

No deception here: This play is good

Production tells life of German transvestite

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Part of being a transvestite - A man trying to look like a woman - involves the art of deception, so it's fitting that deception, or at least uncertainty, is at the heart of the play *I Am My Own Wife*.

Currently being staged at the Baby Grand by Theatre Kingston, the one-man play is based on the life of Charlotte Van Mahlsdorf (nee Lothar Berfelde), a German transvestite who managed to survive the Nazi and Communist regimes in East Berlin.

How she did so remains a question of some debate and that's why playwright Doug Wright inserts himself into the play as a character, rather than simply letting Charlotte tell her story.

Although that seems mildly annoying in Act I, it makes a lot of sense by the time the play is over.

The play has won just about every award it's been eligible for, including the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for drama as well as Tony Awards that year for best play and best actor.

Theatre Kingston's general manager Brett Christopher first acted in the gruelling play - in which he's required to play 40 roles - in Montreal a few years ago, and he recreates that production here.

It's a beautifully staged show with a real Victrola - the forerunner to record players and stereos -plus lovely furniture. That's in keeping with its main character, who kept a museum of household things from the past as well as during the Communist years, running a gay nightclub in the basement of her house.

The play opens in 1992 after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Charlotte's story first became known in the West. Wright finds her story fascinating and decides to do a play about her, visiting her and her museum.

Through his interviews, Charlotte begins to relive her life, including how she came to become a transvestite and how she murdered her brutal Nazi father.

By the end of the first act, doubts have begun to crop up. Newspaper reports have come out accusing Charlotte of being a collaborator with the Communist regime and of even betraying a fellow antique lover.

The second act doesn't clarify the doubts - in fact it seems to subtly imply that Charlotte was a liar - but in a sense it doesn't matter. A transvestite who survived not one, but two regimes that deplored homosexuality is a remarkable person.

One-person shows, of course, are all about showing off the versatility of the actor, and in this case Christopher has a further handicap since for virtually all of the play he is dressed in a black dress with pearls and a kerchief around his head. In that outfit he must play tough Nazis, heartless commies, a brutal father, a lesbian aunt, and even a hearty TV show interviewer.

All he's got to work with is his voice and facial expression.

The voice isn't always varied enough - basically all of his bad guys sound the same, whether they're Nazis or Russkies - but what is most captivating is his portrayal of Charlotte, as a gentle, precise woman with a gentle, precise sense of humour. His Charlotte is eminently likeable.

He also does a terrific job as Alfred, the gay antique dealer who Charlotte either betrayed or collaborated with. Alfred is a bit grumpy, but ultimately noble. One of the highlights of the play is a scene between the two that takes place between the crack in a door, thanks to some great lighting by Tim Fort.

I Am My Own Wife is about one person's will to survive and at the same time preserve things he valued, all in a time of great peril.

It's must see-theatre and the first great production of 2009.

I Am My Own Wife

A play by Doug Wright

* Directed by Brendan Healy

* Costume and set design by James Lavoie

* Stage manager: Kathryn MacKay

Cast

Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf Brett Christopher Rating: **** (out of five)

A Theatre Kingston production now playing until Feb. 14 at the Baby Grand with performances Tuesday to Saturday at 8 p. m., plus matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 2 p. m.

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