Mae West’s “Queer” Plays: Breaking the Heteronormative Barrier on the 1920s Vaudeville Stage

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“Virtue has its own reward, but no sale at the box office.” - Mae West

Introduction

Mae West, one of the most well-known sex symbols of the twentieth century, is remembered for her bawdy double entendres, tight-fitting costumes, and sexually liberated attitude in 1930s Hollywood. Vanity Fair even called her “the greatest female impersonator of all time.”¹ Often forgotten, however, are the contributions she made to the gay community in the 1920s.

Before West made it to Hollywood, she was a playwright in New York City. There, she wrote two controversial “queer” plays: The Drag: A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts, which debuted in Connecticut in the late 1920s, and The Pleasure Man, a rewrite of The Drag.² Her plays focused on what it was like to be gay in a heteronormative society, and they confronted audience members with the realities of homophobia and discrimination, something that had seldom been done before. Furthermore, she made gay life visible in the 1920s and offered gay men, who were barred from having parts with lines by Actor’s Equity, employment opportunities in the theater industry.³ However, her plays were so controversial (they were even defined as political radicalism by one historian) that they were systematically targeted by a series of laws that attacked the LGBT community.⁴ On October 2, 1928, police raided The Pleasure

Man a day after it opened at the Biltmore Theatre on Forty-seventh Street, and police arrested all fifty-five actors, actresses, and musicians on the stage as the curtains rose.⁵

Mae West wrote other plays that did not focus on homosexuality, rather sexuality in general. Her play titled SEX was also raided, this time on February 9, 1927, and police arrested her twenty-member supporting cast, West herself, and her two producers. On April 5, the court found her guilty of tending “to corrupt the morals of youth and others” and sentenced her to jail at the Jefferson Market Women’s Prison.⁶ Ultimately, Mae West knew that her “queer” plays were controversial, but this did not stop her from writing and producing them. She broke the heteronormative barrier through her plays during a time when talking about gay life was taboo and when citizens and the police targeted the gay community.⁷ She made gay life visible on the stage in Connecticut and New York theaters and supported the marginalized LGBT community when the majority of people did not.

**Background**

Mae West was born in Brooklyn on August 17, 1893, by the name of Mary Jane West. From a young age, her father took her to vaudeville performances where she was inspired by legendary performers such as Bert Williams, an African-American entertainer whose satire commented on race relations.⁸ West, exposed to performers who used the stage to spread social messages, grew up to do just that. By the age of fourteen, she played parts with songs inflecting sexual overtones, and over the years she played more risqué roles with various production

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companies.⁹ Later on, she decided that she not only wanted to star in plays but also write and produce them.

**The Drag**

Written in 1926 under the pseudonym Jane Mast, *The Drag* deals with homosexuality. At heart, the play is about a gay love story, but there are scenes where the characters’ experiences reflect the realities of living a double life.

The main character of the play, Rolly Kingsbury, is a gay man who marries a woman named Claire to cloak his homosexuality.¹⁰ In the first act, Rolly runs into one of his ex-lovers in public, but they cannot express their affection for each other out of fear that people will judge them.¹¹ Finally, in the third act, Rolly is shot at a drag ball. The murder is investigated and brought to court, but the outwardly homophobic judge happens to be Rolly’s father. Charlotte Chandler (Lyn Erhard), an American biographer and playwright, noted, "The judge, wanting to avoid the scandal of his son and the two families being linked to the homosexual world in a murder investigation, tells the inspector to report the shooting as a suicide.”¹² West’s political script brought untold stories to the stage in 1927, but getting to the stage was not easy—she needed to find actors and a supportive theater.

