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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WILMA THEATER

Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* September 14 - October 23, 2005

Success 'Becomes' Her

by Walter Bilderback

It was not the most obvious subject for Broadway: an elderly, distinctly unglamorous East German transvestite with a huge collection of late 19th century furniture and antique Victrolas. Nor did it come easy to its author. In his introduction to the printed edition of the play, Doug Wright describes sitting down to write: he has erected a "small shrine" to his subject on his desk, and exhausted every delaying tactic he can think of, including alphabetizing his CD collection.

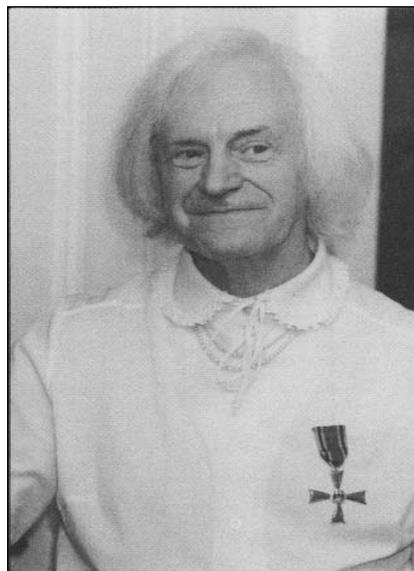
I'm desperately trying to will inspiration into the room.

Still, no words come. My fingers hover, unmoving, over the keys.

Hours pass. Then years.

Nearly six years, in fact: Doug Wright actually started interviewing Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, "Berlin's tranny granny," before he wrote *Quills*, which the Wilma produced in 1997. He finally unlocked his writer's block by acknowledging his mixed feelings and including himself in the play as a character. And it still took three years to finish the play, involving workshops across the country, including one that culminated in a reading here at the Wilma, before the play opened in New York. But *I Am My Own Wife* found critical acclaim, and audi-

ences. The critic Robert Brustein described it as "a remarkable piece of political theater... unquestionably one of the most mesmerizing events of recent seasons" because Doug Wright had "found a way to use his gay identity as a universal criticism of life." Bruce Weber wrote in *The New York Times* that the play "powerfully makes a case for the necessity of storytelling in our lives.

*Charlotte von Mahlsdorf*

Among the resonant assertions of *I Am My Own Wife* is that lives themselves are narratives, and that the perspective, sympathy and reliability of the narrator are crucial to our understanding of them." The play went on to win both the Tony® and

the Pulitzer in 2004.

Although the play was developed with a single actor (Jefferson Mays, who also won a Tony® for his performance) in mind, the Wilma is producing the play, with Doug Wright's blessing, using two actors: Floyd King playing Charlotte and Kevin Bergen playing the role of Doug Wright. (The two divide the remaining 30+ characters between them.) Inside this issue, director Blanka Zizka and playwright Doug Wright discuss the ideas behind this concept.

Wright has crafted most of the play from the taped interviews he made with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf in the early 1990s. As a result, Charlotte's English is somewhat eccentric. This is particularly true in her use of the word "become." In German, the word *bekommen* means "to receive": its similarity to an English word with a drastically different meaning makes this a common mistake for native German speakers. Here, it also lends itself, as Wright says, to "a remarkable kind of poetry."

A Remarkable Ten-Year Journey

An Interview with Doug Wright
by Walter Bilderback

Reimagining Wright

Blanka Zizka on her approach to
I Am My Own Wife

For me the play is a meeting of two people who lived in two different political systems, of the enthusiasm of youth and the life experience of age, of a seeker of truth and a guardian of myth, and of a writer and a subject.

I am intrigued by Doug's attempt to get to know Charlotte. Is it even possible to get to know another person thoroughly? Charlotte lived under circumstances that Doug could hardly imagine. Doug is reliant on Charlotte's stories, and they are mesmerizing. But are they true? Or has Charlotte partially created a myth about herself? Can a fight for survival make a person immoral? Is it possible to live a completely heroic life in a society such as East Germany's?

These are some of the questions I asked myself when working on the play. I believe that two actors inhabiting these two roles will give the audience a deeper understanding of both characters. One actor plays Charlotte and all the characters in her stories, whose lives she has a freedom to interpret. The second actor plays Doug, an outsider, a writer in search of a story. This actor also plays many other characters - journalists, TV interviewer, regular citizens, etc. - who have nothing to do with Charlotte's life but are questioning it, have their own opinions, and argue about her guilt publicly. This duality between private myth and public probing that I find in the play made me interested in casting the play with two actors.

