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Performing Arts: Mae West Reborn

BY EDITORIAL · SEPTEMBER 20, 2010

In this refreshing production, Mae herself returns from the beyond to salvage an impersonator's act-and her own legacy.

By Julie LaPorte



Shannon Perkins Jr., Rachel Hardin, and Johnno Wilson. Photo by Charlie Scarratt.

Five minutes before show time, Mr. Mae West learns it's the final curtain for his impersonation act – not only is

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he dreadful, he's irrelevant to current audiences. Just in time, Mae West herself materializes from the great beyond to show him how to truly *be* her. The two take a Scrooge-like journey through the emotional highlights of her past as she teaches him the walk, the talk and the attitude. Written by local playwright **Kathryn O'Sullivan** and directed by **Paul Awad**, *MAE* is playing at Flashpoint's Mead Theatre Lab through October 2.

"When I was [a grad student] at Carnegie Mellon, as part of our thesis project we had to write a play that involved an intensive amount of research," O'Sullivan said. "The only thing I knew about Mae West was some of her one-liners, which I thought were funny. And that was it. So I started looking into that, and the more I dug into her life, I realized there was so much

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A fabulous evening honoring Judy Woodruff and benefiting pediatric brain disorder treatment and research at Kennedy Krieger Institute

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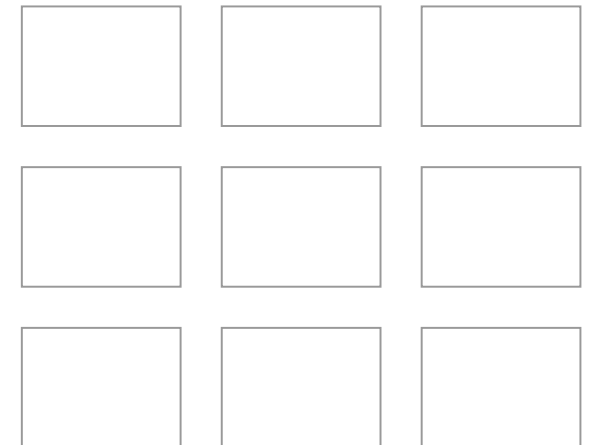


information out there that could sustain a full-length play, that she was fascinating as a woman, fascinating as an entertainer, really progressive and ahead of her time.”

The husband and wife team, O’Sullivan and Awad are presenting the second incarnation of the play with updated material to D.C. audiences. Reprising her role as Mae West is **Rachel Hardin**, who was at Carnegie Mellon as a musical theatre student at the same time as O’Sullivan.

“Pictures of Mae have traveled with me,” said Hardin. “They’re on my desk still. Because of doing [the play] she became sort of my little guardian angel. She was so tough, so empowered.”

Hardin’s Mae West is complex and deep, funny and sensuous.





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She nailed the voice and the mannerisms – her facial expressions convey so much emotion. And filling the theatre was her singing – sometimes flirtatious, sometimes nostalgic, always beautiful.

“Because I’m older, some of my understanding of what she went through is different – I’ve had more life now too,” Hardin said. “And what I like about her as a person, is that she really lifts people up to be more of who they are. If you can stand true to your own convictions you can help more people.”

Matthew G. Myers is a powerful presence. He towers over everyone in his Lucite platform stilettos, flowing blue dress and long blonde wig. As Mr. Mae West, he plays an incomplete diva – hesitant and shrinking at first, more of a bystander. But as his journey



Rachel Hardin and Matthew G. Myers.

Photo by Charlie Scarratt.

progresses he steps more fully into the role, embodying at the end all the sass of Mae West.

“It was surprising to me how difficult it is playing a bad Mae West impersonator,” Myers said. “She was so larger than life, so specific in everything she did, I’ve actually found it difficult finding the good stuff and then trying to make it bad

– for the journey of becoming better at the end. So that finding the walk that's not good, not being able to use my hips, not putting my hands in the right places, all those sorts of things. It was like, this is what she did, so I how do I do this and have it not be right?"

Many in the cast play multiple roles and do a wonderful job of rounding out the story line and providing emotional connection and humor. Worth noting are **Johnno Wilson** in his portrayal of James Timony, **Amy Thompson** in her portrayal of Matilda West and **Cate Brewer** in her portrayal of Beverly West.

"It's a biopic and you might think people would need to know something about Mae West," said Awad. "But even if they don't, the show is a very fun and theatrical production,

and we have some really talented people involved – some of the most talented I’ve ever worked with.”

Myers said: “I think for a more mature audience, the play will bring back memories of all these Mae West movies, all the scandals and the headlines. And for the younger audience, it introduces them to someone that shaped what the definition of a bombshell is.”

MAE is a delightful play, charming and well done. If you’re looking for a theatre experience off the beaten path, *MAE* more than fits the bill. For more information and to buy tickets, visit Flashpoint Gallery.

Julie LaPorte is a freelance writer living outside Washington, D.C. For the past year she has served as a