I Am My Own Wife Study Guide

I Am My Own Wife by Doug Wright

Contents

Plot Summary

Doug Wright, successful playwright, is introduced to the idea of writing a play about a transvestite named Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. Charlotte, now in her sixties, survived as a transvestite during the Nazi regime and then during the rise and fall of communism. The play is a one-man show, so one person plays all forty characters. This lends an interesting perspective, as all characters, from Doug Wright himself down to a Stasi official, are acted out in the costume of Charlotte.

During the first act, Doug contacts Charlotte at the suggestion of his friend John, a reporter for *U.S. News & World Report*. After gaining permission from Charlotte to tell her story, Doug travels to Germany to meet her. What follows is a series of interviews and memories, interspersed throughout with Doug's own thoughts and observations. The audience sees Charlotte in the various stages of her life, from her youth to the present day. We are with Charlotte, in real time, as she is confronted by SS officers, as she kills her father and as she signs a deal with the Stasi to inform on her friends and family.

In the second act, more is revealed of Charlotte's involvement with the Stasi. The audience discovers that she was an informant for many years against her friends and family, which may explain how she was able to survive as a homosexual under the Communist Party. Her role as a gay hero is called into question, but she does not seem to feel any remorse for her involvement with the Stasi. She eventually moves to Sweden, but she returns seven years later to visit her museum in Berlin. While at the museum, she has a massive heart attack and dies. Her elusiveness about her Stasi involvement and her paradoxical life lead Doug to frustration about how to deal with Charlotte as both character and mentor.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

In the first five sections of his one-man show detailing the life of celebrated and reviled transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, Doug Wright explores all that went into his discovery of his play's subject. As the play opens, the audience is introduced to Charlotte. She is a man of about sixty-five and wears a black housedress, a scarf over her hair and a strand of pearls. She enters, leaves and returns carrying a large antique Edison phonograph, which she sets on a small table.

This has all been in preparation for the first scene, appropriately entitled "A Lecture on the Phonograph." The audience first hears Charlotte speak in her broken English, with a German accent. Charlotte begins her lecture by explaining some history on Thomas Edison and his invention of the phonograph. She then details the makings of a record and says that at one time she had over fifteen thousand, or "f'nfzehntausend," (pg. 10) records of her own.

Next, Charlotte points out the famous poster of "His Master's Voice," the Edison trademark of Nipper the dog listening to a phonograph. As she informs her audience of more Nipper trivia, she begins to crank the phonograph handle. She says that she has been turning its crank for fifty years.

According to Charlotte, the volume of the phonograph depends on its size. Also, men's voices and bands sound better through metal horns, while string arrangements and female voices are better suited to wooden horns. She goes on to say that the phonograph has a small sapphire in the needle. She replaces the needle on her phonograph and begins to play a German waltz record. As the waltz plays, Charlotte explains that during WWII, she would play American and British records as the airplanes flew over, imagining that the soldiers would hear them and know she was a friend.

Abruptly, Charlotte is replaced by another persona, John Marks. John is a newsman in his thirties and speaks with a Texas twang. This brings the reader to the section called "The World Flips Upside Down." The section begins with a letter from John, who is a reporter with *U.S. News & World Report*, to his friend Doug. Written in 1990, the letter offers insight into the events occurring in Germany around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

He tells Doug that everything is pretty crazy where he is. "Powerful leaders are turning out to be clowns" (pg. 12), and files are being released from the secret police that expose many German citizens as spies against their own families and friends. He then adopts a more confidential tone and tells Doug that he has found a character Doug would be interested in. John would like to interview her himself, but he is afraid his editor might find her story too extreme. He says, "she may well be the most singular, eccentric individual the Cold War ever birthed." (pg. 13)

Character now shifts to Doug, a playwright in his thirties. Doug is, indeed, interested in the character John wrote of. As he speaks, he relates that he has been sleeping on John's floor in Berlin for two days. He and John are currently riding in a car. They arrive in front of a huge stone mansion. Along with around a hundred tourists, John and Doug are suddenly face to face with Charlotte. The next scene opens, "Das Gr'nderzeit Museum." Charlotte, as if conducting a tour, begins her lecture by saying that everything in the museum is from *die Gr'nderzeit*, the period in Germany from 1890 to 1900. She says that she will show people anything they want to see but that some come to see her. Soon, though, they all look at the furniture.

As the group enters the museum, Charlotte comments on the door, saying that she saved it from a house before the Russians blew it up. The narration momentarily shifts to Doug, who explains that for two hours, Charlotte leads them through the museum. Then, narration shifts back to Charlotte.

Charlotte sits down at a table and places a velvet jewelry box in the center of it. One by one, she takes out miniaturized versions of her antiques - a factory-made oak dresser, an old kitchen sideboard, a bust of the last German emperor Wilhem II, a small clock with a freely suspended pendulum, a gramophone and a cherry pitter. She presents each piece to her audience, along with its history, until each tiny antique is grouped on the table like a little room in a dollhouse.