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¹¹Ibid., 116.
¹²Ibid., 117.
Once Mae West had finalized the script, she put together a cast. She held auditions at gay bars in Greenwich Village, and tryouts and rehearsals took place at Daly’s 63rd Street Theatre.\textsuperscript{13} In a 1929 interview with \textit{The Parade}, West said:

Five thousand perverts\textsuperscript{14} applied for only fifty parts when we were casting for ‘Drag.’ One vice-president of a large bank begged me to let him secretly act in ‘Drag’ because there only could he do what he was starving for—act like a woman and wear expensive, beautiful gowns.\textsuperscript{15}

Her liberating play let gay men, many of them closeted, authentically express themselves. Additionally, her play offered employment opportunities to gay men who had been rejected from Broadway. In her autobiography, she claimed to have “helped a lot of gay boys along,” by casting them when “producers never gave speaking parts to homosexuals.”\textsuperscript{16}

By January 1927, West and her newly assembled cast set out to find a theater to put on their ground-breaking, new show. The Morals Production Company had secured its premier with a Stamford, CT, theater for January 28, 1927.\textsuperscript{17} However, when the manager of the theater, Mrs. Emily W. Hartley, learned that the play “concerned itself and none too subtly with homosexology” and cross-dressing, she “closed the door of her theater to the production.”\textsuperscript{18} In

\textsuperscript{14}Social reformers referred to gender non-conforming men in the 1920s as “male sex perverts.” It does not have the same negative connotation it has today.
\textsuperscript{15}Mae West, “Sex in the Theatre,” The Parade, Sept. 1929.
January, rumor had it that the play was as clean as the Augean stables, and the homophobic Stamford theater owner did not want an “indecent” play to dirty her reputation.\textsuperscript{19}

Three days later, the play found a home at the Park Theater in Bridgeport, CT.\textsuperscript{20} On January 31, 1927, the male actors put on their wigs, makeup, and dresses and opened with a bang.\textsuperscript{21} A Staff Correspondent reported, “All of Bridgeport turned out last night to see the first showing of the latest play by Jane Mast . . . [and] the coldest house in the coldest theatrical town in all Connecticut” was transformed for the first time in twenty years.\textsuperscript{22}

In a 1971 interview with \textit{Playboy}, Mae recalled that there were curtain calls at the end of each act and that it took an hour to empty the theater because many audience members, especially the women, wanted to speak with the actors.\textsuperscript{23} She also noted \textit{The Drag} “glorified homosexuals,” which made the crowd look up to them, partially and temporarily rearranging the social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{24} George Cukor, one of Mae West’s close friends, said, “I saw \textit{The Drag} and was impressed. What was important was that people were thinking, and thinking for themselves, not just canned thinking, pre-thought thoughts thought by others.”\textsuperscript{25} However, not everyone was awed by the play; in fact, many critics were particularly acerbic and insensitive in their reviews.

In a February 1 review published by \textit{Connecticut Post} (in Bridgeport), a critic attacked Mae West and the actors’ sexualities: “Frank realism is resorted to in depicting the habits and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19}Staff Correspondent, “WENT TO BE SHOCKED - FOUND ‘THE DRAG’ CLEAN.” Unsourced clipping, 1 Feb. 1927.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21}See Appendix D: after this night, newspapers began running ads for the play, citing the overwhelming audience.
\item \textsuperscript{22}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Mae West, “Interview.” \textit{Playboy}, Jan. 1971.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
\end{itemize}
traits of these strange misfits of nature, but what can a poor playwright do in these days of stiff competition unless he—or she—or it—adds a bit of color to the more serious skeleton of the play.”

Variety responded with another bitter tirade, writing, “The whole venture is without justification and merits the unqualified condemnation of the public, the theatre and the authorities, not to speak of calling for the prompt intervention of the police.” These critics’ opinions were arguably the most widely accepted ones. Most reviewers were blatantly prejudiced, and most publications sided with them.

“High” and “Low” Theater

In the 1920s, theater production companies separated themselves on the basis of decency, or what was conventional at the time. Theater scholar Ariel Nereson notes the critical difference between “high” and “low” theater as the stage “became a site for increasing censorship, as politicians and vice societies sought any venue where they could enforce a moral code.” Typically, entertainments that dealt with queerness, sex, race, or anything unconventional were considered “low” theater because legitimate “high” cultural venues, such as Broadway, rarely produced them. In this context, West’s plays were “low” comedy, and most theaters did not want to show her “queer” plays. As a result, her plays, namely The Drag, were pushed to the outskirts of New York City to Bridgeport, CT. A set of laws that attacked “low” performances and the people who produced, wrote, and performed them bolstered this separation.

