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THEATER

THEATER; Playing All the Men In Mae's Life

By BARRY SINGER

A MENAGE of musclemen and drag queens flanked Mae West throughout her long career, both onstage and off. They were her honor guard of sin, her "boys," as she liked to call them. In the play "Dirty Blonde," a kind of theatrical free-association on West, Kevin Chamberlin and Bob Stillman bring a number of these "boys" to life.

Written by Claudia Shear, who conceived it with the director James Lapine, "Dirty Blonde" reopens tomorrow at the Helen Hayes Theater on Broadway after a widely praised run at the New York Theater Workshop. Ms. Shear portrays West, the title character, and a West-obsessed fan named Jo. Between them, Mr. Chamberlin and Mr. Stillman play 17 roles.

"The whole fun of it, frankly," Mr. Lapine said recently, "was how few actors we could get away with up there. Claudia and I both pictured the show as a minimalist tour de force. How large a canvas could we paint with as few colors as possible? And we lucked out, because these guys are chameleons."

Sprawled on a sofa backstage at the Helen Hayes between rehearsals, Mr. Stillman summed up the ability to mix and match so many roles in a show for which he is also the musical director and arranger: "It's alchemy," he said. Mr. Chamberlin, seated placidly on the same sofa, agreed.

Side by side, the two register as opposite comic halves of a vaudeville duo. Where Mr. Stillman is tall, Mr. Chamberlin is not. Where Mr. Stillman is svelte, Mr. Chamberlin is not. Where Mr. Stillman, in designer black, is sartorially resplendent, Mr. Chamberlin, untucked and in jeans, is not. Where Mr. Stillman has a mane of thick black hair, Mr. Chamberlin really does not.

While Mr. Chamberlin plays a boxer, a body builder and even W. C. Fields (West's great nemesis), he is mainly responsible for one central character, Jo's alter-ego, the desperately shy librarian Charlie, who is also fixated on Mae West.

"An awful lot of Charlie actually is me," Mr. Chamberlin said. "There's the fact that his parents have passed away -- mine both did within eight months of each other a few years ago. There's the fact that he was a high school wrestling champion; Claudia and I literally had that conversation. I have these wrestling mat burns on my fingers, and she asked me, 'What are those scars?' And I said, 'Oh, I was a wrestling champion,' and she put that right into the piece. It's a great unpredictable thing about Charlie -- that this shy little guy was a wrestler."

Mr. Stillman, on the other hand, engages in flamboyant character doubling in the play, careering from Frank Wallace, West's clueless first husband, to Ed Hearn, West's early drag mentor, to Joe Frisco, the aged ex-vaudevillian who chaperoned West until well into their shared dotage. These quick-change vignettes are punctuated by frequent stints at the piano, where Mr. Stillman accompanies himself and his two associates on an array of Mae West ditties. He has even contributed an original song, also titled "Dirty Blonde," to the show.

There is a paradox here: the current Broadway season has produced a celebrated new musical, "Contact," that contains no singing and no live music, whereas "Dirty Blonde," a straight play, has enough singing to be a musical.

In fact, both Mr. Chamberlin and Mr. Stillman are probably best known as musical-theater performers: the 36-year-old Mr. Chamberlin for his work on Broadway in "Triumph of Love" and Off Broadway in the recent Drama Dept. revival of "As Thousands Cheer," among others; the 42-year-old Mr. Stillman for numerous Broadway appearances in shows like "Kiss of the Spider Woman" and "Grand Hotel." Moreover, both men compose music and lyrics and have written their own musicals.

Born in southern New Jersey and New York City, respectively, they each fell hard for musical comedy at very early ages. Mr. Chamberlin, who collects original-cast recordings with a compulsiveness reminiscent of his Charlie persona in "Dirty Blonde," arrived in New York a few years after graduating from Rutgers University with a degree in theater.

Mr. Stillman was a classical piano student at Princeton and later at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music. "One day I just woke up and realized, 'Nah, I don't want to be a concert pianist,' " he said.

Though their musical gifts serve "Dirty Blonde," the characters they play elevate the production from the realm of one-woman show to richly populated drama. Mr. Stillman's Joe Frisco, for example, is indelible. "There's something very liberating about playing him," Mr. Stillman said. "I've never played a character like that -- the polyester jacket and the sporty little cap -- kind of like Uncle Junior on 'The Sopranos.' "

MR. CHAMBERLIN nodded. "I remember the day you found that Joe Frisco voice," he said.

Mr. Stillman grinned. "I was always imitating people in my family by doing that voice. So I sort of tried it out and Claudia and Kevin both looked at me, and Kevin went, 'Yeah, do that.' "

In the end, though, "Dirty Blonde" is defined by Mae West worship. To fully capture this, Mr. Lapine said, "It was critical that we get both versions of Mae West in the show -- the male and female images of her, that she was both a drag symbol and a sex symbol."

Ms. Shear reigns as the play's chief worshiper. It would be hard to forget Mr. Chamberlin's Charlie, though, dressed up as the object of his own adoration. "The drag is the only part that isn't me," Mr. Chamberlin said. "The first time I put on the dress was very odd. There aren't breasts or anything built into it, because we didn't want to go for that. It's not about looking like Mae West, it's more about

feeling like Mae West. The first thing that hit my mind, though, was how heavy it was and the fact that women went through this to look sexy; how much Mae put on to create this person."

He is adamant that Charlie is a heterosexual. "Claudia went into chat rooms for cross-dressers and most of the guys there were heterosexual married men who hid it from their wives," he said. "I don't think for Charlie that it is a sexual thing. It's sort of like a Rorschach test: you see what you want to see. The idea that Mae West was obsessed with drag queens appealed to all of us. She knew they were going to carry on her legend. So that was the inevitable end of the play. There was never a question, 'Kevin, are you comfortable doing this?' "

But -- is he?

Mr. Chamberlin laughed. "This is the boldest -- no, baldest -- this is the most bald I've ever been onstage. Sure, the hardest thing is stripping down to my underwear because I'm a big guy -- 250, 260 - - who's always shopped in the portly section. The biggest problem any actor has to overcome is self-consciousness. Thinking about it gets me nervous. But I'm this guy, and that dress is inevitable, and the pink walls of our set really create a safe space.

"Heck, at this point I can't lose weight anyway," Mr. Chamberlin continued, "because the costume designer would kill me. That dress was built around me. Plus, I'm playing an elephant after this. Next fall I'll be Horton in 'Seussical,' this big new musical based on the Dr. Seuss books. What can I say? The more hair I lose, the more work I get.

"Character actors like myself, we don't get leads in musicals. We also don't get to kiss the girl at the end of the play. And here I am, getting to do both. O.K., so I'm wearing a dress. And starring as an elephant. But that's show business, right?"

Photos: Kevin Chamberlin, left, as one of Mae West's musclemen, and Bob Stillman as Joe Frisco in "Dirty Blonde" at the Helen Hayes Theater. (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 10); Bob Stillman, left, and Kevin Chamberlin play 17 characters between them in "Dirty Blonde." (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 5)