr Richmond and David foster a clear-cut glossary on the concept of "deviancy" according to which the audience does not get the feeling of "slumming the stage." As Scott Herring puts it, "*The Drag* [...] goes slumming when it stages a lurid local population for mainstream consumption and strives to make freakish bodies sexually readable for audiences in the late 1920s"¹⁵; in this light, West's masterpiece becomes a multi-perspective play in which heterogeneous actors and spectators "act" and "interpret" it according to different hues of queerness. West's deliberate effort to trespass the limits of "hetero(non)normativity" on the legitimate stage brought forth the crucial relational paradigm between "culture" and "power." In this intricate connection, culture is exploited to reify the dominant hegemonic system, so that

each of the relational paradigms within the Queer theoretical model are best summed up through Gidden's structurization theory as the culminating lens through which Gramsci, Adorno, Foucault and Butler come into sharp focus. If micro-level events – individual actions on the part of a single person – have effects on the larger social sphere, and macro-level events – rules, regulations, culture and media – have an effect upon individuals, then one begins to see how Mae West and her dramas contribute to this process.¹⁶

¹³ Nereson, "Queens 'Campin' Onstage," 519.

¹⁴ Lillian Schlissel ed., *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag, The Pleasure Man* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 102.

¹⁵ Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶ James Russell Couch, "Are These Queer Times? Gay Male Representation on the American Stage in the 1920's and 1990's," University of Kentucky Master's Theses, Paper 416, 2003, accessed August 20, 2014, http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_theses/416.

To apparently conform to the “horizon of expectations” ratified by the juridico-medical codes, West included an “educational” preface to the play, a sort of prologue divided into two brief scenes, in which an “illuminated” physician claims that homosexuals are not criminals, rather victims of their “illness” who deserve pity and compassion. Obviously, West here operates from “behind the curtain” of social conventions, thus suggesting that the story of Rolly Kingsbury and David Caldwell illustrates the consequences of censorship. Relentlessly, the educational aim of these introductory scenes is somehow contradicted by the actual focus of the play that is an overt defence of the homosexual world that she personally recruited from New York’s gay neighbourhoods. Indeed, West indulged in the presentation of gay characters, as in the following scene in which the stage directions describe the “artistic poses,” voicing, and attire of a group of dressed up men, gathered around a piano and “amiably” needling one another with sentences and words uttered in effeminate slangs:

DUCHESS: Oh, my goodness. I’ve got the most gorgeous new drag. Black satin very tight, with a long train of rhinestones.

CLEM: Wait until you see the creation I’m wearing dearie. Virginal white, no back, with oceans of this and oceans of that, trimmed with excitement in front. You know, I’m more the flapper type, not so much like a canal boat.

DUCHESS: Creation – ha! That old thing. I knew that three years ago. Oh, Annie.

CLEM (very angry): For Chris’ sake sit. This big bitch thins nobody has anything or looks like anything but her.

DUCHESS: Oh, shut up.

ROLLY: Say, how about a little drink?

CLEM: Yes! How about a little drink?

DUCHESS: I don’t mind a little drink once in a while.

CLEM: Why you big Swede. You’d take it through a funnel if anybody would give it to you.

WINNIE: Funnel? That’s nothing. I take it through a hose. Whoops!¹⁷

The conversation concentrates on such futile issues as fashion, drinks, and paraphernalia to bring real life on stage. These lines clearly evoke the transgressive potential of the play by offering the homosexuals on the stage opportunities to “perform” queer affinity in support and recognition of non-normative lifestyles. In this scene, the crucial clash between hetero- and homonormativity is

¹⁷ West, *The Drag*. See also Marybeth Hamilton, *‘When I’m Bad, I’m Better’: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 61.

evident in the character starred by Rolly Kingsbury. Indeed, his figure underpins West's assumption according to which people who transgress normative gender roles are bound to be dealt out. This can be seen comparing Rolly's gay character with the stereotyped figure of homosexuals presented in the following scene:

No. 1: My goodness here comes the Duchess.

No. 2: The Duchess!