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Challenging Mae West

In the 1920s, the New York Police Department constantly attacked the LGBT community. Police raided drag balls at venues such as Webster Hall, and they swept Central Park to entrap and arrest gay men.\(^{29}\) (\textit{The Drag} reflects this norm.) The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was founded by Anthony Comstock with the YMCA, carried out this harassment too.\(^{30}\) The society set out to seize all “obscene materials,” and it was mostly successful in this role because it had the police department at its disposal and had successfully pushed the Comstock Law through Congress. This law was infamous for banning dissemination of materials relating to abortion and birth control. While significant, it also justified attacks on “immoral” plays. The law stated:

\begin{quote}
Be it enacted in Congress assembled . . . that whoever . . . in any manner exhibit . . . an immoral nature . . . shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and, on conviction thereof, shall be fined not less than one hundred dollars with costs of court.\(^{31}\)
\end{quote}

Congress defined “immoral” under the heteronormative and conservative terms of 1920s America, setting a precedent for authorities to attack Mae West’s plays about homosexuality.

When \textit{SEX} showed in the summer of 1926 after debuting in New London, CT, in April, New York County District Attorney Joab Banton announced the formation of a play jury.\(^{32}\)

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{“Mae West, Stage and Movie Star Who Burlesqued Sex, Dies at 87.” The New York Times, 23 Nov. 1980.}
\end{footnotes}
Volunteer citizens joined the jury and attended plays, and then voted to keep or shut them down. The jury ultimately failed, however, because many citizens exploited it to see the “good stuff” for free. On February 2, 1927, Banton dissolved the failed play jury and announced that obscenity was a legal matter, which was when raids against West’s plays began.

NY Authorities raided SEX on February 9, 1927, and they brought Mae West to court on April 5. During the trial, the courtroom overflowed into the corridors, and Judge Donnellan argued that the evidence clearly showed that the play was “obscene, immoral, and indecent.” He also argued, “Such plays as ‘Sex’ serve no good purpose . . . It had a most inimical effect upon the youth of our city . . . I feel that filth and obscenity will be eliminated from our stage.” District Attorney Banton pushed for jail terms, stating that, “The failure to close this play was an outrage on public decency, and those who are responsible for its production should be shown no mercy.” Mae West was found guilty of violating Section 1140a of the Penal Code because she supposedly “tended to corrupt the morals of youth and others.” Judge Donnellan eventually imposed a ten-day jail term on Mae West and fined her $500, about $7,400 today. According to a New York Times reporter, Mae West felt as if the judge was severe on her because she was a

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34Ibid.
35See Appendix C: Mae West chose to wear a large boa scarf and cloche hat to court (which were both flapper in nature), instead of wearing traditional, professional attire. Her breezy attitude followed her everywhere.
37Ibid.
38Ibid.
39Ibid.
woman, and that the closing of SEX resulted in her losing thousands of dollars.\textsuperscript{40} After court, she moved into the Jefferson Market Women’s Prison on Welfare Island via limo.

The attack on SEX was also an attack on \textit{The Drag} and \textit{The Pleasure Man}. After authorities raided SEX, \textit{The Drag} abruptly closed. However, District Attorney Banton was not content with this as it could still infiltrate the heteronormative “high” stage. As a result, he devised the Wales Act to prevent queer plays from “finding a home in legitimate playhouses.”\textsuperscript{41}

The Wales Act included three significant changes to New York’s obscenity code. One, a play could be judged obscene if any element of it was considered obscene. Two, it banned all speech about homosexuality and defined all discussion or portrayal of homosexuality on the stage as obscene. Also, “all actors who portrayed homosexuals could be arrested at any time, including in the middle of any show.” And three, “theatres that put on plays found to be obscene could be padlocked for up to a year after the conviction,” meaning they could lose a year’s worth of income for producing a gay play.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{The Drag} eventually shut down, although it never included the word “sex” once, and police arrested Mae West in her Arcade Hotel room.\textsuperscript{43} Later, she was arraigned in City Court on technical charges of breach of peace. West believed the play shut down because “the public [was] still too childlike to face like grownups the problem of homosexuality.”\textsuperscript{44} To keep the play alive, she revived it as \textit{The Pleasure Man} a year later.\textsuperscript{45}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid.
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid.
\bibitem{Mae West} Mae West. “Sex in the Theatre.” The Parade, Sept. 1929.
\bibitem{West} West, Mae. “Interview.” Playboy, Jan. 1971.
\end{thebibliography}
West tried out this new gay comedy at the Bronx Opera House and the Boulevard Theatre
in Jackson Heights, Queens, in the last two weeks of September 1928. On October 2, 1928,
crowds packed Forty-seventh Street, from Eighth Avenue to Broadway, with cheers and
bouquets to see the play, but police met the cast with handcuffs during the performance.
The police stationed themselves at the theater’s exits to prevent the gay men and female
impersonators from fleeing, and they packed the cast members into Black Marias. The New
York Times reported, “Flashlights boomed as news photographers took pictures of the
performers being loaded into the wagons. Five trips were made to the station house before the
complete cast was assembled.”

