

CRUTCHLEY GIVES A SUBTLE YET ABSORBING PERFORMANCE

Superb portrayal of a quiet life

I AM MY OWN WIFE. By Doug Wright. With Jeremy Crutchley. Directed by Janice Honeyman. At the Golden Arrow Studio Theatre at The Baxter. Performances start at 7.30. **WILHELM SNYMAN** reviews.

THIS is a play that will appeal on many levels, the primary of which is Jeremy Crutchley's superb, gripping, absorbing yet ultimately subtle performance.

The story the play is based on is true and tells of a man, who chose to live as a woman, or who was a woman locked up in a man's body, as per the standard explanation of transvestitism.

What it tells is the story of a remarkable life – many people who survived World War II, especially those who survived the invasion of Berlin by the Soviet forces in May 1945, have remarkable stories to tell.

Our heroine, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, survived the Nazis and the Communists and the notorious Stasi of the former East Germany, throughout, dressed as a woman.

That she may have been homosexual into the bargain was no doubt assumed, but is neither here nor there as the playwright creates a play within a play, recounting how he came across this person and tried to recount her life's story in a play, which he then proceeds to do.

So we have this delicate interplay between the present and the past – between Jeremy the German and Jeremy the brash American who comes in and fixes on an idea that he finds fascinating and wants to turn into a play.

There are many stories similar to Charlotte's – about those who survived the daily air raids, the Jews who survived in Berlin right until May 1945, about the raping and pillaging that happened as the Russians entered Berlin.

One just needs to read Hidegard Knef's *Der geschenkte Gaul (The Gifthorse)* – one of the more well-known accounts of that period – to get some context of Charlotte's



MULTI-FACETED: Jeremy Crutchley plays a variety of characters in *I Am My Own Wife* at the Baxter. The drama explores the true story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf.

travails and heroism.

Where Wright elevates the tale into the realm of a universal heroism is how Charlotte has made the best of the detritus of her times by opening a museum containing what she has managed to salvage from the ruins of Berlin, whether

a Berlin run by the Nazis or the Communists.

In her museum she savours those bits of bourgeois respectability that echo people's lives, echo a time of stability and security, all ravaged by the ideological buffeting that Europe in general, and

Berlin in particular, went through.

Under the Communist regime (1949-1989) she finds herself being forced to spy on a fellow antique dealer, Alfred, but almost to do him a favour and salvage his collection of antiques, lest the authorities get their grubby paws on it.

Subsequently she is accused of being an informer, but we the audience know why she had to do what she did.

We are the all-knowing witnesses to her life. Significantly, the play starts and ends with references to her gramophone, and various devices for reproducing sound.

Charlotte has no television or radio – she finds her sanity less assaulted when she can choose what she listens to, given the control the various ideologies had over the radio and television.

Ultimately *I Am My Own Wife* is a study in solitude, not loneliness.

Charlotte, whether by choice or circumstances, is on her own but one suspects she prefers it that way, because no one can really understand her need for a private space; her faith in objects is understandable – people lie and cheat and betray; objects, antiques, do not.

As someone who has lived her life at the receiving end of others' ignorance and prejudice she is content to appreciate the history made around her, before her and the objects she collects reflect that.

In objects there is continuity and they help her to create her own world for herself, to make her impervious to the vagaries of the stupidity around her.

One might not have too much sympathy with Charlotte as her carapace is too well developed to let anyone in. There's no self-pity in Charlotte, just a quiet strength, empathy and wisdom born of hardship.

These traits Crutchley captures brilliantly as we are taken down an historical memory lane where, paradoxically, the eccentricities of an individual served as a panacea for the brutal madness of excess and ideological fundamentalism which became the norm that wrecked countless lives – a menace that lives with us still.

Highly recommended.

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