No. 3: The Grand Duchess!

PARSONS: Mr Hathaway, as the Doll.

No. 4: My God that's Clem, the Doll.

No. 5: Clem, the Doll!

No. 6: The Doll! (Enter Taxi-Driver)

No. 7: She picked herself a grand taxi-driver!

No. 8: Taxi-Driver!

No. 9: He's a taxi-driver!

No. 10: Rough trade, dearie!

No. 12: Rough trade!

PARSONS: Mr Gillingwater!

No. 13: Hullo, Rosco!

(WINNIE comes down-stage center. Gives her usual scream)

No. 14: My God, where have you been?

EVERYBODY: Hello Winnie – How are you? How are you?

(CLEM discovers the DUCHESS trying to make the taxi-driver)

CLEM: Listen, Bargain, if you don't want me to clean out this joint, lay off of Civic Virtue before I knock you loose from that flat beezee of yours. I've got what gentlemen prefer.

TAXI-DRIVER: What is this power I have?

CLEM: It's certainly not your face, but that's for me to know and she to find out, after I'm through – If there's anything left.¹⁸

This dialogue sheds light on the process of differentiation mentioned above, in that the audience is asked to “read” Rolly's character through a diverse perspective. Although not performing the same “gender script” as the men in the scene, Rolly is a homosexual, even though he does not act as such. What prevents society and Rolly's wife from “seeing” his homosexuality is the fact that he does not perform gender as the other companions do in the scene; indeed, he just “looks like” a straight man.

¹⁸ West, *The Drag*.

As outlined above, American society marginalised gay men and considered them as ill people who needed cure. With the advent of psychology and psychiatry, psychopathic disorders and homosexuality emerged as specific interests of nineteenth-century scientists. West consulted medical journals in the creation of her plays and had surely done her research on the nature of homosexuality. This is demonstrated by the references to clinical reports and discussions scattered about her representations. Given the presence of this “scientific evidence,” Mae West might be ideologically placed within the dominant hegemonic system. Indeed, at a first sight, she seems to suggest that her characterisation of gay men had a prescriptive attitude by offering two interpretations of their homosexuality: either a possible solution or a demonstration of how this “illness” would have affected the gay man’s life in society. Again, this interpretation leads us to the wrong conclusion in that it would convey a social differentiation according to which homosexuals had to be ghettoised outside of the gays’ dominant group. This was not West’s intention. Her effort to claim dignity for “queer” identities, whatever definition the term would have implied, must be found in the ultimate and most profound meaning of her characters’ gestures, double-entendres, and flamboyant behaviours. West’s real-like displays cannot be interpreted as mere reproductions of actual “homosexual syndromes.” They deserve a full immersion in the world that they embody. In this world particulars matter, they speak and reveal what social codes and normativity often ignore: the individual realisation of one’s self, the human compromise among what a person really is, the cultural background in which he/she performs his/her identity, and social power.

The Drag is not the only play that envisages the relationship between performance (culture) and normativity (power); indeed, West’s other famous work, *Sex* (1926), reveals similar characteristics. The plot is relatively complicated in that most of the play focuses on scenes with Margy Lamont, a prostitute who works and lives in a brothel in Montreal, and her pimp. Yet, because of its enflaming lust and desecrating language, *Sex* was condemned by critics in terms of both structure and execution, as an article that appeared in the *New York Daily Mirror* on 30 April 1926 shows in its headline: “Sex an Offensive Play. Monstrosity Plucked From Garbage Can, Destined to Sewer. [...] It is a sore spot in the midst of our fair city that needs disinfecting.”¹⁹ To a closer analysis, the play collected such an amount of condemnations because its scenes did not simply represent reality, they were perceived as real. As Marybeth Hamilton highlights,

¹⁹ *New York Daily Mirror*, “Sex An Offensive Play,” April 30, 1926, access August 20, 2014, www.maewest.blogspot.it/2014_04_01_archive.html.