Rethinking Her Motivations

While Mae West did break barriers on the stage, some historians and theater critics
contend that she exploited gay men on the stage to make money, arguing that controversial plays
drew large crowds with open wallets. However, Mae West was a long-time ally of the gay
community and sometimes cross-dressed herself. Additionally, her “queer” plays did not make
her wealthy—they were shut down by the police after a few performances, and the court forced
her to pay $500, about 667 tickets worth of money.

Additionally, an unintended consequence of her plays was the formation of a barrier,
particularly because they laid new ground for homophobic authorities to target the gay

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47See appendix A.
48See appendix B.
49Ibid.
50See appendix D; the average ticket price was about $0.75.
community. Nevertheless, her “queer” plays were one stride in the larger march to equality because of the visibility and opportunities they created.

Conclusion

Before her Hollywood heyday, Mae West was a playwright who focused on telling the untold stories of gay men on the 1920s vaudeville stage. She broke the heteronormative barrier through her “queer” plays, which were sympathetic treatments of homosexuality that made the gay community visible. Mae West’s plays also offered employment opportunities to the gay community in a theater industry dominated by the legitimate, high stage, effectively breaking the barrier created by production companies as well. In response, authorities cracked down on Mae West and her barrier-busting, gay plays that scandalized 1927 and 1928 America, landing her in police cars, court, and prison.
APPENDIX A

Pictured are two of the fifty-five cast members of *The Pleasure Man* getting arrested at the Biltmore Theatre on October 2, 1928. The arrests were made by detectives of Deputy Chief Inspector James S. Bolan’s staff, the Deputy Chief Inspector Captain Edward Lenon of the West Forty-seventh Street Police Station and James P Sinnott, Secretary of the Police Department.

A female-impersonator in the back of a Black Maria which transported the arrested members of *The Pleasure Man* to a nearby New York police department. Onlookers crowded the street.

Mae West was taken to the Jefferson Market Courthouse in New York City for her showing of *SEX*. Instead of wearing professional attire, she wore a boa scarf accompanying her flapper-like outfit—she never stopped being herself. “I enjoyed the courtroom as just another stage but not so amusing as Broadway,” she wittingly remarked.

A newspaper advertisement for *The Drag* published in the Connecticut Post on February 1, 1927, one day after it debuted at the Park Theater in Bridgeport.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


This congressional document contains exact wording from the Comstock Law, which banned not only abortion but also obscene materials. Most secondary sources did not focus on how the Comstock Law banned literature and plays, but upon reading the original law, it became more clear that the Comstock Law did affect “queer” entertainments. This law was directly quoted in the paper to support the argument that it set a precedent for authority figures to challenge Mae West.


A New York Times reporter investigated the move against The Drag and how it affected Mae West. This article was published the night of Mae West’s arrest, and it goes so far as to mention the time she was arrested. The information provided in this article was incorporated into the latter part of the essay to support the idea that the move against her plays personally affected her.


This photograph captured two cast members of The Pleasure Man getting arrested, and it is referenced in the essay during the discussion on how authorities targeted her play and in Appendix A. Throughout the research process, many of the newspaper articles available did not do this story justice. Photos like this one bring a fresh perspective to the argument, and they also show off the female impersonators whom Mae West casted for her plays. After all, Mae West “did not believe in the single standard—for men and women,” and she broke barriers through cross-dressing and fashion as well.