OPEN STAGES: Much of the attention that *I Am My Own Wife* attracted in New York came from the performance of Jefferson Mays in all the roles. The Wilma production is going to be unique in featuring two actors dividing the roles. Why have you allowed the Wilma this distinction?

DOUG WRIGHT: I didn't do it lightly. After all, Charlotte adopted many guises in order to survive; how appropriate that one actor adopt many guises to tell her tale! Furthermore, the play has a very central tenet: that one person can embody a host of contradictions.

That said, Blanka is one of the most innovative and responsible directors that I know. She's directed my work with such insight and zest in the past; her production of *Quills* was a delight. She's also a formidable theatrical intellect, and I think she has the capacity to teach me new things about a play I already know very well. When she first proposed the idea, she supported it with the provocative notion that the play is also about the intersection of two foreign cultures. That intrigued me. I don't plan to sanction "alternative" or "radical" production of the work, but - in my heart - Blanka will always be an exception. I trust her.

OPEN STAGES: You've had a relationship with the Wilma for nearly ten years now: what has continued to attract you to this theater?

DOUG WRIGHT: Its artistic staff; some of the most extravagant, vital imaginations working in the theater today. I love the Wilma's pen-

chant for the unusual; their fearlessness. Blanka and Jiri still see theater as central to any sophisticated cultural dialogue. And--on a far more practical level--I think it's one of the most handsome, inviting theater spaces in the country.

OPEN STAGES: *I Am My Own Wife* is sub-titled "Studies for a Play About the Life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf." What led you to choose this subtitle? Is it important to us as a theatrical audience in watching the play?

DOUG WRIGHT: I wanted to qualify my title. It's not the definitive treatise on the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf; it's just a glimpse into the remarkable ten-year journey I enjoyed in her company.

OPEN STAGES: Was that one of the reasons you wrote a version of yourself into the play? To undercut a sense that this was "the definitive treatise"? It's a fascinating part of

the texture of the play and its investigation of history, and a large reason for Blanka exploring the possibility of directing the play with two actors.

DOUG WRIGHT: In truth, my appearance in the play was an act of pure desperation. I'd been struggling to write the script for almost ten years with no success. The events of Charlotte's life felt beyond my understanding. The Nazis! Communists! I'd certainly never experienced such oppressive extremes in my own life. How could I claim to write about them? So I finally decided to write about the one thing I could claim authority over, and that was my relationship



Doug Wright

continued on page 3



Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

with Charlotte herself. Once I decided to make the play about our friendship, all the historical and biographical material just fell into place. Suddenly, the play had a tenable structure.

OPEN STAGES: Charlotte's museum was dedicated to preserving the furnishings of the Gründerzeit, the period from the unification of Germany in the 1870s to the turn of the twentieth century. What do you think the significance of that period was for her?

DOUG WRIGHT: I think she preferred furniture to people; it's stalwart. It doesn't betray or abuse you; it's handsome to admire, and functional. When all is said and done, a credenza can be damn fine company. I think when Charlotte looked at a piece of furniture, she saw more than wood, glass, or metal: she saw the lives that forged it, that used it, that preserved it over time. She saw history.

Charlotte also idolized her mother, and Gründerzeit furnishings date from the time of her mother's childhood. I think for Charlotte, it epitomized a simpler, happier time.

And - finally - the Gründerzeit epit-

omized a certain bourgeois vision of German culture; a flush middle class, living on mass-produced furniture, in the midst of a healthy economy and a future that was naively bright. As a transvestite, Charlotte never imagined herself a diva, a showgirl, or a femme fatale: she saw herself as a bustling housewife. She fetishized the very notion of "hausfrau." And Gründerzeit furnishings were part of the package

"I finally decided to write about the one thing I could claim authority over . . . my relationship with Charlotte herself."

OPEN STAGES: What have you been working on since *I Am My Own Wife*?

DOUG WRIGHT: Since *I Am My Own Wife*, I have adapted the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* for Sony Pictures, and my new musical (with score by Scott Frankel and lyrics by Michael Korie) opens this Spring at Playwrights Horizons. It is entitled *Grey Gardens*, and is based on the notorious documentary of the same name [by Albert and David Maysles], about Edith Bouvier

Beale and her daughter, Little Edie. I'm also writing the stage adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* for Broadway.

OPEN STAGES: What's the path from *Quills* and *I Am My Own Wife* to the book for *The Little Mermaid*?