[s]omething more complex than “prudery” was at work here. Reviewers did not simply hate West’s play; they were incapable of responding to it in terms of their trade, incapable of responding to it as theatre. [...] Critics’ words continually implied that SEX was no theatrical representation of a brothel, but that it uncomfortably resembled a real one; that it was not merely about sex, but was somehow a literal presentation of it, a “sore” that fell in the province [...].²⁰

Performativity and normativity glaringly penetrated another element of the play: its humour. The “authentic” tone of the play consists of comic sketches, double-entendres and overt mimic gestures, as the following scene shows:

GREGG: Oh, I’ve got something for you, wait until you see this, wait until you see this.

MARGY: Well, come on and let’s see it.

GREGG: You’ll get it, you’ll get it. I don’t mind telling you I had an awful time saving it for you. Why, all the women were fighting for it.

MARGY: It better be good.

GREGG: It’s good alright. It’s the best you could get, but you’ve got to be very careful not to bend it.²¹

In this scene, Margy and one of her customers, Lt. Gregg, are playing with an “unspoken” word, which teases the spectators’ ears and leads them to a transparently sexual double meaning. Through this linguistic device, West gives us a real portrayal of prostitution as a working-class (economic) activity. In this light, Margy Lamont embodies the urban vice economy. She is a prostitute and West does not gloss over the truth. Margy’s character is real and palpable to the point that some critics accused West of receiving actual sexual pleasure while performing on the stage, as recorded in the *New York Daily Mirror*, on 31 December 1926: “[West] cavorts her own sex about the stage in one of the most reviling exhibits allowed public display. She undresses before the public, and appears to enjoy doing so.”²² Critics considered *Sex* as an offending display because it was too realistic, in the sense that the play presented sexuality through a style that the “legitimate theatre” could not accept. Its unusual authenticity relies also in the development of characters and/or situations through a series of comic sketches interspersed with double meanings and embellished with body gestures.

The overt sexual references used in the play reflect the interwoven combination between gestures and body, semiotics and pragmatics. In the scene quoted above, as Lt. Gregg utters the final line, he hints at a specific anatomic feature

²⁰ Hamilton, ‘*When I’m Bad, I’m Better*’, 86.

²¹ West, *The Drag*. See also Hamilton, ‘*When I’m Bad, I’m Better*,’ 87.

²² *New York Daily Mirror*, December, 31, 3.

by pulling out from his pocket the gift for Margy: an ostrich feather. Thus, the use of mimics triggers the tremendous “realism” of *Sex*. Inevitably, the presence of a raw and unvarnished language in the play activated in the spectators’ minds a sort of “taste for the lewd,” as they found themselves faced with authentic pieces of life on the stage.

As suggested above, West’s plainspoken references to prostitution as an economic activity are overtly pinned down in sentences like the following:

MARGY (*flipping through her customer book*): Sailor Dan from Kansas, Sailor Dan from Kansas – oh Sailor Dan from Kansas. Yeh Sailor Dan from Kansas, flat feet, asthma, check came back, o, baby, I’ll make you a present of that bird, he’s yours. (*Sex*, 1.12).

Such an expression glaringly conveys the harsh reality of prostitution as the exchange of body and money. Mae West is not the first playwright who has dealt with prostitution on the legitimate theatre. What West actually did was to provide her audience a non-romanticized form of this phenomenon. In her plays, she explicitly attempted to dwell on prostitution and showcase what it entails, that is a body-and-money negotiation. The examples analysed above demonstrate that Margy is bitterly aware of her condition as a prostitute who is bound to bargain away her body.

On-stage interactions and dialogues are dirty and obscene as the world they refer to; yet, in *Sex* Margy’s “bedizened” character presents her strategy as a prostitute: her body becomes a means of dealing with a hostile and corrupted society. As West suggested, Margy is, whether she likes it or not, an ill-paid sex worker, a prostitute who trades her body for money. The grimness of her world patently breaks out in every single word she utters. Her red-light neighbourhood is mean and wicked.

