



**Charlotte von Mahlsdorf killed her father, survived the Nazis, the Communist and the neo-Nazis – finding out who she was makes great theatre in *I Am My Own Wife*.**

**A SOUL-STIRRING** true story, *I Am My Own Wife* details the life of homosexual transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. But who was she?

As a child, Charlotte (born Lothar Berfelde) killed her father for fear he would kill her first. She spent time in a psychiatric institution and

BRENDAN HANSON IN THE SOUGHT-AFTER ROLE AS CHARLOTTE IN PERTH'S BLACK SWAN THEATRE PRODUCTION OF *I AM MY OWN WIFE*.

juvenile jail was forced to join the Hitler Youth. She survived the Nazi regime and the Communist totalitarianism in East Germany that followed the war.

Mahlsdorf went on to establish the Grunderzeit Museum, featuring everyday items from the founding era of the German Empire. The museum became a popular meeting place for the East Berlin gay community.

Her struggles didn't end there: both the East German government and neo-Nazis attempted to destroy the museum. Eventually Mahlsdorf received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and, in later years, conveyed her story to playwright Doug Wright who created the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *I Am My Own Wife*.

The one-person show, which has collected Tony Awards for Best Play and Best Actor, features over thirty characters and has been produced around the world including Sweden, Montreal, Athens and Tasmania. Its various interpretations included a production in Chicago last year with four actors in the role and the first trans actor to play Charlotte. An outstanding performance by Ben Gerrard toured Australia recently. It's currently playing at Perth's Black Swan Theatre, starring Brendan Hanson, directed by Joe Lui (*Letters Home*).

Hanson (who the sharp-eyed will recognise as a finalist in the drag reality TV show, *I Will Survive*) studied at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) and has his work cut out for him, given there are over thirty characters.

"It's a unique process doing a one-person play," says Hanson. "Normally, I don't learn my lines until rehearsals commence but, obviously, that's not possible with 70 pages of text and 36 characters with accents. So I've been learning my lines over the last three months on the treadmill at the gym, on the train, wherever and whenever I get a spare moment!"

Hanson researched the role by reading Mahlsdorf's autobiography and studying the famed German sexologist and gay/transgender advocate Dr Magnus Hirschfeld. His book *Die Transvestiten* played a pivotal role in Mahlsdorf's life.

Hanson holds the role in great esteem, with an understanding of its melancholy but also its ability to uplift.

"*I Am My Own Wife* is a beautifully crafted and evocative play," he says. "It invites the audience to make up their own mind about Charlotte. She's charming, playful, intelligent and complex. It encourages the audience not to judge her for who she is or even the choices she has made, but inspires empathy for a person who has experienced and endured much."

**MORE:** *I Am My Own Wife* plays at the Black Swan Theatre Perth, October 12 to 29. Go to [www.bsstc.com.au](http://www.bsstc.com.au)