Charlotte goes on to explain the various ways she acquired her pieces. She worked for thirteen years to repair her home, an antique itself, and in August 1993, the collection will be thirty-three years old. She ends the tour by asking for everyone to make a donation.

The next scene is another letter, this one to Charlotte from Doug. He tells her that he and his friend John were very impressed by a recent trip to the museum in Berlin but that he was just as impressed with her survival as a transvestite during the Third Reich. He explains that he wants to write a play about her life, and with her support, he feels he will definitely receive funding. Then, he can start writing. The point of view switches back to Charlotte for a moment as she writes back and agrees, telling him a good time to come to Berlin might be Christmas. Action switches back to Doug, who is ecstatic.

Time has moved forward. The date is January 20, 1993, and Doug is driving to Mahlsdorf for his first official interview with Charlotte. John accompanies him. In "Translating Tante Luise," Doug begins by asking Charlotte, through John, about her given name. It is Lothar. Charlotte can speak English, though, so there is no need for translating. Charlotte tells Doug the story of her Aunt Luise, who raised horses in East Prussia and never wore ladies clothes, preferring instead, "[t]he clothes of a land inspector." (pg. 21) Ironically, while visiting Luise in 1943, Charlotte discovers the joy of dressing in women's clothes. At first, Charlotte is horrified that her aunt has discovered her.

Charlotte morphs momentarily into Tante Luise. She speaks in a deep voice in German, then repeats herself in English: "Did you know that nature has dared to play a joke on us? You should've been born a girl and I should've been a man!" (pg. 23)

Narration turns back to Charlotte, who explains that Tante Luise then gave her a book, *Die Transvestiten* by Magnus Hirschfeld. She reads aloud from the book, which discusses the balance of male to female substances in each person. She hands the book to Doug and instructs him to read. Doug reads an excerpt, in which Hirschfeld declares that a person who cannot be classified as simply a man or woman is completely natural and acceptable. He hands the book back to Charlotte, who tells him that Tante Luise said it would become her bible.

Doug moves slightly away to indicate that he is making some private observations. He says he would like to take Charlotte's picture but doesn't want her to think he's just there to gawk at her. He decides, instead, to describe her. She is five feet, eight inches tall and about 170 pounds. She is about sixty-five years old, with white hair in a pageboy style. She is not a drag queen and wears no make-up. She is wearing a black peasant dress and heavy orthopedic shoes. The one thing that distinguishes Charlotte as a man is her hands: "The hands of a woodworker. A craftsman. Definitely a man's hands." (pg. 25) This scene, incidentally, is called "The Giveaway," since her hands are a giveaway that Charlotte is a man.

The next scene is titled "Are You a Boy or a Girl?" and starts off with Charlotte telling a story of her youth in Germany. Near the end of the war, she refused to dress in uniform or carry a weapon. She wore her hair long and blonde, her mother's coat and girl's shoes. One day, as she was walking down the street, Russian planes began to drop bombs all around her. While in an air raid shelter, Charlotte, still using the name "Lothar" at the time, was confronted by four SS officers. They were looking for men and boys, and they dragged her up to the police station.

The play shifts to real time. The SS officer questions whether Charlotte is a boy or a girl. "Young Lothar," Charlotte as a child, answers that he is a boy and is sixteen. Charlotte is saved by her age, as the officer declares they are not so bad that they have to resort to killing children.

Character shifts again to Doug. In "Listening," Doug begins by telling Charlotte that he is sending her two antique records for her collection. He also tells her that he is listening to her interview tapes all the time, as well as studying German history and the works of Magnus Hirschfeld. There is a pause, and then the action changes to a 1993 recorded interview with Charlotte. The topic is her boyhood, and the scene is called "Vaterland."

Charlotte shocks Doug by blurting out that her father was a Nazi. Also, she says, he beat her mother. In 1943, the government evacuated mothers and children, and Charlotte's mother took her and her siblings to stay with Tante Luise in East Prussia. Her father came to Tante Luise's once, and Charlotte's aunt told him that his wife wanted a divorce. Charlotte's father, Herb Berfelde, pulled a gun on Tante Luise. She countered by pulling a revolver on him and telling him she would shoot on the count of

three. Then, she said "three" and shot the door next to him. He left and returned to Berlin. Two years later, Charlotte's mother received a letter saying the government was taking over the house in Berlin for residents who had lost their home in the war. Charlotte returned to her father's home to make room for the new occupants.

The play shifts again, with the point of view moving back and forth between the present day of Charlotte's narration and the real-time dialogue of her father. After she has been there for about a week, Charlotte's father asks her if she is on his side or her mother's. Charlotte asks him if he is ashamed of how he has treated her mother, and Herb says he will shoot her, her mother and her siblings. Charlotte knows this is true. Charlotte's father locks her in her bedroom, but because she always carries keys in her pocket, she is able to escape. She sneaks out with a large wooden rolling pin and beats her father to death. Charlotte is sentenced to four years' detention in the Youth Prison, but she and her mother know she has done what had to be done for their survival.