Yet, Margy’s character is so disturbing because of her peculiar handling of sexuality. From the first time Mae West stepped onto the stage, she manifested a distinctive manner of speaking and wiggling her hips. West accompanied her waddling and languid rhythm with nasal sentences whispered from the corner of her mouth, thus teasing sexual expectations. West’s character in *Sex* does not parody the image of the sexy woman, rather the impact of her physicality on middle-class audiences highlights the clash between the public’s taste for sexual sophistication and, paradoxically, its refusal of eroticism’s explicit manifestations.

The female figure of the sex goddess in popular culture has always played a fundamental role, even though on different levels. On the one hand, the power to amaze, fascinate, and influence expresses the subversive force that every woman is eager to perform over men whilst, on the other hand, the image of the

hyper-feminine woman, according to a male perspective, embodies the projection of men's imaginary. Taking into account the female perspective, actresses who perform the role of the sex goddess exert control on their performing role and on the audience through their seductive power.

Mae West was well aware of the power that her subversive sexuality expressed and her image was undoubtedly invested with an aura of hyper-femininity, which sometimes made her appear as the queer stereotype *par excellence*. Moreover, as anticipated above, West's representation of female characters was based on detailed features, which included moving, speaking, posing and miming. *Sex* can be taken as a clear instance of how she triggered her feminine power:

By the time she took the stage in *SEX*, and probably even as far back as her vaudeville years, Mae West had developed a distinctive manner of moving and speaking on the stage. Entering a scene, she did not so much walk as ooze-moving with a controlled, deliberate slouch, her full hips swaying in a languid rhythm. She delivered her lines in nasal yet resonant tones that spilled from the corner of her mouth, lending every word an insinuating sexual toughness.²³

Therefore, according to Hamilton's analysis of West's character, the "sex goddess" takes on a fleshy eroticism and manipulates her body to convey a wide range of sexual appetites. This assumption is conveyed by one of West's most famous aphorisms: "I speak two languages: body and English." West's figure, encapsulated in tight attire, reveals itself as a crucial issue. Indeed, in the 1920s, while a boyish silhouette conveyed the idea of "normative sexuality," a corpulent and generous body like West's called to mind lower-class females or burlesque actresses whose physical appearance inspired sexual and instinctive passions.

On the stage, West's body emanated her actual and full-fleshed eroticism:

[c]urvy, voluptuous, possessing the classical dimensions of a large bosom, small waist, wide hips, and long shapely legs, with an overall slight figural plumpness. Her face reveals symmetrical features, with large, widely set face with full lips. Her complexion, [...], is flawless, and her hair is long, soft, and smoothly swept back from her face. [...] Hers is a hyper-femininity seemingly taken to its extreme, embodied in every aspect of her movement and appearance.²⁴

West indulged in several details: bosom, waist, hips, legs, face and, in particular, in her skin care. As she posited in the following lines: "Then you'll keep

²³ Hamilton, 'When I'm Bad, I'm Better,' 89.

²⁴ Jessica Hope Jordan, *The Sex Goddess in American Film, 1930–1965* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), 3.

your soft skin. That's how I kept mine. I always use baby oil. But the secret is it has to be warm, and you have to have a man put it on you – all over.”²⁵ The scrupulous care she devoted to her image did not make her a “passive object” of her role, rather the objectification proposed by several critics and scholars became in her “self-empowerment” so that

West's “masquerade” is her self-ironic ability as an actress to reveal to her audience, through verbal and dramatic irony, her own immense agency and empowerment that she enjoyed in her persona as a sex goddess, as she simultaneously conceals her ironic performance to her onscreen “suckers.” She turns back onto her audience their own expectations, and their cultural notions of a sex goddess as a “bad” or “fallen” woman, or, as in the traditional feminist valuation, as “abject,” as she occupies instead a position of empowerment.²⁶

Differently from what popular imagination might have perceived of West as a woman objectified by Hollywood, she was conscious of her power and she did not conceal her “complicity” with the hegemonic system. She proudly enjoyed the shifting tones of her moods, which could range from a serious inflection to obscene flippancy. In other words, nothing was conventional in her figure, rather, as she defined herself, “I was never an ordinary anything. I had to stand trial because of my show, *Sex*. They said I could pay the fine, but I decided it would be more interesting to go to prison. They told me I had to wear prison clothes, but I said I was bringing my own underwear. I wore my silk underwear the whole time.”²⁷

