



I Am My Own Wife: A Play

By Doug Wright

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***I Am My Own Wife* is the winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.**

From the Obie Award-winning author of *Quills* comes this acclaimed one-man show, which explores the astonishing true story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. A transvestite and celebrated antiques dealer who successfully navigated the two most oppressive regimes of the past century—the Nazis and the Communists—while openly gay and defiantly in drag, von Mahlsdorf was both hailed as a cultural hero and accused of colluding with the Stasi. In an attempt to discern the truth about Charlotte, Doug Wright has written "at once a vivid portrait of Germany in the second half of the twentieth century, a morally complex tale about what it can take to be a survivor, and an intriguing meditation on everything from the obsession with collecting to the passage of time" (Hedy Weiss, *Chicago Sun-Times*).

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Doug Wright's *Quills* received the 1995 Kesselring Prize for Best New American Play from the National Arts Club and a 1995 *Village Voice* Obie Award for Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting. Wright also wrote the screenplay adaptation of *Quills*, making his motion picture debut. The film was named Best Picture by the National Board of Review and was also nominated for three Oscars. Some of Wright's other plays include *Interrogating the Nude*, *Watbanaland*, *The Stonewater Rapture*, *Dinosaurs*, and a musical, *Buzzsaw Berkeley*, which features songs by Michael John LaChiusa. Wright has a bachelor's degree from Yale University and an M.F.A. from NYU. A member of the Dramatists Guild and the New York Theatre Workshop, he has taught playwriting at NYU and Princeton University.

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I Am My Own Wife

ACT ONE

(*The French doors at the rear of the room open, and standing before us is CHARLOTTE VON MAHLSDORF.*

She is, in fact, a man, roughly sixty-five years old. CHARLOTTE wears a simple black housedress with peasant stitching, a kerchief on her head, and an elegant strand of pearls.

She gazes at the audience for a moment; the tiniest flicker of a smile dances on her lips. Then, surprisingly, she closes the doors as quickly as she appeared, and is gone.

A pause. The stage is empty again.

In a moment, the doors reopen. CHARLOTTE reappears. Cradled in her arms is a huge antique Edison phonograph, complete with an enormous horn in the shape of a flower. She grins, satisfied, and sets the phonograph on a small plinth.

She steps back for a moment to admire the music machine. When she speaks, it's in broken English, but the cadences of her voice are delicate; there's a musical lilt to her inflection. She has a German accent.)
A LECTURE ON THE PHONOGRAPH

CHARLOTTE: Thomas Alva Edison was the inventor of the first talking machine of the world, in July of 1877. And, you see, the record is not *ein Plattenspieler; nein*. It is a cylinder made of wax. And this record is working with a hundred and sixty revolutions per minute, and is playing four minutes long. And the record is made by the National Phonograph Company in Orange, New Jersey. At one time, I had over *fünfzehntausend* cylinders.

(CHARLOTTE indicates a painting of the Edison phonograph with an attendant dog, its ears cocked to listen.)

And you see on the wall a painting: the dog Nipper, *His Master's Voice*. The most famous trademark in all the world. Next month, this phonograph will be half a century old.

(She begins to turn the handle on the phonograph, readying it for play.)

For fifty years, I've been turning its crank.

The loudness depends on a big or a small horn. Metal horns are better for bands and the voices of men. And the wooden horns, they are better for the strings and the voices of the female. *Die Sopranistin*. And Edison's phonograph has in the needle a little sapphire.

(She plucks a tiny disposable needle from a drawer concealed in the phonograph. She holds it up to the light, and says emphatically):

Nicht Diamant, nur Saphir. And when it grazes the record it sounds so nice.

(She installs the needle on the arm, then delicately places the arm on the wax cylinder. The machine begins to play--an old German waltz, scratchy and exquisite.)

In the Second World War, when the airplanes flew over Mahlsdorf, and the bombs were coming down, I played British and American records. And I thought, They can hear in the airplanes that I am playing Edison records. I thought, If they hear me they will know I'm their friend.

(A pause as CHARLOTTE revels in the music.

Then--abruptly--the music stops. CHARLOTTE is supplanted by someone else, a thirty-something newsman named JOHN MARKS.

JOHN has the intrepid spirit of a Saturday serial matinee hero. His voice has a Texas twang. His masculine edge stands in sharp contrast to CHARLOTTE's demure nature.)

THE WORLD FLIPS UPSIDE DOWN

JOHN: From the desk of John Marks Bureau Chief, Berlin *U.S. News & World Report* September, 1990.