The play abruptly shifts to Doug, who is frantically writing a letter to John. The scene, called "Auf Deutsch," is a departure from Charlotte's story and instead details Doug's panic at not being able to fully grasp the German language. He tells a funny story about his German class in which he wound up telling the class he was wearing black lace panties.

The audience is then, once again, back in interview mode. This scene, "Durch Die Luft," shows an exchange between Charlotte and Doug in which he tries practicing his German with her. She explains that she escaped from the Youth Prison when the Russians bombed and the walls fell down.

The next scene, "Eine Spende," starts with a ringing phone, which is answered by John's answering machine. After the recording, Doug begins to speak, trying to get John to pick up. When he does answer, Doug tells him he has run out of grant money, so he says he is going to sell his car. He also asks if he can still sleep on John's floor when he comes to Germany. There is a pause, signifying a passage of time before Doug is now back in Germany with Charlotte. She leads him down to the basement, where she shows him a room that is an exact replica of an old tavern.

"Mulack-Ritze" is the name of the scene and of the tavern. Charlotte tells Doug that a long time ago, the bar was a restaurant for gays and lesbians. The owner, she says, wanted the homosexual clientele because they were well behaved and had money. In 1963, Minna Mahlich, the barmaid, told Charlotte that the communist government was shutting them down the next day, so Charlotte went and bought all the furniture.

Charlotte says that soon after came the Berlin wall and with it the end of the gay lifestyle. There were no bars, no personal ads and no gay culture. It was as if, Charlotte says, they "were not supposed to exist." (pg. 38) She decided to give the homosexual community a place to meet, so she recreated the Mulack-Ritze in the basement of her museum. There, homosexuals would meet on Sunday afternoons, and sometimes they would pair up and go off together. Doug explains that this went on for almost thirty years under the nose of the Communist Party.

Action switches to an awards presentation, a new scene. In "Bundesverdienstkreuz," the Cultural Minister of Germany presents Charlotte with an award for her work in preserving German history through her antiques and through her recreation of the Mulack-Ritze. Charlotte says this was a good thing because it showed what a transvestite could do. Narration switches to John, who tells Doug he wishes he could've seen it - Charlotte, an old man in a dress and pearls, accepting an award with no laughing or catcalls, only respect.

In the next scene, "Berlin from Behind," Doug asks Charlotte what it was like to visit West Berlin after the wall fell down. What follows is a series of descriptions of gay nightclubs, read aloud from what appear to be a guidebook as the audience is taken back to Charlotte's real-time first encounter with these clubs, via guidebook only, as their descriptions seem to disturb her a bit. The end of this scene takes a turn, however, as Doug questions Charlotte about her reported involvement with the Stasi.

The next scene, "I, Lothar Berfelde," details Charlotte's response to Doug's question. She says that yes, one day they came to her and asked her to sit down. The Stasi official tells her to get a paper and pencil and dictate what he says to her. Doug asks her what she was told to write, and she reads it aloud. It says that he, Lothar Berfelde, will willingly report any illegal activities to the Ministry for State Security, using the secret code name Park. It also says that if he breaks his oath, he will be prosecuted.

Doug asks if Charlotte signed the paper, still hoping she did not. She did, however, sign. She tells him that she signed it, still believing she would be able to do what she wanted. She tells Doug about something Tante Luise told her once: "'Be as smart as the snakes; it's in the Bible.' She said, 'Never forget that you are living in the lion's den. Sometimes, you must howl with the wolves.'" (pg. 44)

"Bated Breath" begins with John telling Doug that the German press has gotten a hold of Charlotte's secret file and that it portrays her as a willing and enthusiastic spy against her friends. There is a switch to Doug, who is seen reading through several tabloid headlines. He then tells John he will be returning to Berlin as soon as he can.

The final scene of the act is called "Horns." Charlotte is once again discussing the phonograph. She says that when she was young, everyone wanted radios instead of phonographs but that she always preferred the phonograph. She says they always made things better and that she doesn't know if she would have survived everything, including the horrible times with her father, without them. The act ends with Charlotte lost in a reverie as the music plays from her phonograph.

Act 1 Analysis

As Doug first meets Charlotte and begins to learn the details of her past and her struggles, he is drawn to her a hero. Having grown up gay in a very conservative part of the country, he is fascinated by Charlotte's ability to survive under the oppressive regimes of first the Nazis, then the Communist Party. In reality, though, Charlotte, even

with the trauma of an abusive father, had a support system. She had her Tante Luise, who, as a lesbian, helped Charlotte to accept her own sexuality. There aren't a lot of details of a real struggle, which creates an idyllic sense of freedom and adventure that does not yet delve too deeply into Charlotte. This gives a false sense of heroism on the part of Charlotte.

