

# She's Not All That

## Review of 'Miss May Does Not Exist' by Carrie Courogen



by Bruce Bawer

There's plenty of comedy from decades ago that can still have you in stitches. But when I watch YouTube clips of Elaine May and Mike Nichols, the sketch comedy and improvisation duo who were viewed by America's middlebrow elite at the turn of the 1960s as the height of comic sophistication—indeed, as the personifications of a veritable revolution in humor—I'm decidedly underwhelmed. Yet the duo's three years at the top, from 1959 to 1962, propelled both of them into long and storied careers—and made May, now 92, a far bigger name than most of her subsequent work warranted.

In the wake of their creative break-up, [Nichols didn't waste time conquering both coasts](#): After directing a hit Broadway

show (*Barefoot in the Park*), he went West and directed hit movies (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Graduate*). May was different. "She had success," writes Carrie Courogen in her unsettlingly worshipful biography, *Miss May Does Not Exist: The Life and Work of Elaine May, Hollywood's Hidden Genius*, "but at what cost?"

May, in Courogen's telling, was too pure an artist, too ardent a rebel, to be entirely comfortable pleasing mass audiences. Her title comes from the autobiographical squib that May wrote for the duo's first album: "Miss May does not exist." And the book's introduction, I must confess, is, hands down, the weirdest I've ever read. "Hagiography" is far too weak a word. Courogen positively worships May, hailing her as "one of the singular minds of the twentieth century." May refused all contact with her biographer, and Courogen spends pages describing her obsessive efforts simply to catch a glimpse of her heroine on Central Park West.

Part of what appeals to Courogen about May is that, while Nichols always had his eyes on the prize, May was a born bohemian. Raised in L.A., she left school at 14, had a brief marriage at 16 that produced a daughter—Jeannie Berlin, whom she would later direct in 1972's *The Heartbreak Kid*—whom she dumped on her mother. May, who survived on her own by bumming quarters from passersby and shoplifting from grocery stores, worked in small theater companies in Chicago. Courogen depicts her as sheer hell to work with—"scarifying," "savage," a woman with "no filter for politeness" whom all her male collaborators were "eager to be castrated by." (Severn Darden: "You have the feeling that at any moment she might kill you.") But for Courogen, May is a goddess because "truth was her religion," her creations "driven by cynicism and contempt for the status quo." And even though her work might not have been good, it was "unflinchingly honest" and made her "the god-mother of improv comedy."

Post-breakup, Nichols collected major awards on both coasts.

May flailed. One friend explains it as a case of “too much brilliance.” She supposedly could have written successful “gag plays like Jean Kerr” or taken “pratfalls and [been] funnier than Lucille Ball” or produced “tragedies blacker than Lillian Hellman’s” or even taught “philosophy at Radcliffe.” Yeah, right. Repeatedly, Courogen’s excuse for May’s failures is misogyny. Female playwrights, she maintains—ignoring such cases as the aforementioned Lillian Hellman and Jean Kerr, as well as Claire Boothe Luce and Edna Ferber—were rarely permitted to be successful on Broadway. And personally? May hooked up with her psychologist, David Rubinfine, driving the mother of his three young daughters to suicide. Six weeks after the mother’s death, May and Rubinfine married. While colleagues shunned him for his outrageous violation of professional ethics, he became, thanks to May, “a psychoanalyst to the stars.”

In the 1960s, flop followed flop. A revue May wrote bombed terribly. Her performance in a play called *The Office* was so bad that she got booed throughout the show, which closed during previews. She played forgettable roles in the middling 1967 movies *Enter Laughing* and *Luv*. But Courogen keeps shoveling out the praise: *Luv* director Clive Donner says May was “better at everything—writing, acting, directing—than almost anyone else I know.” Indeed, Courogen assures us that May had the stuff to be “a true star, with the charm of Judy Holliday, the versatility of Barbara Stanwyck, and the fast-talking wit of Rosalind Russell.”

Then May scored two genuine hits. *A New Leaf*, a movie she wrote and directed in 1971, is an adorable comedy about a naive, awkward heiress (May) and the conniving suitor (Walter Matthau) who wants to get his hands on her cash. But it took a long time to make the picture presentable. Her original script was an overlong mess. She didn’t have a clue about film directing. She went way over schedule on filming and editing. Eventually, Paramount took the film from her—all three and a

half hours of it—and edited it to a manageable length. When she sued over the supposed mutilation of her work, the judge screened the studio's cut and laughed throughout, pronouncing it “the funniest picture in years.” Paramount won.

Courogen describes the parts of the movie that Paramount cut out, and it all sounds horrible: What ended up as a neat and tight story about an incompetent wife-killer would, left in May's hands, have been a genre-busting mess. Her second Hollywood triumph was *The Heartbreak Kid*, about a newlywed who dumps his bride on their Miami honeymoon for a hotter babe. It was written by Neil Simon, whose rat-a-tat-tat jokey style May was praised for infusing with a deeper humanity.

