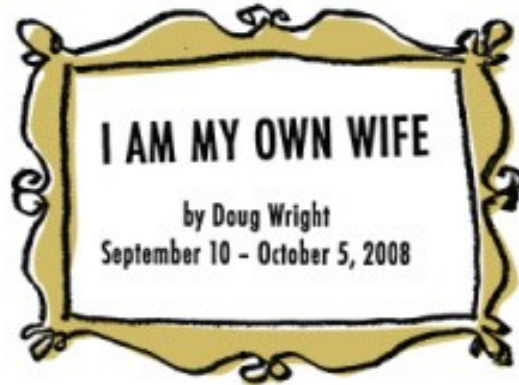


Researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of and appreciation for the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

## I AM MY OWN WIFE

<b>Inside this guide</b>	
Synopsis/German Lesson	<b>2</b>
Charlotte von Mahlsdorf	<b>3</b>
Interview with Michael Gotch	<b>4</b>
Homosexuality in Nazi Germany	<b>6</b>
Discussion Questions	<b>7</b>
Visiting the Rep	<b>8</b>



Stiemke Theater

### A study guide for students and educators

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**\*Warning\*** *I am My Own Wife* contains adult content and references to sexuality.

## SYNOPSIS

I AM MY OWN WIFE is the story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a German transvestite, born and raised in tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. Growing up during Hitler's rise to power, Charlotte survived Nazi Germany and Communist East Germany, all the while living an openly homosexual lifestyle.

An American journalist named John Marks is stationed in Berlin and discovers Charlotte's story. John passes the story on to his American playwright friend, Doug Wright. Doug becomes fascinated with the possibility of turning Charlotte's life into a play. He manages to raise enough money to travel to Germany to interview Charlotte.

Doug visits Charlotte's home, an old mansion that houses an extraordinary collection of historic German household items. Charlotte has spent a good portion of her life preserving and collecting these items. In fact, her home became an actual museum, each room filled with gramophones, clocks, vases, pictures, matchboxes, furniture, and anything else she could rescue from the destruction wrought by the Nazis and the war.



Doug makes the unique decision to write himself into his own play, attempting to capture his real life study of Charlotte, how he found her, and the history she collected. From Charlotte's Gründerzeit Museum to World War II to Germany's favorite late night talk show, the audience accompanies Doug on his journey to uncover the truth of Charlotte's existence.

The Gründerzeit Museum, as well as Charlotte's home, in Berlin, Germany.

## A SHORT GERMAN LESSON

There are many German phrases that are used in I AM MY OWN WIFE. Here are some of the phrases and what they mean in English:

*Ein Plattenspieler:* a phonograph

*Sammler:* collector

*Wie sol ich sagen:* How should I say

*Die Polizei:* the Police

*Auf Deutsch:* In German

*Unhöflich:* impolite

*Wie sagt man:* How does one say

*Tanzen ist verboten:* Dancing is forbidden

*Folgen Sie mir bitte, ja?:* Please follow me, yes?

*Was war Ihr Geburtsname?:* What was your birth name?

*Kunsthandler:* art dealer

*Bundesverdienstkrueuz:* Cross of Merit, a medal of honor

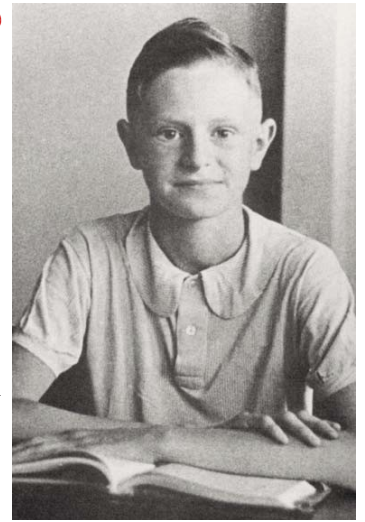
*Ich bin meine eigene Frau:* I am my own wife.

*Mit einem Blumentrichter:* with a gramophone horn

*Weisst du, mit uns beiden hat die Natur sich einen Scherz erlaubt. Du hättest ein Mädchen warden müssen und ich ein Mann!:* 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!

