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Review of the Original Broadway Production

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Inventing Her Life as She Goes Along

By BRUCE WEBER

Of all the peculiar entries in the Broadway derby this fall, perhaps the most peculiar is Doug Wright's fascinating one-actor play starring Jefferson Mays, "I Am My Own Wife." A critical success in its limited run earlier this year Off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons, it has now moved to the Lyceum Theater, where it opened last night amid all kinds of doubts that such a work might find enough of a mainstream audience to sustain it.

That it arrives during the tourist-heavy Christmas season, with the ordinarily barren weeks of January and February to follow, seems more curious, if not plain unwise. It's true that another one-actor show, "Golda's Balcony," garnered mostly good reviews (though not from me) and has attracted reasonable business. But that show has a recognizable star in Tovah Feldshuh and a subject, Golda Meir, that is of intrinsic interest to much of the well-established Jewish segment of the theatergoing audience.

"I Am My Own Wife" has neither of those advantages. And you have to wonder, How many visitors from the heartland of America will be eager to pass up the bling-bling of a Broadway musical for this quiet, dramatic tale about an East German transvestite played by an unknown male actor speaking in heavily accented English and wearing a black dress and a string of pearls?

That being said, let me urge them to do so. For the producers of "I Am My Own Wife" have done theatergoers a service by giving the play a chance to be more widely seen. And it has, in fact, broader appeal than a mere description would have you believe. It is not an esoteric work, and it isn't especially kinky.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
Jefferson Mays as
Charlotte von Mahlsdorf,
a German transvestite.

It does, however, tell a terrific story based on a real person, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (née Lothar Berfelde), a soft-spoken but tenaciously gender-bending biological male who died in 2002 at 74. Her lifelong obsession – Mahlsdorf preferred to be thought of as female – was the preservation of furniture, especially pieces from the 1890's, and other household relics like Victrolas and gramophones.

Her devotion to her astonishing collection – she turned her home into a museum – gave focus and motivation to a life whose grandest achievement was that it proceeded to its natural end. In fact, "I Am My Own Wife" is largely about Charlotte's enduring the cruel repressions of the Nazis and the Communists, and her harrowing tales of survival through the eras of the Gestapo and the Stasi, the East German secret police, are nothing short of breathtaking.

Ah, but are they credible? That becomes an issue in the play, which very subtly but in the end quite powerfully makes a case for the necessity of storytelling in our lives. 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. In other words, to endure the world, people may lie about themselves or to themselves, and the lies are as important as the truth.

The various perspectives on Charlotte's life are all enacted by Mr. Mays in a simply splendid, genuinely artful performance. The characters include a television talk show host, more than a few brutal authoritarians, several of Charlotte's family members and friends, as well as Mr. Wright, the playwright himself. The total number of characters is 35, each with a separate voice and many with differing accents. Mr. Mays is able to render quite remarkably an American newsman whose German is inflected with a Texas drawl, but no less remarkable is that he consistently switches roles not only with vivid persuasion but also with uncannily precise timing.

Quite aside from the technical aspects of his performance, Mr. Mays is thoroughly mesmerizing when he is inhabiting his main persona, who is, of course, Charlotte herself. He presents to us a character of steely pride and ferocious wariness, someone whose manner is so self-contained that it seems unassailable even in its most dubious claims. Whatever the truth of Charlotte's story, it is clear, from Mr. Mays's performance, that the story she tells about herself is the one she has convinced herself to believe.

Charlotte's carefully calibrated movements and her tick-tock speaking voice give off a metronomic quality, which works perfectly with the diamond-sharp

direction of Moisés Kaufman. The set by Derek McLane, in which shelves and shelves of period artifacts seemingly emerge out of darkness – where did he find all those Victrolas? – is not only beautiful, but also completely suits the theater; Mr. McLane has adroitly made the step up in magnitude to a proscenium house on Broadway. And the lighting of David Lander is used pointedly but without fanfare to underscore the drama in the text. There are louder bells and whistles to be heard on Broadway, and more smoke and mirrors, but over all, there is no more exquisitely rendered package of stagecraft. Its modesty is a strength.

That Mr. Wright has made himself such a prominent character in his own play remains the one gnawingly imperfect aspect of "I Am My Own Wife." Indeed, Charlotte's story is framed by the story of how Mr. Wright came to write her story. And what we learn from the play is that well along in Mr. Wright's work on it, he discovered that Charlotte might have been embellishing more than a few significant details. As a result, rather than being an organic part of the play, the framing device announces itself as a solution to a playwrighting problem: What happens when a fundamental presumption of a play proves dubious? How do you tell a story without confidence in it? The device works thematically; it just feels self-indulgent, conspicuously so in a work that otherwise is anything but.

Even with this caveat, however, **"I Am My Own Wife" is the most stirring new work to appear on Broadway this fall.** With nothing to recommend it but **a story that is both moving and intellectually absorbing**, a staging that is both careful and lovely and **a performance that is a true tour de force**, we should all hope that theatergoers prove that it belongs there.

I AM MY OWN WIFE

By Doug Wright; directed by Moisés Kaufman; sets by Derek McLane; lighting by David Lander; costumes by Janice Pytel; sound by Andre J. Pluess; production stage manager, Andrea Testani; production supervisor, Arthur Siccardi; general manager, Niko Companies. Presented by Delphi Productions, in association with Playwrights Horizons. At the Lyceum Theater, 149 West 45th Street, Manhattan.