

She Done Him Wrong

By Randy Skretvedt

Released in February 1933, not quite a month before Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, Mae West and “*She Done Him Wrong*” proved that audiences could still scare up a few coins to see something really worthwhile, even in the depths of the Depression. (It’s often cited as the film that saved Paramount Pictures from bankruptcy.)

Born on August 17, 1893, Mae West had worked as a singer in vaudeville since her mid-teens, but had made her mark on the Broadway stage in the late ‘20s as the writer and star of several plays whose titles reflect her unique mixture of comedy and seduction: “*Sex*,” “*The Wicked Age*,” “*Diamond Lil*,” “*Pleasure Man*,” “*The Constant Sinner*.” Her friend George Raft recommended her for a supporting role in his own first starring picture, “*Night After Night*,” and although Mae didn’t have much footage in the film, she garnered the best reviews. (Raft later said, “*She stole everything but the cameras.*”) Her hip-swinging walk and her unique nasal delivery of double-entendre jokes marked her as a great original, and she was an immediate sensation with movie audiences.

Mae’s Broadway productions had all run into problems with censors; in 1927 she was sentenced to ten days in jail on Welfare Island for “corrupting the morals of youth” with her play “*Sex*.” She dined with the warden, got two days off for good behavior, and enjoyed the publicity that the incident aroused. She later quipped, “I believe in censorship. I made a fortune out of it.”

“*Diamond Lil*” had achieved such notoriety that Will H. Hays, enforcer of the Production Code Administration, had already insisted that a film of it could never be approved. Paramount responded by changing the title, turning Mae’s character into “*Lady Lou*” and adding some new material by screenwriters Harvey F. Thew and John Bright. “*She Done Him Wrong*” is listed in the film’s credits as being “*By Mae West*,” with no reference to the source play. Some of the more blatant lines were replaced with new ones which got their effect through implication, insinuation and innuendo, which Mae actually found funnier. Examples: “When women go wrong, men go right after them.” “I wasn’t always rich; there was a time I didn’t know where my next husband was coming from.” Mae as *Lady Lou*



*Cary Grant and Mae West give each other the eye.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

describes herself as “one of the finest women ever walked the streets,” and the songs she sings in a saloon as “A little bit spicy but not too raw, you know what I mean?”

“*She Done Him Wrong*” is set in the 1890s; even though Miss West would have but a faint memory of the later years of that decade, doubtless many of the crew members, and many in the audience, remembered it well, as it was only forty years before the film was made. An introductory title describes it as “A lusty, brawling florid decade when there were handlebars on lip and wheel.” While some scenes paint a rosy, nostalgic picture of the time (the singing waiters in the saloon, the free lunch and especially the nickel beer would have elicited a few sighs in an audience still stifled by Prohibition), others depict the ‘90s as a grim and gritty time, marked by political corruption, white slavery (forced prostitution), counterfeiting and other vices not nearly as enjoyable as those Mae promotes.

The film moves briskly, running only 66 minutes. (It’s the shortest film to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar.) It was directed by Lowell Sherman, who had recently proven again that he was a fine actor in “*What Price Hollywood?*” (1932). Sherman directed 14 films between 1928 and his death at 46 in December 1934. “*She Done Him Wrong*” is more a series of vignettes than a linear story, with episodes designed to showcase Mae’s comedy delivery, her fabulous dresses, hats and jewels, and her sultry singing. She does three numbers: the traditional “*Frankie and Johnnie*,” and two new songs

written by Paramount contract songwriter Ralph Rainger – “A Guy What Takes His Time” and “I Wonder Where My Easy Rider’s Gone,” the titles of which vividly convey their subject and tone.

Several men compete for Mae’s affection here. Owen Moore plays Chick Clark, an old flame of Mae’s who breaks out of prison to see her again; Noah Beery appears as Gus Jordan, proprietor of the saloon where Lou sings and a rival to David Landau as politician Dan Flynn. Then there’s Gilbert Roland as Serge Stanieff, a partner in Gus’s white slavery trade. Mae/Lou is clearly a woman with a past; when she visits Chick in prison and walks down the row of jail cells, every one of the convicts recognizes her and yells a greeting.

The man who ultimately wins Lou’s affection – for a time, anyway – is Cary Grant, who plays Captain Cummings, head of the temperance league. This is Cary’s ninth film and the first in which audiences really noticed him. (Mae certainly noticed him. Upon first seeing him, she told a Paramount executive, “If he can talk, I’ll take him!”) Cary doesn’t yet have the sparkle and assurance that he would display a few years later in “Topper” and “The Awful Truth,” but one can certainly understand Mae’s attraction to him.

Along with the frequent double-entendre jokes, the saucy songs, and the white slavery story line, Mae/Lou actually gets away with murder. It’s unintentional, but even so it would never have been permitted sixteen months later, when the Production Code brought a severe censorship to American movies in June 1934. Mae was only permitted to make one more film at full strength, “I’m No Angel,” before the

Code caused her subsequent films to be much tamer. (Mae starred in only a dozen films; she was 38 in her 1932 debut and 85 in her last, “Sextette,” made in 1978.) She was often thought to be the prime reason for the implementation of the Code, but movies that were far more daring, such as Barbara Stanwyck’s “Illicit” and Dorothy Mackaill’s “Safe in Hell,” had already been released. Stanwyck’s 1933 film “Baby Face” is far more surprisingly explicit than anything Mae appeared in, and Miss West later remarked, “I’ve always taken the rap for the Code, but it was really those Barbara Stanwyck pictures that did it.”

Throughout her seven-decade career, Mae West was described as tantalizing, arousing, stimulating. She was all of these, but she always remembered to be entertaining first.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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