Lyn Erhard, best known under the pen name Charlotte Chandler, is an American biographer and playwright. For her research on Mae West, she interviewed George Cukor, a longtime friend of Mae West, who saw The Drag first-hand. George Cukor’s thoughts on the play revealed that people were personally touched by the story it told. Erhard also interviewed Mae West before her death in 1980, which was included in her research. I included a quote from the interview to show that her play made people think differently about the gay community to some extent.

This magazine from 1922 talks about vaudeville culture, specifically notable performers. One of these performers was Bert Williams, who was, like Mae West, ahead of his time. This magazine was incorporated into the background of the essay to give historical context to Mae West’s upbringing.


The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation was founded in 1980 to preserve the architectural heritage and cultural history of Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo. It publishes a blog that features news, research, viewpoints, and historical information about various topics, one of them being LGBT history. This photo illuminated Mae West’s distinctive style and her courage. It is referenced in the paper (Appendix C) to highlight her personality, her fashion, and her involvement in the court.


A reporter for the New York Times wrote about the move against *SEX* in seven sections: “Crowd Overflows Courtroom,” “Pleas Made by Counsel,” “Eight Jurors Ask Clemency,” “Banton Asks Jail Terms,” “Judge Donnellan’s Address,” “Morals of Youth Harmed,” and “Explained Penalty for Miss West.” This article is mostly objective and was one of the most in-depth sources available on the relationship between *SEX* and the court. Specific facts, such as quotes from Judge Donnellan, were incorporated into the introduction and end of the essay to illustrate the court’s orthodox nature.


In an obituary, a journalist reviewed Mae West’s career. This article outlined her impact from the stage to the American vocabulary. (During World War II, Mae West’s name was applied to various pieces of military equipment and was listed in Webster’s New International Dictionary, Second Edition. The Royal Air Force named its inflatable life jackets ‘Mae Wests,’ because Mae West was noted for her full figure, and United States Army soldiers referred to twin-turreted combat tanks as ‘Mae Wests.’) The obituary included quotes from prominent publications, such as *Vanity Fair*, which were used to introduce the topic of this paper and give context to her career in the early twentieth century.

This source cites the original production of the play, as well as when and where it debuted and for how many times.


This newspaper article reports on *The Pleasure Man* raids. It includes specific details which were used to describe the night it was raided. This information was incorporated into the essay three times: once in the introduction to introduce the raids, in the discussion on how *The Drag* evolved, and in Appendix A to name who arrested whom.


In addition to incorporating sources that talk highly about *The Drag*, sources were also incorporated that derided the productions and Mae West herself in order to complete the picture. Quotes from critics in the third section of the essay were implemented to reveal the backlash *The Drag* received. The opinions presented by critics represented the most common argument at the time.

Staff Correspondent. “WENT TO BE SHOCKED - FOUND ‘THE DRAG’ CLEAN.” Unsourced clipping, 1 Feb. 1927. From Special Collections - Margaret Herrick Library, *Mae West Collection, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*, Los Angeles.

This newspaper clipping comes from the Mae West Special Collection of the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills, California. This library specializes in print, graphic, and research of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The staff correspondent of this article noted that the play transformed the Park Theater in Bridgeport after it was rejected by a Stamford theater. This information was used when talking about *The Drag’s* Consequences to amplify the transformative, ground-breaking nature of Mae West.

“*The Drag.*” *Connecticut Post*, 1 Feb. 1927. From the Bridgeport History Center.

Because *The Drag* debuted in Bridgeport, CT, I reached out to the historians at the Bridgeport History Center to see if they had any rare sources from 1927 available. The center had a copy of a February 1 Connecticut Post paper from 1927, which included a harsh critique of the play and an ad for the play. This information was used to talk about how the comedy was received and in Appendix D.


Mae West revealed herself in her autobiography published in 1959. She talked about the power of women, her career, and even her 1920s career with wit, humor, and intelligence. Quotes talking about her relationship to the gay community, specifically how she helped gay men get parts in the industry, were included in the paper. On top of critics’ views, her view was important as well.