A recurring symbol throughout the play is Charlotte's love of phonographs. She prefers them to the radio, though her friends and family say she is old-fashioned. This preference is a reflection of a major aspect of Charlotte's personality. She would rather hear her own records that she has chosen than hear the news or current events. This keeps her insulated from reality and allows her to live inside the world she has created in her own head.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act Two opens to the sound of music cut short by the slamming of a prison door. The lights come up on Alfred Kirschner, a thin prisoner with thick glasses. He addresses Charlotte in a letter as if she were the audience. In "A Letter From Prison," Alfred is writing a letter to Charlotte. He describes the loneliness he feels when he does not receive mail and his happiness at receiving her letter. He tells her about the headaches and dizzy spells he's been having and the dentist that keeps pulling his teeth. He closes his letter by saying that when he's released, he'll play his favorite waltz, probably Strauss, on the piano.

Alfred morphs into Doug, and a new scene, "Erasure," begins. Doug tells Charlotte that her Stasi file is frustrating to him because repeated references to an antiques dealer that she informed on are all blacked out. Referred to as "BLANK," Doug infers that this person must have been very important to Charlotte, as he is mentioned often. On stage, Doug has been stripping out of Alfred's garb as he speaks, until finally, he is once again dressed as Charlotte.

Charlotte begins by recounting her first meeting with Alfred. They are both in an antique shop, and they both begin looking at a Polyphone. This leads them to discover that both are antique collectors, flirting back and forth about how many records they have. Alfred invites her back to his house, and she sees that he is indeed a collector of records and record players, but also a collector of clocks.

Eventually, Alfred learns that his clocks are a hot commodity to American soldiers. The soldiers are always on the lookout for authentic German clocks, as they are very inexpensive because they are seen as gaudy and kitschy. Soon, Alfred has a business proposition for Charlotte. She can give him the modern clocks she often receives as gifts, and they will sell them to American soldiers. Their idea is a great success, and soon they need a van to haul all of the clocks. The soldiers, however, are followed by customs officials, and the Stasi obtains some information about the clandestine sellers.

Several months later, a Stasi agent comes to Alfred's door, telling him they believe he is engaging in illegal activities. Instead of stopping, he asks Charlotte if he can sell the clocks from her basement. Next, the stage goes dark. It is midnight. Alfred is pounding on Charlotte's door. The Stasi came to his apartment and found evidence. He says they are coming for her soon, and he says, in order to save herself and her museum, she should tell them that the clocks are his. They argue, but, she tells Doug, this is what she did. Next, the stage goes dark with one spotlight, giving the impression of an interrogation. The audience sees Charlotte, sitting in a chair, telling the Stasi that the black market clocks belong to Alfred Kirschner.

Narration switches back to Alfred, as he once again writes to Charlotte. He tells her that when the Stasi found out he was a homosexual, they were afraid that he might be labeled mentally defective and be exempt from trial. To his chagrin, he is deemed sane. He tells Charlotte a little off-color story that, despite the circumstances, she finds amusing.

The play switches back to Charlotte, who says that she visited Alfred in jail, claiming to be his wife. She tells him that she has brought him some warm clothes, and he asks if she has heard from any of their friends. She tells him no, that they are afraid of looking guilty by association.

Back in the present with Charlotte, she explains that she almost burned all of her letters from Alfred, as she was afraid that the Stasi might search her home and find them, but she decided against it. She shows Doug an old menu Alfred wrote on. The point of view changes to Alfred, who has written his will, leaving everything to Charlotte. Charlotte then tells Doug that while Alfred was in jail, the Stasi impounded his possessions. When Alfred was released, Charlotte got him a room in a nursing home. Soon after, he died, leaving her all he had - an old bill, a photo of himself with a record player and a postage stamp. All he had left, she says, were scraps of paper.

The scene changes to "Aktenvermerk," and Charlotte becomes John. He is telling Doug that though this is a great story that sounds like some sort of Cold War thriller, it doesn't mesh with the actual facts of Charlotte's life. John explains that even if it did happen the way Charlotte tells it, she had already been a Stasi spy for over a year. Narration switches to a Stasi agent, bragging about all the information they have gained from Charlotte as evidence against Alfred Kirschner. He says that Charlotte, code name "Park," has been given full immunity and that she may even receive a promotion.

Point of view switches from the agent to Doug, who reminds John they shouldn't rely on a Stasi file for facts, as agents had quotas and supervisors. They could easily skew events to put themselves in the best light. The same agent reappears and tells a totally different account of "Park," concluding he has given them nothing substantial for forty-eight months.

The next scene, "A Convenient Lapse," begins with a shift of character to Doug. Doug has returned to see Charlotte in Mahlsdorf to ask her about her Stasi files, specifically about Alfred Kirschner. She deflects his direct questions by commenting on the sweater she made for Alfred. He continues to try and question her, but Charlotte seems lost in her own memories.

