

VALLEY NEWS

“My Own Wife” is Riveting

by Alex Hanson
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Part of the joy of seeing a one-man or one-woman show is to watch the actor at work. When the entire burden of a play falls on one person, we're watching two dramas—the play itself and how the actor shoulders it all.

So it is that Northern Stage's riveting production of *I Am My Own Wife* is doubly rewarding. The story of how Charlotte von Mahlsdorf survived Nazism and Communism, and actor Kevin Loreque's interpretation of von Mahlsdorf and 35 other characters provides both a tale of resilience amid tyranny and a transparent view of the actor's craft.

Early in the play, young Lothar Berfelde visits his maiden aunt Luise in East Prussia and discovers a woman living virtually as a man. “Did you know that nature has played a joke on us,” Luise tells young Lothar, who is trying on Luise's unused dresses. Lothar becomes Charlotte, dressing as a woman for the rest of his life.

Born in 1928, von Mahlsdorf weathered both Nazi brutality and East German paranoia. She survived by preserving objects from abandoned and bombed homes, everyday items from the late 19th and early 20th century—Victrolas, recordings, old clocks, glassware. Eventually her collection became the *Grunderzeit Museum*.

The action of the play follows playwright Doug Wright's interviews with von Mahlsdorf after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Through flashbacks, von Mahlsdorf acts out key scenes from her story of survival.

What *I Am My Own Wife* reveals is that there are all kinds of tyrannies, and not all of them are immediately visible. The first tyranny von Mahlsdorf faces is her own sex, born a man who feels like a woman, a teenage boy in a dress during the Third Reich. When she says, “My father was a Nazi,” the line cuts two ways, in its literal sense, and against today's hyperbolic language.

Wright's 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning play is full of the fine grit of von Mahlsdorf's life. He ultimately has to decide whether to trust her story, whether her moral compromises during East Germany's communist nightmare disqualified her from his sympathy. “I need to believe that things like that are true,” Wright says near the end of the play, “that things like that can happen in the world.” He plays the story straight, no pun intended.

Loreque and co-director Brooke Ciardelli went to Berlin to research von Mahlsdorf. Their research shows; the entire production is polished, from Ciardelli's and Catherine Doherty's direction to James Wolk's spare, inventive set and Rachel Kurland's costuming.

But the play belongs to Kevin Loreque, who returns to Northern Stage after an appearance last year as the emcee in *Cabaret*.

Loreque's task is a formidable one and he has developed a strong gestural language for the audience to follow. At times von Mahlsdorf seems so tightly held together that I wondered whether her character lacked nuance, whether Loreque was enacting her story without revealing her emotions. But clarity is the first business for Loreque and there he is without flaw, convincingly rendering both von Mahlsdorf's German accent and Wright's flat Texas drawl. To play one of these characters so clearly would be admirable, to play them both, and more than 30 others, in a way that can be easily read is Herculean.

The theme of preservation of things as self-preservation carries the play along. But even freedom is a test for von Mahlsdorf, as her actions come into question after the Berlin Wall comes down. "You must save everything, and you must show it," she said, referring both to the objects she safeguarded and, obliquely, to her own persona. Honesty demands it, and art, if it's going to help us survive, demands honesty