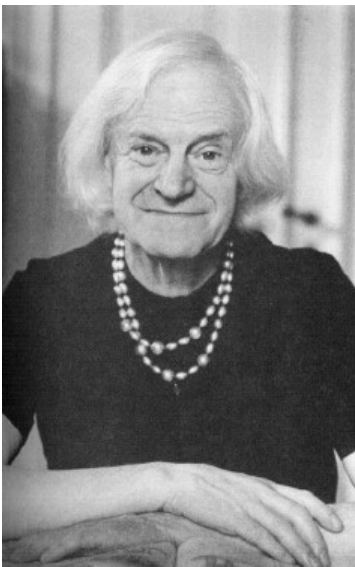
## WHO WAS CHARLOTTE VON MAHLSDORF?

On March 18, 1928, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was born in Berlin-Mahlsdorf as Lothar Berfelde, son of Max and Gretchen Berfelde. Although physically male, Lothar felt more like a girl and from his childhood was interested in playing dress up, especially in girls' clothes. During his childhood, he helped a second-hand goods dealer to clear out apartments, mostly those of deported Jews and, becoming interested in antiques, occasionally he kept items for himself. Lothar's father Max was a devoted member of the Nazi Party and became a party leader. He was overbearing and abusive, and in 1942, forced his son to join the Hitler Youth. Specific details are sketchy and Lothar claimed to have beaten his father to death in self defense in 1944. After this, Lothar spent several weeks in a psychiatric institution, eventually being sentenced to four years detention as a juvenile delinquent. However, he did not serve out his entire term in prison due to the fall of the Nazis.



**Lothar Berfelde as a young boy**

Following his release from prison, Lothar worked as a second-hand goods dealer and dressed in a feminine way. He began to refer to himself as a woman, and eventually adopted the name Charlotte von Mahlsdorf – “Charlotte” after a favorite aunt's lover and “von Mahlsdorf” after the suburb of Berlin in which she had been



**Charlotte von Mahlsdorf as an elderly woman**

born. Charlotte continued saving and collecting historical household items and moved into a decrepit eighteenth century mansion. Here she stored her collection and worked diligently to restore the old building. For these efforts, Charlotte was awarded the manor house rent free. In 1960, Charlotte opened a museum dedicated to displaying everyday articles from the Gründerzeit period of Germany. The museum became well known in cinematic, artistic, and gay circles and often hosted meetings and celebrations. In 1974, the East German authorities announced they would bring the museum and its exhibits under state control. In protest, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf began giving away the exhibits to visitors. The authorities ended this attempt in 1976 with no real reason, but many say that it was because Charlotte was an “unofficial co-worker” of the Stasi until that year. It has been alleged that Charlotte reported on friends and others to the Stasi, as many East Germans of the time period did. However, as Charlotte herself was very vague about her involvement with the Stasi, the extent to which she participated is unknown. In the early 1990s, Charlotte's Stasi file became public and in 1991, one year after the dissolution of East Germany and the reunification of the country, neo-Nazis attacked participants at one of her celebrations in the museum. Several participants in the festivities were seriously injured.

In 1997, she moved to Sweden where she opened a new museum. Charlotte's beloved Gründerzeit Museum was purchased by the city of Berlin. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf died from heart failure during a return visit to her museum on April 30, 2002. A memorial to Charlotte was planned for the first anniversary of her death with the inscription “*Ich bin meine eigene Frau (I am my own wife) – Charlotte von Mahlsdorf – 18. März 1928-30. April 2002.*” However, Charlotte's relatives demanded the inscription be changed. While Charlotte von Mahlsdorf had been known almost exclusively by her chosen name, her relatives pushed for “*Lothar Berfelde, 1928-2002, gennant Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. Dem Museumsgründer zur Erinnerung*” (*Lothar Berfelde, 1928-2002, known as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. In memory of the founder of the museum.*) Charlotte is still looked to today as one of the biggest influences and role models for gay, lesbian, and transgendered culture.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL GOTCH, ACTOR