The scene changes to "The Cross." The audience hears loud music that indicates a news broadcast, and a German news anchor steps forward. He asks, as a lead-in to his story, if Charlotte should be forced to give up her Medal of Honor. Markus Kaufmann, a conservative politician, believes that if anyone has suffered because of her cooperation with the Stasi, her medal should be taken away. Ulrike Liptsch, a student from Humboldt University, takes the opposite view, saying that since one out of every three German citizens at the time was some sort of an informant, finger-pointing could only lead to

disunity. The last person to offer an opinion is Josef R'diger, a former political prisoner. R'diger is bitter as he details the tortures and indignities he suffered while in prison and makes it clear that he feels Charlotte, and all informants, are guilty of a crime: "Complicity in this country should always be treated as a criminal act." (pg. 66) The German news anchor ends his report by saying that the Medal of Honor has only been revoked one time before, when a winner was exposed as a former SS member.

In a new scene that is a continuation of the former, entitled "The Three *M*'s," Charlotte faces her "accusers." She turns to each in turn and says, "Museum. Mobel. Manner" (pg. 66), which she translates as, "Museum. Furniture. Men." (pg. 67) She says this is the order she lived her life in. She tells a story to illustrate, in which she has an appointment with a clock dealer. On her way, an attractive man hits on her. She declines, because she does not want be late for her appointment. She says, "For me, there was no choice." (pg. 67)

With a blast of loud pop music, the scene becomes "Celebrity," and Charlotte becomes Ziggy Fluss. He is a talk show host, and he introduces his guest, the "Trannie Granny" as he calls her - Charlotte. They engage in small talk, and Charlotte confirms that she has decided to move to Sweden. Ziggy protests that Berlin is the city that made her famous, but Charlotte tells him she is leaving because it has gotten too violent. She tells him that someone has recently thrown a rock through her window. Neo-Nazis who knew Charlotte was a homosexual vandalized the museum, and some of her friends were hurt. No one was caught, and no one was arrested.

Ziggy eventually brings the subject around to Charlotte's Stasi file and asks if her departure has anything to do with a desire to avoid a "tarnished reputation" (pg. 72) in Berlin. Charlotte deflects the subject by turning it to the size of her new home. The segment ends soon after.

The next scene, "Editorials: A Phantasmagoria," shows Charlotte being accosted by reporters outside of the show on her way to her limo. The first, Brigitte Klensch, questions the validity of Charlotte's claims that she killed her father. Next is Karl Henning, who asks her about claims that she appraised antiques for the Stasi. Shirley Blacker, Daisuke Yamagishi, Mark Finley, Pradeep Gupta and Clive Twimbley are all journalists grilling Charlotte about her past. She is not used to such ill treatment.

Charlotte turns to the group and relates a story about her mother. She says that her mother told her that it was all well and good to dress up like a woman, but that now he was a man and needed to marry. Her response to her mother was *never*. "I am my own wife." (pg. 75)

In "Diagnosis," a psychiatrist steps forward to explain Charlotte's behavior. This psychiatrist, Dieter Jorgensen, has decided that Charlotte is mentally ill. He believes she is autistic. As evidence, Jorgenson explains that her way of storytelling is actually a form of repetition, which is a symptom of autism in adults.

This short scene is followed by "Abdication," in which Doug is arguing with John about what he is going to write. John supports going with the news reports and the files, but Doug says he needs to believe in her stories, in her survival as a homosexual amidst the cruelty of the Nazis and the Communist Party. He says he doesn't know what to do. Then, he seems to come upon an idea. He remembers an interview with Charlotte in which he asked her what she did with an antique when it started to show its wear. He asks if she ever wants to fix or alter the veneer.

This launches the new scene, "On Curating." Charlotte tells Doug that she never refinishes her pieces or repairs them when they are broken. Those imperfections are as much a part of the piece's history as the piece itself. As she speaks, Charlotte is placing her miniaturized furniture pieces back in the box in the center of the table, describing what is broken or missing from each. She says these things are proof of the pieces' history and must be left alone. As Charlotte describes her furniture, detailing the various worlds her pieces have lived in, she gives the sense with her words that she is also speaking of herself. She concludes by saying everything must be shown "as is."

Charlotte removes her kerchief and pearls and becomes Doug. Doug tells the audience that Charlotte did move to Sweden, where she lived for seven years. In April 2002, while visiting her old museum, Charlotte had a heart attack. She died alone amongst her record players. A few days after her funeral, Doug received an envelope containing a photograph of young Lothar as a child of ten.

"Between Two Tigers" is the last scene of the play. Here, Doug describes the photo that Charlotte sent him. It shows her at ten, Lothar, dressed in a little boy's sailor suit. He is at a zoo in Berlin, and he is sitting between two tiger cubs. They look dangerous, but young Lothar has one arm around each cub. Their paws rest on his knees.

Doug begins to play one of his interview tapes through the gramophone. The play ends, much as it begins, with Charlotte. This time, it is the real recorded voice of Charlotte, beginning her lecture on Edison and the phonograph. As Doug stands listening, a waltz plays, and the play ends.

