

Gender-bending ode to a quiet subversive

Review: *I AM MY OWN WIFE*
By Christina Kennedy
Cue contributing editor

For a master – or, in this case, a mistress – class in finely tuned acting, Jeremy Crutchley in *I Am My Own Wife* is hard to beat.

Quite possibly one of the finest and most astute actors this country has ever produced, Crutchley turns in a dextrous and nuanced performance as eccentric East German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf – and 39 other characters that flit in and out of her life.

American playwright Doug Wright's account of this remarkable personality's life makes for absolutely riveting, revelatory viewing. Beyond the initial curiosity value of this soft-spoken cross-dresser who survived the Nazis and the Soviets, the viewer comes to realise that Charlotte, like her prized furniture, is a true original – scuffs, scratches, imperfections and all.

From the moment Crutchley emerges on stage, clad in black from top to toe, Charlotte materialises; her gentle, composed demeanour offset by lively eyes. This is no OTT screaming queen in a feather boa: she is a dignified woman who wears no make-up and only a string of

pearls as adornment.

Yet as her incredible story unfolds, we come to realise that this demure museum curator is a subversive and revolutionary in her own right. Or does this attractive, heroic myth of the quietly defiant deviant obscure a more sinister truth?

Adroitly and with consummate ease, the actor morphs into other characters, each conjured with its own barely perceptible change of expression, posture and mien. Even if a character exists for only a few seconds, Crutchley inhabits him or her completely.

The piece recounts Wright's process of happening on Charlotte's story, and then researching what he initially thought would be a straightforward account of how this elderly man in women's clothes made it through tumultuous times in Germany's history.

However, as the playwright's research progresses, dirt begins emerging that casts aspersions on Charlotte's account of her history. It may not, in fact, be as rose-tinted as she would have us believe. But does it matter whether this saint is really a sinner?

The depiction of her devotion to German furniture from a bygone era is no accident. She has painstakingly rescued a

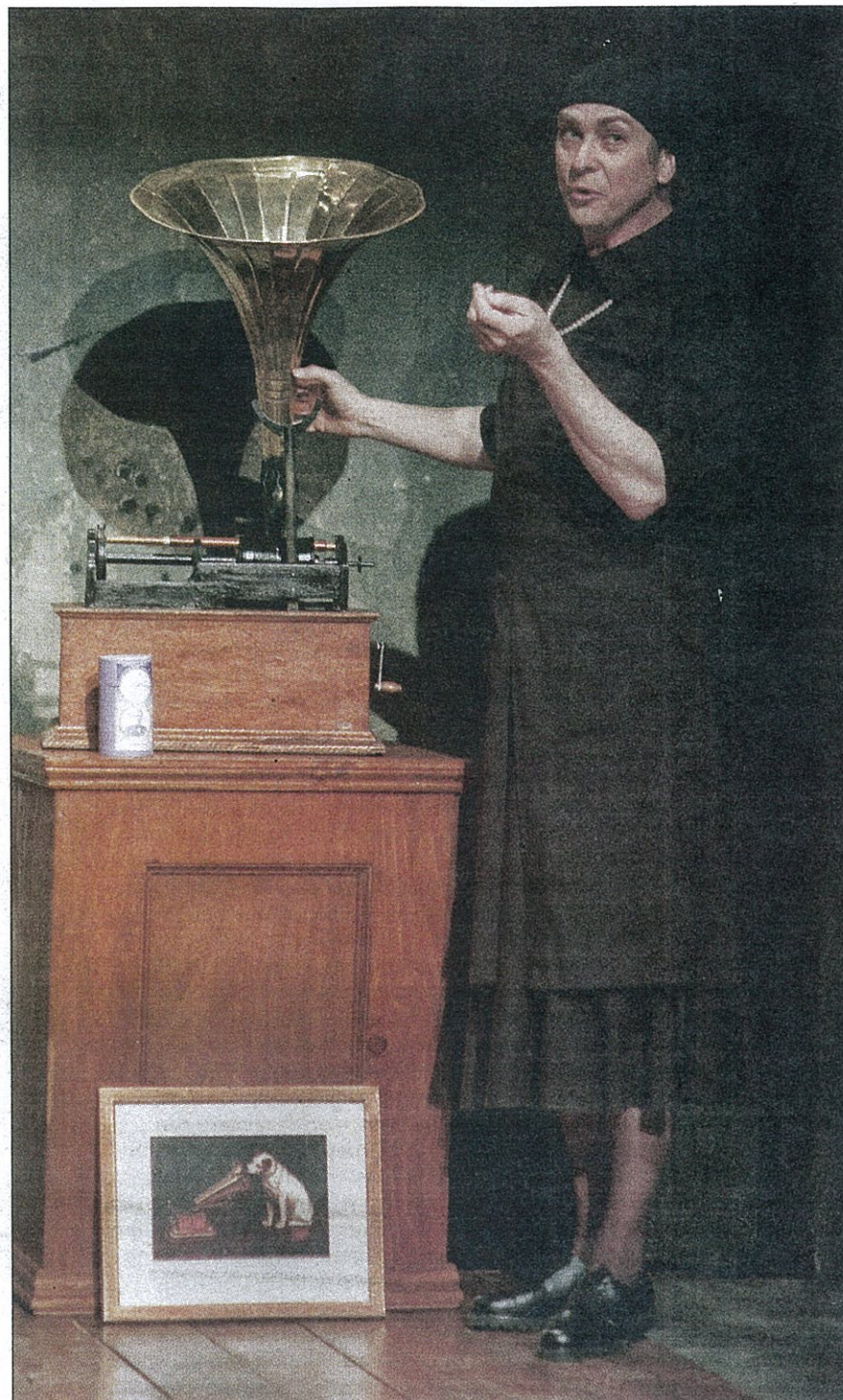
selection of phonographs, clocks and other exquisite antiques for her museum and lovingly preserved – not restored – them. To Charlotte, an item's integrity and authenticity relies on remaining true to its original character, flaws and all, and herein perhaps lies an important clue to our heroine's motivation.

Her response to the brutality of the repressive regimes she has lived through – and to the violence she encountered growing up – is to treasure the ordered and reassuring world of beauty in her museum. Ironically, the ugliness that she has worked so hard to shut out of her world intrudes more rudely than ever in post-reunification “free” Germany. She, like her museum bric-a-brac, is a dignified artefact from an old world gasping for air in a brash, crass new world.

Humour and heart abound in this extraordinary production, brought to life by a consummate artist who is nothing short of dazzling and directed with precision and poise by Janice Honeyman.

“Art survives,” says Charlotte, cryptically. Like its peerless protagonist, this piece of art deserves to both survive and thrive.

I Am My Own Wife is at
Graeme College today at 2pm and
7pm



Jeremy Crutchley plays a variety of different characters in *I Am My Own Wife*, directed by Janice Honeyman. CuePix/Harold Gess