

NEW YORK POST

SEE 'I AM MY OWN WIFE,' PLEASE

By CLIVE BARNES



Jefferson Mays shines in "I Am My Own Wife."

December 4, 2003 -- PERHAPS the most valuable gift a person could have during the last century was a gift for survival. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a German transvestite, virtually raised it into an art form.

Charlotte - a larger-than-life but real figure - is the subject of the remarkable, one-person, multifaceted "I Am My Own Wife," which opened at the Lyceum Theater last night, following a successful run at off-Broadway's Playwrights Horizons.

Written by Doug Wright, it's a complex, fascinatingly flawed play that holds one's interest even when its dramatic machinery turns cumbersome - partly because Wright is a main

character in his own play.

Playing Wright - and the ambiguous role of Charlotte and 34 other roles - is the amazing Jefferson Mays.

But I get ahead of myself. It is 1990. The Berlin Wall has fallen, and Berlin is turning somersaults.

In what had been East Berlin, Charlotte (born Lothar Berfelde) runs a small, fantastic museum of 1980s memorabilia - furniture, clocks, phonographs.

When Mays enters as Charlotte - his impassive face a blank scribble-pad for nuanced emotion, a slight song-song German accent to his precise, high-pitched voice - he starts a lecture about cylinder phonographs and old bric-a-brac that could be a satire of TV's "Antique Road Show."

It's here that an American correspondent in Berlin discovers Charlotte and

writes to his friend, the playwright Doug Wright, suggesting him as a subject for a play.

For Charlotte seems to have done the impossible: Born in 1930 and openly homosexual, he survived the ministrations of both Hitler's Gestapo and the East Germany secret police, the Stasi.

And now Charlotte runs this quaint museum, and has even been awarded a Medal of Honor by the new German state.

Wright, his attention piqued, gets a Guggenheim grant to go to Berlin and tape Charlotte's astonishing story.

That story - which includes both patricide and the running of a Weimar-style cabaret club during the height of the East German regime - unfolds with unflurried dignity.

Some playwrights would end the story there. But Charlotte's story has a strange twist, one that Wright uses to crank up the final reality of this bizarre, 20th-century saga.

In the end, we're left with a character less fascinating than we originally thought. We might even feel a little cheated.

Yet on the whole, however true or false some of the details, we accept that Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was an extraordinary creature who survived extraordinary times.

The play is helped by the clever and attractive setting by Derek McLane, adroit neutral costuming by Janice Pytel, atmospherically crepuscular lighting by David Lander and a staging by Moises Kaufman that manipulates the interplay of the text with light but firm control.

But most praise must go to Mays, who grabs the role of a lifetime with sweetly unobtrusive grace. He makes us believe that he really is a stage full of folk, and the gradations and colorations of his portrayals are to be seen, cherished and remembered.

Here is one of the performances of the season.