Act 2 Analysis

Act Two brings to light more information about Charlotte's life as an informant for the Stasi. The revelation that she *was* an informant is bad enough to Doug, but her unwillingness to accept responsibility for making the choices she made cause Doug to question the adulation he has built up for her. On one hand, Charlotte seems to be a courageous figure, never bowing down to the pressures of the straight world and living as a transvestite with no apologies. On the other hand, she glosses over her involvement with one of the most tyrannical and cruel regimes in history, an involvement that may very well have led to her ability to survive, even thrive, while those around her were imprisoned and oppressed.

Doug doesn't know how to reconcile his feelings for Charlotte as a mentor with the facts of her Stasi file until he begins to regard her in the same way she views her antiques. He even says, at one point, that he is "curating" her. In order to understand her fully, he must first accept her faults, not as flaws that detract from her worth, but as a part of her history that, good or bad, has made her who she is.

Characters

Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

The entire play is centered on Charlotte's life. Charlotte is a transvestite who lives in Germany during both the Nazi and communist regimes. When Doug meets her, she is around sixty-five. The entire play is performed by one man who plays all forty roles, but they are all done in the "costume" of Charlotte: black dress, pearls, heavy shoes and a kerchief over her white hair. Charlotte is first presented as a gay hero, but as Doug delves deeper into her story, she becomes much more complex. As a reader, or an audience member, we are never certain what Charlotte's real loyalties are. Did she turn in her friends to the Stasi under duress, or did she willingly betray the community she had supposedly been trying to save?

John Marks

John is a reporter for *U.S. News & World Report* in his thirties. He is from Texas and apparently lives in Berlin. He introduces Doug to Charlotte's story and serves as the conduit through which Doug learns about Charlotte when he is not in Germany.

Doug Wright

The author of the play, Doug is a writer in his thirties. He is intrigued when he hears about Charlotte, and his fascination grows as he learns more about the history of the gay community. Doug represents the audience, as he hopes against hope that Charlotte did not betray her community and friends to the Stasi. We experience his ambivalence as he tries to distinguish between facts and rumors.

Tante Luise

Charlotte's aunt with whom she lived after her mother and siblings were evacuated from Berlin, Luise was a lesbian and was Charlotte's first real contact with the homosexual world. At Tante Luise's, she first tries on women's clothing, and when Tante Luise discovers her, she gives Charlotte a book on transvestitism that Charlotte learns to look to as her bible.

SS Officer

An SS officer questions young Charlotte, then still a child, on whether she is a boy or a girl.

SS Commander

An SS commander asks Charlotte how old she is and comments that the Nazis are not so far gone as to kill children.

Young Lothar Berfelde

Charlotte as a young boy is known as Young Lothar Berfelde. Lothar represents all that Charlotte will come to represent. Though it seems that transvestitism would be a problem for Charlotte, it is actually the blanket that covers her. As Lothar, she is still dressed as a girl, which makes her physically appear more fragile and childlike.

Herb Berfelde

Charlotte's father, Herb Berfelde, was a Nazi and was abusive to Charlotte and her family. Charlotte finally beats him to death with a bat to prevent him from coming to her Tante Luise's and killing the whole family as he threatened.

Prison Guard

A prison guard at the Youth Prison where Charlotte is serving time for killing her father tells Charlotte to run when the Russians begin bombing, so she escapes.

Minna Mahlich

The barmaid at the Mulack-Ritze, Minna Mahlich informs Charlotte that the Stasi are coming to shut the bar down, prompting her to buy up all the furniture and recreate the bar in her basement.

Cultural Minister

The cultural minister gives Charlotte a Medal of Honor for her efforts in the area of cultural preservation because of her museum and the Mulack-Ritze. Charlotte charms him, though he knows she is a man, and the entire event is shown on German television. It is a serious, dignified event and a major milestone in the gay movement.

Stasi Official

A Stasi official tells Charlotte to sign an oath that she will inform the Stasi of any "information which may have the character of an action inimical to the state." She signs, but she claims to Doug that she still planned to do whatever she wanted.

Alfred Kirschner

A friend of Charlotte's, Alfred is a fellow antiques dealer. After an encounter with a soldier who is looking to buy clocks, he comes up with a plan, involving Charlotte, to sell clocks to soldiers illegally. When he is discovered, he asks Charlotte to keep the inventory in her basement. She contends that he asked her to turn him in when the Stasi discovered her, for the good of the community and her museum. Alfred is witty and does not seem to blame Charlotte for his incarceration, though Charlotte informed on him for selling clocks to American soldiers on the black market, which led to his arrest. Alfred is also a symbol for all of the friends and colleagues that Charlotte's Stasi file indicates she informed on.

Young Homosexual Man

Charlotte finds a young homosexual man waiting outside of Alfred's house one day. He first tells her to go away because Alfred is busy with two men and then laughs hysterically when he discovers she is a transvestite.

American Soldier and His Buddy

An American soldier and his buddy want to buy a clock from Alfred, and though he refuses, he does offer to sell them other clocks. They are stopped by customs and subsequently followed on their next "buy" by Stasi agents.

Customs Official

The customs official stops the American soldiers and detains them for several hours.