**The play requires you to play over 30 roles. What have you done as an actor to discern between these characters and make each one different?**

Good question. Well, first off, I think it's safe to say (hopefully without dashing anyone's expectations) that the play really has about 7 characters at its heart. They're the main focus, the engine of the story. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, of course, is the largest. Then Doug Wright himself, which is a device similar to the one used in Lisa Kron's *Well*; I'm playing the playwright of the play the audience is watching, but it's not an impersonation of the real man. Wright, I think, wanted the character to function as a perspective for the audience, a way to enter the story from a more familiar place and voice. As a result, that character is close to being "just me" as I can get. There are a few other characters as well that are shaped quite finely and have a lot of stage time, and they get special attention. The other 30-some people who inhabit the narrative are (thankfully) small and intermittent. They come and they go, sometimes with only one line of dialogue, so they're a bit easier. It's almost impossible to create a fully fleshed out voice and history for someone who only says "You can't go in there" and then isn't in the play anymore. So we do paint some broad strokes here and there, dictated by the rhythmic need of the piece, the pacing, the need to contrast each new thing with what's just happened and what's happening next, that sort of thing. All these people have to live together, you know. They're a team in the play. They have to work together to create a flow, an elegance to the piece. I hope people come away with the feeling that while they saw all these characters come out of one person, that they don't really notice major gear changes—like a faulty transmission in a car. It should really move like liquid. That said, I'm nonetheless really proud that we don't have any cardboard characters. The variety is fun and challenging. The dialects help, too. I do German, Standard American, Texan, Californian, Brooklyn, French, Japanese, East Indian, and British. There might be a couple more. I forget. It's hard for me to think of everything in the play at once when I'm not working on it. I have to be up on my feet doing it and then it comes to me. The important thing to remember is that all the characters have to conform to the demands of the structure, the build. In that way, you could say that there's only ONE character—the story itself—and my voice and body just changes as necessary to make it come to life.



**Charlotte has experienced so much in a single lifetime that it's hard to fathom everything she went through. How did you relate to her character? What did you pull from your own life to help you with the play?**

I always try to approach a role, a character, as an extension of myself. That's not to say that I have much in common with Charlotte on the surface. For one, I don't wear dresses or speak German. But there is always something about a character that I can identify with. In this case, I really found a way in through her wit, her composure under pressure, her intelligence and confidence, even while facing terrible situations. At the most basic level, she's a survivor, and we're all survivors to some extent, so any difficult situation I've ever encountered in my life and managed to fight my way out of became fair game as far as using for this role. Then again, I'm not really a Method actor, so I don't usually need to have really experienced something to feel like I can act it successfully on stage.

At the most basic level, she's a survivor, and we're all survivors to some extent...

**The rehearsal process varies from show to show, especially with one actor. Does it ever get monotonous? What has the rehearsal process been like?**

Well, it's a great deal more intense than most of the shows I've done before. But fortunately I've had some experience with large roles in Shakespeare (like RICHARD II) and that's helped me approach a role of this size. The first hurdle, of course, was memorizing the whole

play. When I started, back in July, it seemed daunting. It's an 80 page text and I'm on every one of the 80 pages. I took for granted the small comfort of working on a show in which, even if you have a large role, you have the luxury of turning some pages that don't require anything of you. You look at this script and you think "Even Shakespeare gave the guy playing King Lear a 20 minute break". Not so with Doug Wright's play. I worked slowly, focusing simply on getting the words into my head, into my body. No character work, no dialect work. Then, as rehearsal approached, I started adding elements: dialects, voice variations, rhythms, etc. The Rep thankfully gave me a few months notice before the start of rehearsal, so I was able to begin working while I was back in New York after doing ARMADALE here in Milwaukee this past spring. And while it is more stressful in some ways, being the only actor in a show is also very freeing, too. You are the creator of everything right from the start, so there's an enormous amount of control that you don't have when you're waiting to see what scenes will be like when the other actors you haven't met yet show up. Sometimes it's a huge shock that takes a few weeks to settle into when you've been playing scenes in your head very differently than the way they end up when you meet your scene partner. But even this control is a double-edged sword; at the end of the day with a one-person show, the buck stops with you. No excuses. You have to make choices alone and that's hard in its own way. You can start to doubt yourself, you can start to worry that you're making all the wrong choices. Fortunately, I have a grade-A director in John Langs who is both an audience and a guide for me in rehearsal. I trust his eye, his ear. He lets me know when I'm on the right track and helps me come up with solutions to problems that I'm not able to solve myself in some scenes. We're all having a lot of fun in the rehearsal room and since our "team" is considerably smaller than most shows enjoy, we're all very close. Our stage manager, her assistant, John's assistant, our dialect coach and I are the skeleton crew for this one. Everyone gives input and I'm grateful for all of it.

