



“I’m No Angel”

Born on August 17, 1893, Mae West (Mary Jane West) would become the first “sex clown” on film. Mae was only five years old when she began on the vaudevillian stage and by the age of 14 she was being



billed as "The Baby Vamp." Later, her salacious eye-rolling and thinly veiled innuendo spawned a string of risqué comedies in the 1930s.

In 1926, Mae wrote, produced and directed the Broadway show, "Sex," which resulted in her being arrested for obscenity. The following year, her next play, "Drag," was banned on Broadway because its subject matter was homosexuality.

With *Diamond Lil* (1928), West became the toast of Broadway, and in 1932 she signed with Paramount. Her first film role was supporting George Raft in *NIGHT AFTER NIGHT* (1932), in which Raft said, "She stole everything but the cameras." The first film to star West, *SHE DONE HIM WRONG* (1933), the film version of *Diamond Lil*, broke box-office records and saved Paramount from selling out to MGM. The Hays office brought in a new censorship code in 1934, largely to combat the code of the West, but she led them a merry chase through several more blockbusters: *I'M NO ANGEL* (1933), *BELLE OF THE NINETIES* (1934), *GOIN' TO TOWN* (1935) and *KLONDIKE ANNIE* (1936). Her popularity declined in the late 30s and, after the failure of *THE HEAT'S ON* (1943), (the first West film she didn't script herself) she returned to the stage and, later, the nightclub circuit. She turned down numerous film offers, including *SUNSET BLVD.* (1950), but finally made a comeback of sorts in *MYRA BRECKINRIDGE* (1970).

West skirted the delicate sensibilities of Hollywood censors with sexual innuendo and double entendre, and her witty observations were as widely quoted as Ben Franklin bromides: "It's better to be looked over than overlooked"; "I used to be Snow White but it drifted," etc. Although she cultivated the image of the "tough broad," West always conveyed a curious Victorian innocence coupled with a winking, self-effacing amusement at her own preposterous creation. Her popularity reached such peaks that sailors were inspired to name their inflatable life jackets after her overemphasized 43-inch "assets," ensuring West a place, like no other actress to date, in Webster's Dictionary. [http://www.bombshells.com/gallery/west/west_bio.php]

