

**I AM MY OWN WIFE
CURRAN THEATRE
MAY 3. 2005**



Midweek popped on over to Babylon to catch the Pulitzer-winning play *I am My Own Wife* at the Curran, authored by Doug Wright and starring Jefferson Mays. The play distinguishes itself by the presentation of two increasingly common tropes in contemporary American theater: the device of employing a single actor to present more than twelve characters of both genders and the presentation of a subterranean world that provides a kind of shelter in a time characterized by the onset of a familiar darkness reminiscent of a period of time in German history.

The play concerns the life of Charlotta von Mahlsdorf, the famous "tranny granny" who survived the Nazi regime of Adolph Hitler and then the nearly as brutal period of Soviet occupation of Eastern Germany, all while dressed in pearls, a dress, and high heels and running a Weimar style cabaret in her basement only to be forced to flee the country after the Wall came down amidst scandal and a climate of neofascist revival.

The actual Charlotta died of a heart attack in 2002 during a visit to her home in Mahlsdorf, an old section located in the northeast quarter of Berlin. We have been there and remember some of the buildings mentioned in the script, even as late as the 1980's still pockmarked with machine-gun holes from the Battle for Berlin, and including the ruins of the Jewish synagogue that was partially destroyed during the infamous Night of Broken Crystal.

This is not a campy "drag show" as much as the preceding description might imply. Except for a brief segment in which Mays wears a blue prison uniform, the actor wears a dowdy black dress, artificial pearls, clunky orthopedic shoes and a simple peasant scarf as a headdress, much as the original had done when he went on a series of interviews with her in Mahlsdorf during the 1990's. Although the entire contingent of gay and lesbian glitterati had turned out for the play's opening, no work earns the prestigious Pulitzer by holding a narrow focus.



As Wright discovered to his chagrin, Charlotta could not be made into an icon of triumphant gay survival, for when her Stasi files were released, it became painfully obvious that her survival was in part due to her collaboration with the notorious Secret Police of East Germany.

Charlotta refused to clarify her participation as an informant, preferring to spin long contradictory stories to the press and to the disappointed Wright, who begged for some insight into the situations she had found herself. At the end of the day, after several years of increasingly frustrated interviews recorded to tape, Wright found his main subject to be as amorphous and unknown as the first day he met her.

Essentially she becomes a palimpsest of imposed preconceptions of what a person is supposed to be and do when under extremity. On the one hand she was just anyone who did what they felt they had to do to survive. At one point

she burst out angrily, "You! You have not yet lived through my life! The Stasi never came and pounded on your door!" Another hint about the compulsive collector of antique furniture comes when given a chance after the Wall comes down to troll through the sin palaces of the West.

The bemused granny wanders with guidebook in hand down the streets taking notes before returning to her basement and the dusty memories of a drum gramophone and her collection of period furniture, which she has turned into a museum with guided tours. The purpose of her existence is and has always been fulfilled in the act of preservation, not execution.

When a group of neo-nazi skinheads climbs over the garden walls to break up a party, smash the windows and injure several people with bats and gas pistols, she confronts one of them on the stairs with a shock of recognition. "I have seen you before!", alluding to the hate rallies of the 1930's.

And there is the second trope we find cropping up with disturbing frequency. As Charlotta comments in a fleeting remark during one of her interviews, "It was a dark time; and those times are coming again. . .".

Everyone in that room in the Curran was intimately aware of the little events, isolated murders, savage beatings and the flaring hatred now erupting with increasing frequency and boldness, seeking to subvert even the rule of law to the ends of specific and particular oppression, and not one of us has been untouched. A friend of ours was telling us the other day about something that happened to them in "liberal" Boston. "They got me when I came out of the bar. It was late and there were four of them with baseball bats. And they beat me with

those bats, breaking both of my arms, my legs and my ribs. Then they left me in the snow for dead."

Well anyone may have opinions about lifestyle or the essence of what a person is, but that sort of thing should be unthinkable instead of on the rise.

From this perspective, the play is not so much about an aging homosexual's troubles and possible lapse in ethics, but a serious inquiry into the very real concerns about survival for just about anyone who does not bind themselves in union about the handle of a Roman ax. Charlotta's story is not about Charlotta, but about the people she knew, the world she lived in and the events that took place, as well as the suggestion that one make one's decisions early and now.



In Charlotta's own words, when asked if she ever uses her considerable carpentry skills to restore a piece "which has lost its luster," she replies, "No! You

must present each object exactly as it is, for each piece tells a story of its life and the people who used it, each nick and scratch and stain is important . . .".

Mays ends the play by replaying a tape from one of the actual interviews, and we hear the real, the actual Charlotta's voice welcoming visitors to her furniture museum. When the lights came up, the entire audience rose as one and gave three standing ovations.



Authored by Doug Wright and starring Jefferson Mays
Set Design by Derek McLane, Lights by David Lander, Costume by Janice Pytel
Director Moises Kaufman

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