DOUG WRIGHT: The brutal truth? *I Am My Own Wife* was a boon to me; it enjoyed a long run on Broadway, and garnered some (blush) prestigious awards. I was frivolous enough to think that - for a while, at least - it might even garner me a living wage! But the theater is in dire straights. The show didn't even earn back its investment. And so - like many playwrights - I'm still in search of the project that might actually allow me to support myself. I'm a big fan of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. It's a charming movie, and boasts a memorable, Broadway-style score. And who knows? It might also help me pay down my mortgage!

-- Walter Bilderback



Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

The Obsessions of Ch

A Ti

Before the Third Reich

1871

Beginning of German Gründerzeit (Founders' Era) with the establishment of the German Empire under Wilhelm I.

1877

Thomas Alva Edison invents the phonograph, which reproduces music using a wax cylinder.

1887

Emile Berliner invents the gramophone, using a disc instead of a cylinder.

1910

Magnus Hirschfeld publishes *Die Transvestiten*.

1918

World War I ends, and Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates. The Weimar Republic is proclaimed in Germany: gay, lesbian, and transgender life flourishes in the cabarets of Berlin, including the Mulack-Ritze.

1920

Adolf Hitler joins National Socialist German Worker's Party (NAZI).

Mar 18, 1928

Lothar Berfelde (later Charlotte von Mahlsdorf) is born.



March 18, 1928
Lothar Berfelde with
his mother and great uncle

The Nazi Era and After

Jan 1933

Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor. Article 48 of Weimar Constitution denies civil liberties in time of national emergency. Federal police agencies, SA (Storm Troops) and SS (Special Security), are created.

1933-45

Gays deported to concentration camps.

1934

Lothar begins collecting phonograph records and clocks.

1935

The Nazi Party passes the Nuremberg Laws, persecuting the German Jews.

The lover of Lothar's Aunt Luise is murdered in Nazi's euthanasia program.

1937

Hitler Youth Participation becomes mandatory.

Nov 9, 1938

Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass): Nazis burn synagogues and homes of Jews.

September 1, 1939

German troops invade Poland, beginning World War II.

1942

Lothar and family evacuate Berlin and move to Bischofsburg. He receives Gründerzeit furnishings from Tante Luise.

Apr 26, 1945

Liberation of Berlin by Allied Forces. Berlin, as well as the country as a whole, is partitioned into zones controlled by the U.S., Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.

1945-49

Resurgence of gay life in Berlin.

1948

Alfred Kinsey publishes *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*.



Alfred Kirschner
phonogra

Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

Timeline

Behind the Iron Curtain

1949

Founding of German Democratic Republic.

1952

Communists begin crackdown on gay and lesbian bars.

1959

Lothar takes possession of Hultschiner Damm 333 and begins restoration.

1960

Gründerzeit Museum (formerly Hultschiner Damm 333) opens.

1961

Berlin Wall, symbol of the Cold War, erected.

1963

Mulack-Ritze Cabaret is resurrected in the basement of the Gründerzeit Museum.

1969

A police raid on the Stonewall Tavern, a transvestite bar in Greenwich Village, the day after Judy Garland's death triggers a riot as the trannies fight back. This marks the beginning of the modern gay rights movement in the U.S.

1971

Lothar permanently assumes the identity of "Charlotte von Mahlsdorf." Alfred Kirschner arrested by Stasi, the East German secret police.

1989

Berlin Wall falls.

Reunification: *I Am My Own Wife*

1990

East and West Germany unite.

1992

Charlotte receives the country's *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (Federal Service Cross) for her restoration efforts. She publishes her autobiography (published in the U.S. in 1995 as *I Am My Own Woman*).

August 8, 1992

Doug Wright meets Charlotte for the first time.

1993

Doug Wright begins interviewing Charlotte.

1995

Gay filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim releases docudrama of Charlotte's life. Charlotte closes the Gründerzeit museum and moves to Sweden.

1997

Re-opening of the Gründerzeit Museum.

2000-2002

Doug Wright begins to write *I Am My Own Wife*. Workshops take place at the Sundance Play Festival, La Jolla Playhouse, **The Wilma Theater**, About Face Theater (Chicago), and New York Theatre Workshop.

Apr 30, 2002

Charlotte passes away in Berlin.

May 27, 2003

I Am My Own Wife opens at Playwrights Horizons in New York. It moves to Broadway on December 5.



1971
and his collection of
graph records



1989
Berlin Wall Falls

"Everything seemed natural. I knew, I can't be any other way."

A (Very Brief) A History of Transvestitism

The term "transvestite" was coined by Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) in his 1910 book *Die Transvestiten* (translated into English as *The Transvestites: An Investigation of the Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*), the book Charlotte credited for the discovery that she was not alone in her identity. In 1897, Hirschfeld and three friends founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, an institution that lent support to those whose sexual practices or inclinations were considered "deviant" by society. He is often credited with originating the gay rights movement.