3 Conclusion

West's legacy is undeniable: her iconography and performativity of speech acts have made her the “queen of the queers.” Her feminine mannerisms, her parading and swishing on high-heeled shoes, and her aggressive sexuality became the dominant features of her style. As an interpreter of queer sexuality, West foresaw the new role and figure of homosexuals in society as the product deriving from the interplay among institutional power, medicine and the law. Mae West's innuendoes and double-entendres sublimates their comic effects to disclose subtle observations on sexual semiotics and gender politics of the modern era. Indeed, statements like “I'm no model lady. A model's just an

²⁵ Chandler, “Interview with Mae West in Ravenswood Apts.”

²⁶ Hope Jordan, *The Sex Goddess in American Film, 1930–1965*, 13.

²⁷ Chandler, “Interview with Mae West in Ravenswood Apts.”

imitation of the real thing” or “Marriage is a fine institution, but I’m not ready for an institution” reveal on the one hand an insight into gender performativity and, on the other hand, a critique of the institutional power to enforce heteronormativity through marriage. Her aphorisms operated at a semiotic level to undermine and subvert the ambiguous irony and metaphors that seep into everyday language, as she highlighted in one of her most famous quotations, “If I asked for a cup of coffee, someone would search for the double meaning.” Mae West’s use of sexual innuendoes provided an instance of “double-level speech” that allowed for the exploration of speech acts as a site of political struggle, which leave room for Butler’s notion of linguistic agency, where the speech act works to unhinge linguistic conventions by means of re-signification.

Although she was seen as an immoral woman, West was actually an early supporter of the women’s liberation movement as well as gay rights. West implemented her iconography in favour of her full-bodied form to the point that she inspired the semiotic functions of market as in the case of Joe Biedenharn’s decision to bottle Coca-Cola in a curvy reproduction of her hips. In the 1920s, designers Madelaine Vionnet and Elsa Schiaparelli created for her eccentric dresses which West wore to premier her films, as in the case of *Night After Night* and *Every Day’s a Holiday*.

Known for her sexual eccentricity, exuberance, and personification of scandal, Mae West was the “real” product of her times, and even though the hegemonic system censored her for representing homosexuality within culturally sanctioned arts, she is still considered one of the most appealing icons ever appeared on the stage, and the expression of the dichotomy performativity/normativity, art and power. Thus, her unconventional style entailed the paradox of her era, which reflected the discrepancy between moral code and sexual freedom. Nothing better than her words mirror the spirit of that time: “Too many women wait around depending on men to bring them happiness. I didn’t depend on men for mine. I knew how to handle men. I have a code though: no drinking, no smoking, and no married men. There are enough men to go around.”²⁸ Not only, the paradox of her times was expressed by her allure, as it played a double effect on men and audience as well; indeed, on the one hand, spectators found her devastatingly sexy and, on the other hand, her outrageous “physical prosperity,” so to say, amused her viewers. Yet, despite social condemnation, censorship, and police raids, West’s *Sex* became one of the most successful representation of the 1926 season, until it was forced to close in March 1927.

²⁸ Chandler, “Interview with Mae West in Ravenswood Apts.”

To sum up, West provoked and inspired such a breadth of reactions in that she was far from being an ordinary sex symbol. Significantly, West as both an actress and a playwright, manipulated culture more than she was manipulated by it. What made her performances sexually subversive and unique was the halo that she created around her enigmatic style. The spell of her myth included a touch of self-mockery, hues of irony, and sensational gestures vaporised upon her real concern: body power as the expression of the individual's identity. The secret source of West's success lays in her ability to embed a disguised vagueness in every word she whispered, thus forcing her audience to interpret it. Beyond the shocking reality that she brought on the stage, the viewer's "horizon of expectations" on sexual issues faded away to make room to a new intriguing identity: the queer.

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