Stasi Agent

The Stasi agent tells Alfred that they know about his illegal activity. As a result, Alfred asks Charlotte to keep the clocks in her basement. Eventually, the agent comes to Charlotte, and she incriminates Alfred, supposedly at his request.

Prison Official

The prison official questions Charlotte when she goes to see Alfred in jail, asking who she is; she replies that she is his wife.

Nurse

After Alfred is released from prison, he finds the Stasi have impounded all his belongings. Charlotte arranges for him to have a room in a nursing home. The nurse calls Charlotte to tell her Alfred has died.

German News Anchor

The news anchor is covering the story of whether or not Charlotte's compliance with the Stasi should be grounds for the removal of her Medal of Honor.

Markus Kaufmann

A conservative politician, interviewed for the news, Markus Kaufmann feels that if anyone suffered because of Charlotte's actions with the Stasi, her medal should be taken away.

Ulrike Liptsch

A Humboldt University student interviewed for the news, Ulrike Liptsch believes Charlotte's medal should not be taken away. She feels that her Stasi file should not even be looked at, because at the time one out of three people was working as an informant, and looking at the files can only lead to finger-pointing and disunity.

Josef R'diger

A former political prisoner who spent two years in a Stasi prison, Josef R'diger is very bitter, mainly because he suffered horrible tortures without informing on anyone. He feels that anyone who did comply with the Stasi should be treated as a criminal.

Ziggy Fluss

Ziggy Fluss is a hip German talk-show host. Charlotte appears on his show, where she charms the audience.

Neo-Nazis

While on Ziggy's show, Charlotte explains that she is leaving Berlin due to a rise in violence. She recounts and incident in which neo-Nazis vandalized her museum, injured her friends and threatened to kill her.

Brigitte Klensch, Karl Henning, et al

A group of reporters accost Charlotte as she leaves Ziggy's show. They hurl questions at her about her past and her involvement with the Stasi. She is not used to such ill treatment.

Objects/Places

Charlotte's Museum

Charlotte's museum is where Charlotte not only displays her collection of antiques, but also where the homosexual community of Berlin is forced to meet in secret under the communist regime.

Communism

Communism is a belief in a communal, state-run society. Charlotte lives in East Germany during the time of communism, a time in which homosexuals are forced into hiding. This creates a need for her "museum."

Gramophone/Phonograph

A gramophone or phonograph is a record player. Charlotte is a big fan of record players, preferring them to radios.

Magnus Hirschfeld

Magnus Hirschfeld is a German physician who authored many books dealing with sex. His book, *Die Transvestiten*, is given to Charlotte by Tante Luise, who tells her it will become her bible.

Mulack-Ritze

The Mulack-Ritze tavern is a restaurant for gays and lesbians. The owner wants the homosexual clientele because they are well behaved and have money. In 1963, Minna Mahlich, the barmaid, tells Charlotte that the communist authorities are shutting the tavern down the next day, so Charlotte goes and buys all the furniture. She recreates the Mulack-Ritze in her basement as a secret bar for the gay community under the Stasi.

Nazis

The Nazis are the German National Socialist Party, led by Adolf Hitler. The Nazis killed millions during their time in power, and among their victims were many homosexuals. Charlotte's abusive father was a Nazi.

Stasi

Secret police of communist East Germany, the Stasi come to Charlotte and persuade her to sign an oath to be a secret informant against her friends and family.

Thomas Alva Edison

A famous inventor, one of Edison's many inventions was the phonograph. Charlotte starts off tours of her museum with a discussion of Edison.

Transvestite

A transvestite is a person who dresses, and sometimes acts like, a member of the opposite sex. From a young age, Charlotte dresses as a woman and exists as a woman - not a drag queen, simply a woman.

Themes

Reality vs. Perception

A major theme in this play is the distinction between a reality based in facts and a reality that has been created. Before the audience has ever heard that Charlotte has a Stasi file that may show her to be an informant, it is easy to believe her account of events. Once her compliance with the Stasi is discovered, however, her entire version of her life story is called into question.

The question is, does it matter? Wright hints at this quandary in his own confusion as to how he should portray Charlotte. He finally concludes that he must show her as she shows antiques - flaws and all - for the truth to emerge. For Charlotte, though, truth is in her stories. In the same way that she prefers the repetition and safety of records to the radio, she prefers her history to be the history she has created. The creation may not be a lie; it may simply be a matter of perception. What develops is the idea that we are all a combination of the facts of our history, our perceptions of our past and the lens through which others filter us.

Self-Discovery

Having grown up "gay in the Bible Belt," Doug Wright can relate all too well to the challenges Charlotte faced growing up as a homosexual and a transvestite under first the Nazis and then the communists. One aspect of Charlotte's own self-discovery that probably led to her being better equipped for survival was the acceptance and camaraderie she found with her Aunt Luise. Tante Luise, a lesbian, helped Charlotte understand and become comfortable with her own sexuality. Doug takes Charlotte's survival on as a symbol of his own, and he discovers a new desire to explore the history of the gay community. Even though his faith in Charlotte is shaken by the revelations surrounding her Stasi file, he finds a way to incorporate all he learns into his new sense of gay identity. He comes to understand that in order to fully comprehend Charlotte's heroism, it is not necessary to idolize her, only to discern the source of her strength and emulate that.