Magnus Hirschfeld

While he coined the word (which is simply Latin for "cross-dressing"), transvestism was not a new phenomenon when Hirschfeld wrote his book. Cross-dressing and other transgender manifestations are part of the ancient traditions of many societies. Some Native American nations accepted a "third sex" - biological women who lived as warriors or men who lived as women, and transvestitism and hermaphroditism have been common in the shamanic traditions. Numerous Hindu gods contain both male and female attributes - Siva (or Shiva), for example, is often depicted as having male characteristics on one side and female characteristics on the other side of his body. The Hijras of India continue this tradition today, although their place in

society is both celebrated and disparaged. Islam has also had a long tradition, with an example being the Xaniths of Oman.

Transvestism seems to have had a more tumultuous history in Europe, due to a confluence of Greek, Roman, and Christian notions of sex and gender. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it was relatively well-accepted as a practice among the nobility: among other classes, it seems to have been more common a practice among women than among men - largely because being identified as a man offered women more freedom to travel, and to earn money and prestige, while female clothing tended to diminish these opportunities.

Despite this, it was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that transvestism, especially among men, became closely associated with homosexual behavior. This was as a result of several factors: most notably new definitions of sexual distinctions ("homosexual," and "heterosexual," are in fact late nineteenth century coinages, scarcely predating "transvestite") and the "Great Masculine Renunciation" of decorative dress beginning in the early nineteenth century. As a result, modern male transvestism has tended toward flamboyance (the drag queen). Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was somewhat of an anomaly in her preference of the understated dress of a middle-class German hausfrau. "I also had no need to dress up fancy," she explains in her autobiography. "Let others adorn themselves with attention-getting jewelry. I am what I am. Most of the time, I wear an apron and a kerchief and am satisfied to be a housemaid."

Despite the connection of transvestism and homosexuality, Hirschfeld found that transvestites were roughly equally divided

between "gays" and "straights," with a smaller number of bisexuals and "auto-monosexuals" (a form of narcissism lacking sexual interest in others, male or female). Female transvestites were predominantly lesbian, while the majority of male transvestites were heterosexual, some even professing strong antipathy toward "sissies." While later researchers have not always found the same breakdown, the idea of "straight" transvestites was common enough in Weimar Berlin that a song, "Masculine/Feminine," was written about the romance and marriage between a "butch" woman and "femme" man.

Transvestism has remained a controversial lifestyle, even sometimes within the gay community, although the contemporary gay rights movement in the U.S. was started at Stonewall, by transvestites (many Black and Puerto Rican) who resisted a police raid.

But Hirschfeld's crusade to remove the stigma of disease from transvestism and other sexual minorities has been joined in recent decades by many other researchers and theorists challenging rigid concepts of gender, sex, and individual identity. They include A. H. Devor who has



argued that "[o]ur dogged insistence on thinking in terms of binary categorisations of male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, either right/wrong serves to blinker our vision. It is time that we begin to retool ourselves for the job of coming to see, appreciate and understand the value of human gender, sex and sexual diversity."

-- Walter Bilderback and
Susannah Engstrom

Further reading:

Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. 1993
A. H. Devor, "How Many Sexes? How Many Genders? When Two Are Not Enough," 1996 *University of Victoria Provost's Lecture*. 2000. (<http://web.uvic.ca/~ahdevor/HowMany/HowMany.html>)
Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. 1992
Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*. English translation 1991.
Charlotte Wolff, Magnus Hirschfeld. 1986 (*Here in Philadelphia, Hirschfeld's continuing relevance is shown in the Magnus Hirschfeld Fund, which presented the Philadelphia Freedom Concert and Ball on July 4 this past summer. Established in 2004, the Hirschfeld Fund was created to fund programs that foster education about HIV/AIDS, fight prejudice and discrimination, or deliver services to people living with or at risk for HIV/AIDS.*)

Clarifying the Characters' Relationship

An Interview with Jorge Cousineau

By Walter Bilderback

OPEN STAGES: What are the challenges of designing *I Am My Own Wife*? Can you talk a little about the process you and Blanka went through to get to the final design?

JORGE COUSINEAU: Well, to start off, I don't know when a design can be called final, but to answer the question: How to not be influenced by the success and the elegance of the previous production, how to still approach this play with innocence and surprise, how to find the right ways to surround it, that was maybe the biggest challenge here. Blanka and I met a number of times and engaged in lengthy explorations not only of the subject at hand as well as ones that seemingly have nothing to do with it. Starting with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil, a pair of scissors and a ground plan of the theater, waiting for the possibilities to arrive.