Dear Doug,

It's a funhouse over here. You can't imagine. The Berlin Wall falls and the world flips upside down. All the great and powerful leaders are turning out to be clowns. Erich Honecker, one of the most feared and respected dictators in the world, has in one year become a fugitive. He wanders around the grounds of a Soviet military hospital in his pajamas. Secret police files kept on East Germans for four decades are being released, and it turns out husbands spied on their wives, children on their parents, dissidents on each other.

(He steps forward, and adopts a more confidential tone.)

Now, in the midst of all this craziness, I've found a true character; she's way up your alley. (And, believe me, I use the term "she" loosely.) I'd love to interview her--make her my first official article for *U.S. News & World Report*. But I'm afraid my editor will say her story's too extreme. Still, I think she may well be the most singular, eccentric individual the Cold War ever birthed.

Have I piqued your interest?

Love, John

(Another abrupt shift. DOUG is a playwright, in his mid-thirties, with an eager-to-please manner and a somewhat mellifluous voice.)

DOUG: "Piqued" indeed.

August 8, 1992. I've been in Berlin for two days now. I'm sleeping on John's floor. Today we went to the Reichstag. There were demonstrations, because Cristo wants to cover it in pink tulle. Now we're in John's car, headed toward the east.

(DOUG *glances out an invisible window, as though he were riding in a car with JOHN.*)

Through the windshield, I can see fragments of the infamous wall still standing. Slapped onto one in bold paint are the words "Art Survives."

A sign whizzes past: "Mahlsdorf." It's a grim place; vast apartment complexes rise like cement gulags. Then we turn a corner, and it's like we've turned back the clock two hundred years or more. Standing before us is a huge, weather-beaten mansion made entirely of stone. About a hundred tourists are gathered at the front door. Suddenly, with a creak, it opens.

(DOUG *morphs into CHARLOTTE. She fingers her pearls. Music from an Edison Amberol wafts through the air.*)

DAS GRÜNDERZEIT MUSEUM

CHARLOTTE: *Wilkommen in meinem Gründerzeit-Museum.* Welcome to my Gründerzeit Museum.

Here, people can always come to see my collection. Everything from *die Gründerzeit*; this was the period in Germany between 1890 and 1900. *Wie soll ich sagen ...* "the Gay Nineties." Petroleum lamps and vases, gramophones, records, matchboxes, telephones, ink wells, Polyphones, pictures, credenzas, bureaus, and, of course, clocks.

No matter what people want to see or hear, I'll show or play it. Some people, they come to see me. *Ich bin Transvestit.* But soon they look at the furniture.

Folgen Sie mir bitte, ja?

(CHARLOTTE *pulls the doors of the museum open.*)

CHARLOTTE: This old door? It is not original, *nein*. I saved it from a house on Prenzlauer Street. Before the Russians blew up the houses, I took such things.

(As CHARLOTTE *enters the museum, DOUG addresses the audience directly, recounting the adventurous step into the unknown.*)

DOUG: She ushers us into the foyer of the museum. The ceilings are high, at least fifteen feet. We're huddled together like schoolchildren. For the next two hours--room by room, object by object--she guides us through the house.

(CHARLOTTE *seats herself at a small, ornately carved wooden table. From beneath it she pulls a velvet jewelry box. She places it squarely in the center of the table. With great ceremony, she opens it.*)

CHARLOTTE: Come in, please. There is room for everyone, yes?

(CHARLOTTE *pulls a, small, lovingly carved, elegantly furnished doll dresser from the box. She holds it sweetly in her palm and approaches the audience, holding it out for inspection.*)

CHARLOTTE: Here we have *eine alte Anrichte*. A cupboard, yes? *Und dieses Möbelstück* is made of oak, in the style of neo-Renaissance. But this was not handmade; this was factory-made. So-called mass production.

And the trim? People would tear it off; they would burn it. They did not like the scalloped wood, the tiny turrets, the ornamental molding. "Too old-fashioned! Too difficult to dust!" But me ... I had a feeling for such things. And so I saved it.

(She removes a tiny lacquer cabinet of lighter wood.)

Und hier haben wir *ein* Vertiko. An old sideboard, ja? It was designed and built by *ein Tischlermeister*, Otto Vertiko, in *achtzehnhundertfünfundneunzig*.

(She pulls out a tiny bust on a pedestal.)

And this is a bust of Wilhelm II, the last German emperor. During the Second World War, they wanted to melt it down for munitions. And so--with my school friend Christian--I pulled it from the bonfire, yes? It looks like a bronze bust, but it is only zinc. Galvanized. Not so expensive.

(Next, a miniature clock with an open, suspended pendulum.)

In French, this clock is called "*regulatour*." Because it is regulating the time. And *auf Deutsch* we say "*Wandulir*", oder "*Freischwinger*." Because the pendulum isn't encased in a glass box; it's freely suspended. Of course, American...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Cathy Thomas:

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