

Germany's Family Jewels

Pearls lie everywhere in Leebrick's *Wife*

"Gender is what's between your ears; sex is what's between your legs," says activist Kate Bornstein.

So much for gender and sex. But what about loyalty, truth and survival — especially between the conscience of a private person and the intrusions of a totalitarian state?

I Am My Own Wife, the current play at the Lord Leebrick Theatre, engages with these questions, focusing on a specific life. And what a life — what a pulsing, complex, contradictory, fantastic life!

After the Berlin Wall came down, queer folks across the world thrilled to the tale of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. She was a self-described transvestite who survived the Nazis and the East German Stasi, both notoriously homophobic regimes.

Not only did von Mahlsdorf outlive both hostile governments, but, in her museum, she saved thousands of recordings and old clocks, many pieces of furniture and even a cabaret. The spare yet allusive set at the Leebrick, designed by artistic director Craig Willis, incorporates chairs from the actual time period as well as a beautiful gramophone. But when Charlotte collected her things, she was living under a regime that didn't tolerate pretty baubles or bourgeois obsessions. How did she do it?

That's the question playwright Doug Wright addressed as he leapt into the story. We know this from material he includes in the script, which recounts his first brush with

Charlotte's tale. His letters of introduction to Charlotte appropriately skewer his self-presentation, his desire for fame and his knowledge that this narrative had all the markings of a winner.

About the play's success he was correct, but he little expected the twists and turns, the torturous secrets, he would discover on his repeated visits to the reunified Germany and the rediscovered Charlotte von Mahlsdorf.

"I wouldn't want to review a one-person play," another critic said to me on opening night. "For theater, you need conflict, and how can you have conflict with only one person?"

Damned if Wright didn't pull it off. The play's Tony, Drama Desk and Pulitzer awards merely add shine to the already radiant piece. At the Leebrick, *I Am My Own Wife* is a co-production of first-time director (and experienced vocal coach) Mary Unruh and actor Vince Camillo.

Camillo was decent in last year's *Seagull* at the Leebrick and pretty good in *Fortinbras* at the Very Little Theater last summer. Still, playing 40-plus parts, two of which form the core of the play's struggle, and holding audience attention for the hour and 45 minutes of talk-heavy action: That's no easy task for an experienced older actor, much less one in his thirties. But Camillo, dexterous and flexible, takes the audience on a riveting journey through the 20th century — and through the complex interior of Charlotte's personal history. With Wright as a guide, that journey is



Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (Vince Camillo) with her collection

both complicated and devastatingly direct.

Camillo makes no serious attempt to look like a woman other than wearing Sarah Gahagan's simply designed costume. When he plays Charlotte, he uses his hands to bring his focus inward, to seem both older and more "feminine" — though the play questions what that means. After all, Charlotte was born Lothar Berfelde and certainly never had sex reassignment surgery. Remember: Gender lies between the ears.

We do start to wonder what was going on in Charlotte's brain as she tells Doug Wright stories of her daring escapes from horrible situations. Truth or fiction, both, neither? This is what Wright has to investigate and what Camillo must portray: The closets, the basements, the secrets folded into every corner of 20th century German history.

Camillo's many characters stay fairly distinct, and the occasional German phrase rolls well off his tongue (though a quick note: Charlotte is three syllables *auf Deutsch*). The night I went, the audience remained enraptured even during slower moments; the pacing stayed strong, and Camillo had people both laughing and gasping.

From the lips of the characters, from the words of Doug Wright, from recordings on wax and paper and tape, drop jewels and dross. And in the midst of the detritus and gold of the 20th century, emblematic but unique, stands the story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. Hers is a tale that deserves telling — and, in this production, it deserves to be heard.

EW

I Am My Own Wife continues through Nov. 24 at the Lord Leebrick Theatre. Tix available at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

Opening Nights

Threepenny Opera opens in the Performance Hall at LCC Friday, Nov. 9.

The UO may not have a full theater of its own to play with, but *Threepenny* director Joseph Gilg combined forces with LCC's Patrick Torelle to create a new production of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's masterpiece. You might only know "Mac the Knife" from bad McDonald's commercials, but the *real* brilliant words and music will blow you away. (See article, right.) Show dates are Nov. 9-11 and 15-17. Call 346-4363 for tix.

Angels in America: Millennium Approaches opens Thursday, Nov. 8, at OSU's University Theatre.

OK, this is one of the best plays of the late 20th century. And, as the 2003 HBO *Angels* made clear, Tony Kushner's award-winning drama retains its narrative power and glory even as drug cocktails make it possible for many people to live with AIDS. Let's hope the cast, which includes five engineering (!) students, aces the test of this luminous work. Show dates are Nov. 8-10 and 15-17; tix available at 541-737-2784.

Penny Drops

First things first: *The Threepenny Opera*? It's not an opera.

Second thing, especially for *EW* readers dedicated to solving social problems: The story, about beggars and thieves, the homeless and the overhoused, remains as relevant today as when young artists Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht created it in 1928.

Those things, they're good to know when you consider buying tickets for the joint UO-LCC production, opening Friday, Nov. 9, in LCC's Performance Hall.

"Don't go expecting opera — or stay away because it's opera," says director Joseph Gilg. Instead, *Threepenny* is a work of musical theater, with famous songs like "Mack the Knife" alongside classics like "Ballad of Sexual Dependency Song" and "Call From the Grave." This translation comes from mid-1990s London, with lyrics translated by Jeremy Sams and the book by Robert David McDonald. "It's contemporary, naughty and pretty edgy," Gilg says. He looked through several English versions before hitting on this one, and he laughs about his actors' reactions.

"I made the comment in rehearsal one day that I thought we'd end up with a PG-13 production," Gilg says. That is, he thought it would be more PG-13 than PG. But his cast? "The students all thought it was an R."

For the first time in his life, Gilg is a co-director. Along with LCC's Patrick Torelle, for whom this is also a first, Gilg has been working in

unfamiliar terrain with a mix of students from both campuses to put on what he calls "a fun musical" — but one that still deals with social content.

Gilg and Torelle worked out the deal after getting the UO Theatre's "Orphan Season" to fit in with LCC's Student Production Association plans. The path of co-direction wasn't clear.

"At first, he was going to direct the musical numbers, and I was going to direct the staging," says Gilg, who's working with a UO-based design team. "But then during [LCC's production of *King Lear*], he came up with the idea that he could be an acting coach. So he worked with the actors on relationship and characterization, which was really great."

The visual aspects of the play point up social commentary while staying true to Brecht's ideals about forcing people not to get too emotionally involved. Designers created some *very* special supertitles, including a sing-along for one of the songs, and a set that, like the characters, lives on the other side of the tracks. "These are people who live underground, behind the scenes and out of sight," Gilg says. "This is the backside of everything."

The audience should be alert for clues about the time period in which this production is set. It's not the original time of Queen Victoria — though issues around class remain pretty much the same.

"Expect some good social commentary," Gilg says, and don't be put off either by the easy three miles to LCC (free van transportation is provided to ticket-holders from 15th and Kincaid half an hour before each show, and there's free parking at LCC) or the fact that it's a student production. Gilg, former chair of the UO Department of Theatre Arts, says, "Come and see what we do, and you'll get hooked."



MacHeath (Chip Sherman) and Polly (Rachel O'Malley)