In 1971, 44 years after *The Drag* debuted, Mae West recalled the night *The Drag* showed; it was important enough for her to remember. *Playboy*, the first American magazine to publish sexually-oriented material, interviewed Mae West (a sex symbol at the time), in which she talked about a few of her plays. This information was used in the discussion about *The Drag* to bring it to life.


This piece was also from the special collections at the Margaret Herrick Library. *The Parade* interviewed Mae West two years after she showed her plays in Connecticut, and she responded, saying how the play helped closeted, gay men be themselves on the stage. It let him, “act like a woman and wear expensive, beautiful gowns.”


This book was not specifically referenced in the essay, but it was used to read the original script of *The Drag*, which helped in writing about the story and why it was so important. The book also included the original scripts of *Sex* and *The Pleasure Man*, which were helpful in talking about them.

**Secondary Sources**


Charlotte Chandler researched Mae West’s life for her personal biography *She Always Knew How*. Her research that related to this paper detailed the play’s production and the story’s main character, Rolly. Her work was quoted in the discussion of the play, specifically the relationships between Rolly and his homophobic father, to highlight how society treated homosexuals in the 1920s.


The authors of this book focus on West’s life as a movie story and how she was one of the first to treat race relations and homosexuality openly on the stage. “Although reviewers might have called her plays, as one did, ‘gross, disgusting, tiresome, utterly futile vulgarity, without a single excusing feature or reason for being,’ the public loved them.” The authors perfectly capture her personality as well: “My measurements are the
same as Venus de Milo’s only I got arms.” This book set the tone for the rest of the research process. Eells’, George’s, and Musgrove’s work was referenced when talking about Stamford.


Rhonda Evans is an Assistant Chief Librarian in the JBH Research and Reference Division: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. She researched the impact the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice had on obscene materials, which was useful in talking about the sex culture in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Evans utilized newspaper articles, print collections, and legal sources in her research to write about the society’s involvement in New York City obscenity law.


Hamilton’s essay is about West’s early stage and film career, as well as the roots of West’s performance style and how her plays resonated with Broadway audiences. She notes that West’s persona developed out of the social and sexual tensions of New York City in the 1920s, and that she brought “the urban underworld alive with an unsettling realism.” This information helped me write about high and low theater (although not directly referenced) and about specific details regarding popular theaters during this time.


This article details the naive play jury that tried to target plays such as those written by Mae West. This was used to talk about the short-lived history of Banton’s play jury and why it failed. Primary sources on this specific topic were very scarce.


This website was used to get a brief overview of Mae West’s life and get context on the topic. It was used when discussing West’s background.


Ariel Nereson’s essay focuses on Mae West’s early productions and how they are all related. He examines these plays in the context of queer performance in 1920s New York.
City and even defines them as “political radicalism,” as mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Nereson notes the difference between the “intelligent minority” (the higher class where the gay community was “nonexistent”) and the underground performers. His research also focuses on the Wales Act, which shaped the discussion on “Challenging Mae West.”


This newspaper article, published in Hartford, Connecticut, was a corollary to previous findings on a Stamford theater’s rejection of The Drag. Frank Rizzo’s work includes the name of the theater owner and quotes from her. This was extremely helpful when talking about the play’s relationship to Stamford, CT, as primary sources quoting Rizzo herself were hard to find. I reached out to the author of this article, asking for the sources he used; however, he did not reply.


The NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project released a historic context statement for LGBT history in New York City. This cultural heritage initiative and educational resource overviews LGBT history in New York City from the 17th century to today, such as how gay bars in Greenwich Village became meeting grounds for men in the gay community. It also details other places the gay community appropriated and how they were attacked by the police. This was referenced in a general discussion on the gay community being targeted and when talking about specific places police targeted to set up context for “Challenging Mae West.”


This article was written by Polly Stenham. She researched Actor's Equity, which was included in the introduction to this paper, and information about Daly’s 63rd Street Theatre, which was talked about during the discussion on how The Drag, despite being rejected by Broadway and Stamford, became a reality. Stenham also directed a revival of The Drag in 2017. Today, theaters around the world are reviving The Drag to keep West’s legacy alive. London’s Arcola Theatre opened with the play in 2017, and Massachusetts’ Provincetown Theatre will launch the 2020 season with The Drag.