I think the play speaks to that voice in all of us that tells us to keep fighting, to follow what you love, to never give up, no matter how bad things get.

**Do you feel that everyone can relate to Charlotte in one way or another? How so?**

I think anyone who has ever been up against incredible odds can relate to Charlotte. That doesn't mean you had to survive the Third Reich or the Communist regime in East Germany as a transvestite to relate to her, either. It's a story about how people can survive (even thrive) in the most unlikely places. I think the play speaks to that voice in all of us that tells us to keep fighting, to follow what you love, to never give up, no matter how bad things get. Charlotte found a niche in a very unforgiving, intolerant world and with a little luck and a lot of faith, she made it work. She has a great sense of humor, so I think that's something hopefully everyone will find charming. She is incredibly self-aware, she knows her strengths, and she's not afraid to make tough choices. She's as tough as nails herself, despite the string of pearls and the dress. You underestimate her if you think she's anything less just because she wears women's clothes. We've all been at a place in our lives where we're the odd man (or woman) out—in high school, in college, or in a job. How we deal with that kind of isolation is what determines our character. You either sink or swim. Ultimately, you have to say, "I know what's right for me, I believe in myself, and I'm not going to let other people dictate how I should feel about myself." I think anyone who sees the show can recognize that about Charlotte, and about themselves, too. It's inspirational, even if you don't recognize yourself in her on the surface.

**How long have you been acting? What was your training like? Did you ever expect to have a role such as this?**

I've been an actor for about 8 years now. I started in Chicago in 2000, after undergrad, and then I went to graduate school for acting. I live in New York now, but travel around the country to work at theatres like Milwaukee Repertory. I went to the same graduate school that Lee Ernst, Torrey Hanson and Mark Corkins attended: the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware. It was a great classical training conservatory and gave me an excellent foundation for work in so many different kinds of theatre—from Shakespeare to this show.

I never could have guessed I'd be playing this role. It's an honor and a great challenge.

## HOMOSEXUALITY IN NAZI GERMANY

By the 1920's, Berlin had become known as a "homosexual Eden," where gay men and lesbians lived relatively open lives amidst an exciting subculture of artists and intellectuals. Nazi policy against homosexuals was more than an assault on individuals. The regime destroyed the equal rights movement for homosexuals as well as the openly gay social world that flourished before World War II in German cities.

From May 25, 1871 until March 10, 1994 Paragraph 175 (see below) was enacted in Germany. This German Criminal Code made homosexual acts between males a crime. It never applied to lesbians. The Nazis broadened the law in 1935 and increased prosecutions by an order of considerable magnitude. The Nazis were dedicated to eradicate male homosexuality as they saw it as a contagious disease. Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis arrested about 100,000 men for the "crime" of homosexuality. Roughly half of those arrested were sentenced to prison, with an estimated 15,000 sent to the concentration camps. Approximately 60 percent, over 7500, of these men died in the camps from malnutrition, exhaustion, and in medical experiments. While the Jewish wore the Star of David, gays were forced to wear pink triangles for "identification" purposes.