Then we sorted, saw what could be done, what was really needed, how much we could do without. And after a couple more times reading through the script and conversations with [lighting designer] Russell Champa, adding again some things that we started missing.

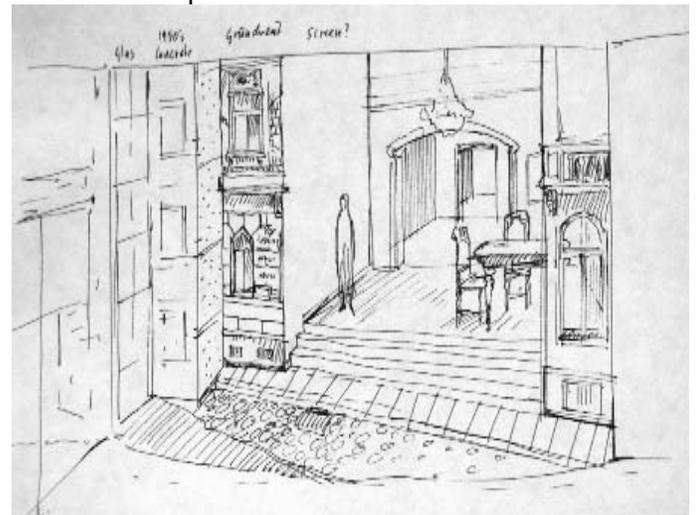
OPEN STAGES: How has the decision to produce the play with two actors instead of one affected your design?

JORGE COUSINEAU: Since I knew from the beginning what Blanka wanted to do with this production, I didn't have to adjust to the change. In that way the play is not different from any other as it has its own rules and dynamics that have to be attended to. Since it

is performed with two actors I felt that the space needed to help clarify the characters' relationship. Where in the one-man performance all the characters live in the same environment, here we tried to separate Doug's more neutral setting from Charlotte's mysterious habitat, allowing the two to reflect and affect each other.

OPEN STAGES: You were born and grew up in the former East Germany: what effect, if any, has this had on how you approached this play?

JORGE COUSINEAU: Having a past that relates to the subject of a play always helps me to find a personal connection, which I find very important for the work to be truthful. Sometimes it is harder to find, but for this production it was almost too easy. I thought I knew maybe a bit too much about it to understand the awe with which the playwright initially encountered Charlotte and her history, but then I found that Dresden's Neustadt - the part of my hometown I had my first apartment in - is now considered the largest remaining example for the architecture of the Gründerzeit, the period Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was so attracted to. All of a sudden I was in awe of my own history. Not to mention feeling a little homesick.



Jorge Cousineau's original sketch design for I AM MY OWN WIFE.

You're Invited!

Season Teasers are back and FREE!

Take a few plays for a test drive with our free reading series, *Season Teasers*. Sample some of the work under consideration for future Wilma seasons, then stick around for a lively discussion with the actors, dramaturg, and you!



SEPTEMBER 26

7:00 pm

The Rosendorf Quartet
by
Jason Sherman
(*Patience*)

adapted from the novel
by Nathan Shaham

commissioned by The Wilma Theater

Palestine, 1936: Four expatriate musicians form a string quartet and attempt to create art in the shadow of Hitler while navigating between political conflict, terrorism, and their own egos. Featuring: David Chandler (*Patience*), Caroline Tamas (*Outrage*), Janis Dardanis (*The Magic Fire* and *Orpheus Descending*), Gregg Almquist (*Outrage*), and Kevin Bergen (*I Am My Own Wife*).

Season Teasers

OCTOBER 17

7:00 pm

The Night Season
by

Rebecca Lenkiewicz

This recent hit at the Royal National Theater in London is a comic and moving look at three Irish sisters, their family, and the movie star who stumbles into their lives, written by one of the fastest rising young British playwrights.

DECEMBER 12

7:00 pm

*Agency**
by

Ken Lin

*Agency** introduces a gifted young playwright to Philadelphia audiences! Ken Lin explores faith, free will, and love in a thriller about a priest turned assassin and a computer program generating its own, god-like, consciousness. Featuring Frank X.

STILL TO COME:

Season Teasers: November 7, November 28 and December 5

Season Teasers are free and open to the public
Call the Wilma box office to make a reservation: 215-546-STAGE

Post-Reading Discussions Moderated by Walter Bilderback, Wilma Dramaturg and Literary Manager