And then it all went south. She wrote and directed *Mikey and Nicky*, starring Peter Falk and John Cassavetes as gangsters. She exposed no fewer than 259 hours—265 miles—of film and kept firing and hiring cinematographers. The editing took more than a year. When Paramount balked at all this waste, she tried to sell the film—which she did not own—to a company that was a front for some of her friends. Another court case followed, and Paramount won again. But the eventual product was then and remains unwatchable, the reviews terrible.

Courogen offers more feminist excuses: The film's “production directly crossed paths with the struggle of women to gain a stronger foothold in Hollywood.” Also: “As a woman, you're damned if you're nice, damned if you're not nice enough.” May herself complained that America is “a bad setup for people who are in the arts. It's really hard to work here.” By this point, she'd been living for years at the super-luxe San Remo on Central Park West.

Eventually May found a calling of sorts as a writer of other directors' movies and, especially, as an uncredited (and staggeringly well-compensated) script doctor. If she had trouble keeping her own movies tight and tidy, she was good at boiling other writers' work down to their essence. She got an

Oscar nomination for writing *Heaven Can Wait*, basically wrote *Reds*, and fixed *Tootsie*. (“Elaine,” said Dustin Hoffman, “is the one who made the movie work.”) She rehabbed herself and got out of directing jail-only to come up with her biggest debacle ever. She conceived of *Ishtar* as a combination of a wacky Hope-and-Crosby-style *Road* movie and a serious critique of “our involvement in the Middle East.” The result was one of Hollywood’s legendary bombs. Even the *Village Voice* wrote: “The directorial incompetence crashes through the camera lens as demented insolence.” In defense of *Ishtar*, Courogen offers yet more feminist claptrap, blaming its bad press on Elaine being a woman.

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I recently read Barbra Streisand’s memoir. Her personality and politics turn me off big time, and she’s always labeled as difficult. But compared with May, Streisand is a total pro. Appearing in her first film, *Funny Girl*, the young singer-actress respectfully peppered the director, William Wyler, and cinematographer, Harry Stradling, with questions and came away with valuable knowledge about filmmaking. May, by contrast, comes off here as a monster of arrogance, unwilling to learn from anyone and continually professing that being a real artist means pleasing only herself: “Elaine was going to make the movie she wanted to make, and they would all just have to live with it.” When put at the helm of a big-budget picture like *Ishtar*, she was, it seems, determined to go off the rails, because something in her despised the idea of pleasing the riffraff—at least when her name was onscreen. Once she complained that Clint Eastwood “could do anything because he’s tall and they respect him.” Or maybe it was because his scripts were always tight, he brought his movies in on time and on budget, and he almost always hit it out of the ballpark?

After *Ishtar*, May was unbankable in Hollywood. But Nichols saved her. He wanted to make an English-language version of

the French comedy *La Cage Aux Folles* and asked her to write it. The original is the tender, witty story of a gay couple whose son plans to marry the daughter of very conservative parents. May, despite her PC showbiz views on gay rights, failed entirely to grasp the issues at stake for the gay couple. The result, 1996's *The Birdcage*, struck a tone uncomfortably different from the original. Lead actor Nathan Lane, who was gay, admitted to being offended by the script. So was I, and I said so in a *New York Times* article, quoted by Courogen, in which I contrasted May's tacky, tone-deaf take with the elegant, perceptive French original by Jean Poiret.

Courogen quotes me fairly but concludes that given the historical moment in which they were operating, Elaine and Mike had done their best to be pro-gay "allies." They were rewarded; it was May's biggest hit ever. It was followed by the May-Nichols adaptation of *Primary Colors*, based on Joe Klein's roman à clef about the 1992 Clinton campaign. I like it. But there's one big problem: Being Clinton intimates, Elaine and Mike softened the portraits of the characters based on Bill and Hillary, producing a movie that (as Courogen herself admits) seemed toothless alongside the darkly cynical political satire *Wag the Dog*, written by David Mamet and released just a few months earlier.

And after that? May wrote a play that was panned as "lazy" and "dated." A remake she wrote of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* was deemed "shockingly unfunny." And on it went. At a 2006 Lincoln Center event, she complained to the audience about "being treated very badly" by the industry—this from a woman who could always pull off a skit but who, at sea with long-form projects, had nonetheless kept being paid royally to create them.

In the end, this supposedly mistreated genius was rewarded handsomely. In addition to snagging a Best Actress Tony for *The Waverly Gallery* at the age of 86, May won a National Medal of Arts, an honorary award from the Writers Guild of

America, and (in 2021) a Lifetime Achievement Oscar—a reminder that for all her determination to play the recluse, she'd long been a member of the in crowd on both coasts.

Exemplifying the kind of inane gush that Courogen routinely serves up here is her closing flourish: “In an age where we know too much about too many people, Miss May insists on remaining unknowable, seen but never truly seen. She's both everywhere and nowhere at once, just as she likes it.” First of all, what does this even mean? Second of all, when has such hysterical hagiography been so drastically out of sync with the subject's actual accomplishments?

First published in [Commentary](#).