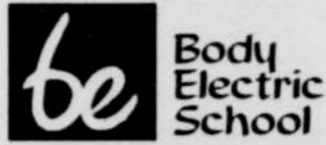


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THEATER

A big flirt

The witty *Dirty Blonde* puts Mae West at Center Stage

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

Before Madonna, Barbra and Judy there was Mae West—an early 20th century icon of sexual liberation still popular in gay culture today.

"I made myself platinum, but I was born a dirty blonde," draws the bawdy and audacious West, flaunting her smart wit and voluptuous hourglass figure all the way from vaudeville to Hollywood via Broadway.

Broadway is giving back with *Dirty Blonde*, a Portland Center Stage production through April 14 at Newmark Theatre.

Along its way, West's creative work crossed many social circles, including gender, race and sexual orientation. Gutsy ambition

coupled with salty sex appeal challenged industry censors and public sensibilities but won her celebrity on both stage and screen. She was not only a popular performer but also wrote and produced much of her own work—celebrated as much for her lines as her curves, as one biographer put it.

But followers of celebrities often embrace hero worship more than the heroes themselves. So, too, is *Dirty Blonde* a romantic celebration of all that is Mae West, as seen through the eyes of two modern-day disciples.

Jo and Charlie (Jennifer Taub and Colin Thomson) are quirky loners obsessed with the blonde bombshell. When the two both show up at West's grave to honor her birthday, an awkward relationship begins. Jo is a bit thrown, for instance, when Charlie admits he loves to dress up as their idol.

As they get to know each other, Jo and Charlie share their appreciation—and envy—of West's attitude, self-confidence and chutzpah. They find in the star (also played by Taub) a role model for creating happiness together within themselves.

The play alternates between Jo and Charlie's humdrum life and the wild and raucous expanse of West's career. The pairing of these two scenarios is clever, and the mechanics of the plot are often novel, especially when the focus is on action over narration.

But, at only about 90 minutes without intermission, *Dirty Blonde* doesn't do justice to either one. The interwoven storylines compete for attention. The contemporary love story leaves a less-than-satisfying resolution. And the period biography of West doesn't spend enough time exploring what's beneath all the sass and brass.

So the audience laughs at West's familiar, but quaint, double-entendres. They chuckle at a man squeezing into a dress, donning a big, floppy hat and wrapping himself in a feather boa, which, West says, thankfully covers a mul-



A bit of bawd lights up Newmark Theatre during *Dirty Blonde*

PHOTO BY OWEN CAREY

titude of sins. They see West upstaged by her own caricature.

Nevertheless, this Broadway hit is nominated for two Tony Awards, including Best Play and Best Actress, for the role originated by its playwright, Claudia Shear.

Making her Portland Center Stage debut in the same dual part, Taub offers a congenial and energetic portrayal of Jo, the struggling-to-be-someone actress. As West, she also embraces in earnest the challenge of portraying a woman *Vanity Fair* once described as "the greatest female impersonator of all time."

Thomson plays his multiple parts with balanced and vigorous execution, having understudied with the original cast and directed the first leg of its national tour. In his primary persona, he offers a glimpse into Charlie's increasing sincerity and vulnerability as he learns to be himself with a person he loves.

Of the three-person cast, Roy Abramsohn seems to have the most fun with his frenetic role. This quick-change artist plays a number of supporting characters—and a piano—with aplomb. One of his best bits is as West's gay attaché, flamboyantly bedecked and symbolizing the Hollywood queen's connection to her fairies.

Incidental song-and-dance numbers provide nostalgic relief, and several cross-dressing variations camp things up a bit. West's extravagant costumes by Jeff Cone are noteworthy, but the bland set, hollow sound and indifferent lighting leave the theater feeling a bit empty.

Some say that Mae West's actual talent was limited and that she was a figure of speech in more ways than one. Still, most find her entertaining, and many continue to adore her legacy. The same holds true here. Although the show only flirts with the legend, this *Dirty Blonde* is still a fun date. [C]

DIRTY BLONDE runs through April 14 at Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$12-\$44 from the Portland Center for the Performing Arts box office.