Paragraph 175 became much worse in 1935. The Nazis redefined the misdemeanor crime as a felony, thus increasing the maximum penalty from six months to five years imprisonment. The adjective *widernatürlich* ("against nature") was also removed making the law apply to any homosexual acts, not just intercourse, as it was before. Now, there was no need for contact in order to be convicted. If a man was simply identified as a homosexual, he was considered to be breaking the law.

Eventually, East Germany reverted to the old version of the law in 1950 and abolished it entirely in 1988. West Germany maintained the 1935 statute until 1969 and finally revoked it entirely in 1994 after the German reunification. In neither East nor West Germany were the gay victims of the Nazis granted the reparations given to others who had been persecuted for other reasons. Today, out of the approximate 100,000 men persecuted, fewer than ten of them are known to be living.

### PARAGRAPH 175

**Paragraph 175: A male who commits a sex offense with another male or allows himself to be used by another male for a sex offense shall be punished with imprisonment. Where a party was not yet twenty-one years of age at the time of the act, the court may in especially minor cases refrain from punishment.**

**Paragraph 175a: Penal servitude up to 10 years or, where there are mitigating circumstances, imprisonment of not less than three months shall apply to: (1) a male who, with violence or the threat of violence to body and soul or life, compels another male to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (2) a male who, by abusing a relationship of dependence based upon service, employment or subordination, induces another male to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (3) a male over 21 years of age who seduces a male person under twenty-one years to commit a sex offense with him or to allow himself to be abused for a sex offense; (4) a male who publicly commits a sex offense with males or allows himself to be abused by males for a sex offense or offers himself for the same.**

**Paragraph 175b: An unnatural sex act committed by humans with animals is punishable by imprisonment; the loss of civil rights might also be imposed.**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Doug Wright says that Charlotte is a strong role model for himself. Come up with five questions and interview a role model of yours. Write a short story, similar to *I AM MY OWN WIFE*, revealing the answers to your questions.
- This play focuses on the ideas of prejudice and sexual intolerance. How do you see this in today's world? What problems are we having with these two topics? What can we do to eliminate prejudice and sexual intolerance?
- Charlotte is attached to her phonograph-- it is like her security blanket. Name something that makes you feel safe and important. Bring it in (if you can) and write a short monologue about it and perform it for your classmates.
- Survival and overcoming obstacles are key themes in *I AM MY OWN WIFE*. Define survival in your own words. Write about and discuss with your class a time when you survived a difficult situation or overcame an obstacle.
- Charlotte collects things in order to preserve the German culture of her era. What would you collect and keep to preserve today's culture? Draw, or bring in, these items and create your own classroom museum. How will you display the artwork or artifacts? Write short explanations about why you are including the objects. Invite other classes to come to your museum.
- The idea of self-identity continually comes up in *I AM MY OWN WIFE*. Charlotte came a long way in deciding who she was and who she wanted to be. What makes you who you are-- ethnicity, religion, gender, and nationality? What is your personality--likes and dislikes, hobbies, and favorites? Lastly, what is important to you-- beliefs and opinions? Out of all these, what describes you the best? What is your self-identity?
- Evidence suggests that Charlotte was an informant for the German Stasi. There was an extensive network of informants and spies in general. Children spied on parents, employers on employees, husbands on wives, and friends on friends. Can you imagine instances where you would inform on a loved one? What do you think would cause such behavior in humans?

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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***“The theatre is so endlessly fascinating  
because it’s so accidental.  
It’s so much like life.”***

**Arthur Miller**

Our lives are greatly enhanced with theater. Studying and viewing it teaches us about other cultures and times, collaboration, work ethic, and imagination. We become more aware of the world around us with these concepts, and in addition to this, more alert to and responsive of human nature. With this improved understanding of what theater can provide for us we are able to gain a better appreciation not only for theater, but for life as well.

**The Rep Milwaukee**  
THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

## VISITING THE REP

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You’ll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. There will be a stair case on your left and the Stiemke Theater is next to the staircase.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full “running time” of the play.

**For more information on our education programs and our productions,  
please visit our website at [www.milwaukeeep.com](http://www.milwaukeeep.com)**