Freedom and Survival

Charlotte's ability to endure and even thrive in the atmosphere she did offers a fascinating look into the human drive to survive in the most challenging of circumstances. With Charlotte, though, Wright explores the lengths someone will go to and the costs someone will pay in order to live "freely."

In a move that could be deemed courageous, Charlotte lives as a transvestite from a young age. She provides the gay community with a much-needed social outlet in communist East Germany. However, there is convincing evidence that Charlotte's

participation with the Stasi, in which she informed on some of the people that she seemed to be helping, played a role in her ability to live her life in the way she saw fit. Wright takes these real-life events and, in recounting them with a slightly creative flair, is able to show that freedom may not always be free. Even though Charlotte is able to exist in a much freer manner than most openly gay men and women living under communist regimes, she is still forced into a role and made to betray those around her, which, in reality, is just another form of imprisonment.

Style

Point of View

As a one-man play with forty characters, *I Am My Own Wife* has many different points of view. The two main points of view, however, are Charlotte and Doug. When narration is with Charlotte, the audience or reader sees the events of her life as she saw them, most in real-time. Doug is more of a voice of the audience. He asks the questions and searches for answers that we as readers and viewers need to know. It is his point of view that hopes for Charlotte's innocence and must ultimately accept her with all her flaws.

The combination of two main sources of narration allows for a powerful juxtaposition of views, as the audience is able to see all sides of Charlotte and decide, ultimately, as Doug did, for ourselves how she should be seen by history. Also of note is the fact that though there are so many characters, all (with the exception of the first appearance of Alfred) are performed in the dress of Charlotte. Symbolically, everyone is filtered through the lens that is Charlotte.

Setting

The physical setting of the play is a recreation of a simple square room with a back wall covered in blue lace. In the wall is a set of French doors, and in the middle of the room is a table with four wooden chairs. The physical set of the play is purposefully nondescript so it can function as the room from which Charlotte tells the tales of her life while allowing the audience to be transported to the various settings visited throughout the play.

In the story, the setting changes from the "present," the early 1990s, to Nazi Germany, to East Berlin and Tante Luise's house - even to a German talk show. Somehow, through a deft use of characterization and a somewhat generic backdrop, Wright is able to conjure the mood of each distinct setting in order to provide a clear portrait of Charlotte and the times and places she lived.

Language and Meaning

Because *I Am My Own Wife* is a play, it is by its nature mostly dialogue. Wright intermingles German with English throughout the play to allow his audience to fully experience the essence of Charlotte. He also notes, in his Introduction, that in transcribing her interviews, Charlotte's English translations were sometimes more meaningful than she meant them to be. For example, when she told Doug in an interview that she received furniture, the words she actually used were, "I became the furniture." Wright chose to write most of the play based on his interviews, using her

language and her way with words to create her as a character as well as fully develop a supporting cast.

Structure

The play is structured unconventionally. There are two acts, but there are no designated "scenes." Instead, the acts are broken into sections that are named, like chapters. They are often very short, averaging three to five pages, maybe less, and give the play a sort of "snapshot" feel, as if the audience is not so much seeing one long narrative as seeing a series of pictures. Also, for a reader, they give the play a more literary feel. If we were watching the play, we would never know the names of each section, but in reading the play, some insights can be gained by paying attention to the significance of the scene's name.

Quotes

"When families died, I became this furniture." (pg. 18)

"I grew up gay in the Bible Belt; I can only begin to imagine what it must have been like during the Third Reich." (pg. 19)

"Did you know that nature has dared to play a joke on us? You should've been born a girl and I should've been a man!" (pg. 23)

"You are teaching me a history I never knew I had." (pg. 28)

"And it was spring! And the birds were singing in the trees! And it was an awful war." (pg. 35)

"'Be as smart as the snakes; it's in the Bible.' She said, 'Never forget that you are living in the lion's den. Sometimes, you must howl with the wolves.'" (pg. 44)

"Complicity in this country should always be treated as a criminal act." (pg. 66)

"For me, there was no choice." (pg. 67)

"An old friend of mine heard I was leaving town. She said to me, 'You can't transplant an old tree,' I told her, 'I am not a tree. I am a flower. And I always carry my flowerpot with me.'" (pg. 69)

"I am my own wife." (pg. 75)

Topics for Discussion

What draws Doug to Charlotte as a character?

Does Charlotte believe she did anything wrong by being a Stasi informant?

What could account for Charlotte's survival under such harsh regimes?

Do you think Alfred knew Charlotte put him in prison? Do you believe her version of what happened?

What is John Marks' purpose in the story?

How is Charlotte's story better served as a play than as a straight novel?

Discuss the symbology of the gramophone/phonograph?

What does Charlotte give up in order to live as a transvestite?