

*E PLURIBUS UNUM:*

## A Study in Multi-Character Solo Performance in the Documentary Drama

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The United States of America has adopted as its official motto, “*e pluribus unum*,” a Latin concept translating to “from many, one.” This refers to the multitude of cultures and immigrants that come together in our country. Two American documentary theatre pieces of the recent past have embraced this concept of “*e pluribus unum*” by giving us a documentary solo performance in which the sole performer takes on dozens of personalities in a single show, with the lines between characters blurred and fluid. In the genre of documentary drama, the general level of difficulty for the performer is raised. Most, if not all, of the characters in these documentary theatre pieces are real people, some of whom are still living. Portraying not just one real person but a whole cast of them presents challenges, especially to a performer who has had limited contact with the multitude of subjects being portrayed. How can one portray twenty-plus personalities in a manner that is simultaneously convincing, accurate, and theatrical? In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities*, Anna Deavere Smith has shown us how, as has Jefferson Mays in Doug Wright’s *I Am My Own Wife*, albeit in very different way.

**DOCUMENTARIAN AS PLAYWRIGHT AND PERFORMER: ANNA DEAVERE SMITH, FIRES IN THE MIRROR: CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN, AND OTHER IDENTITIES** “*E pluribus unum*” is no alien concept to the MacArthur Genius Grant-winning Anna Deavere Smith. For the better part of three decades, Smith has embarked on her own journey to discover America with documentary theatre as her superhighway. Her brainchild, *On The Road: A Search for American Character*, is a continually-evolving dramatic work chronicling people, places, and events that make up our nation. In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, a piece revolving around the aftermath of the 1991 Crown Heights deaths of Gavin Cato, an African-American child from New York City and Yankel Rosenbaum, a Hasidic Jewish yeshiva student from Australia, Smith was acclaimed for her ability to portray a multitude of characters of different genders, ages, races, religions, and levels of notoriety – all in one evening of theater.

Success in this project didn’t come easily. As Smith conducted dozens of interviews in the early 1990s, there was no strong precedent for what she was setting out to accomplish: portraying a multitude of characters as a solo performer. What began as an educational exercise soon evolved into what became *Fires in the Mirror* as it is known today. In the preface to her play’s published text, Smith defends her process in devising her work.

“[I] knew that by using another person’s language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual. It struck me that this could work on a social level as well as an individual level. Could language also be a photograph of what was unseen about society just as it reflects what is unseen in an individual?” (Smith xxxii-xxxiii).

In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith used her language as action not only to drive her message forward but to differentiate between the plethora of characters as well. Smith's cast of characters included well-known figures such as Reverend Al Sharpton, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Angela Davis, but also some unknown figures, members of American society whose names are not revealed but whose presence is just as essential. In her production, Smith made very distinct and thought-out adjustments in order to define her characters for the audience. Each of Smith's characters had some article of clothing, hairpiece, or accessory to announce formally their presence in the play: a skullcap for Rabbi Shea Hecht, or a mustache for Reverend Al Sharpton, as examples. As Smith traveled between characters in her performance, she did not attempt to hide this change of costume by leaving the stage. In addition, the lighting changed slightly per character, as if to indicate a distinct change in pace.

Even through these vessels of character differentiation, Smith's performance choices were subject to some criticism. One opinion is espoused by African-American Studies and Theatre and Performance Studies scholar Sandra L. Richards, who is known for having commented that "a viewer's sense of the ease with which [Anna Deavere] Smith [switches] racial identities is aided by the fact that she is a lightskinned [sic] African-American woman" (Kalb 24). On the other end of the spectrum, Smith reports in her text's introduction that some African-American audience members thought that she was more sympathetic to the Jewish characters, and conversely, Jewish audience members thought she was over the top in many instances (Smith xxxvii). Other criticisms came from the fact that Smith did not include herself as a character, thereby separating herself from a situation for which she obviously had strong feelings. Yet her existence as the empty vessel, to some, probably seemed like an objective choice in order to aid her multi-character juggle, to view the different sides more distinctly without the clouds of bias.

#### **DOCUMENTARIAN AS PLAYWRIGHT: DOUG WRIGHT, *I AM MY OWN WIFE***

For Doug Wright, the solo performance aspect of his documentary drama *I Am My Own Wife* wasn't an instinctive part of his process. Wright's play chronicles the life of Lothar Berfelde, better known as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a controversial transwoman and "pack rat" who preserved much of the material culture that was prevalent in early twentieth-century Germany. With an obsessive passion for regionally-made furniture, whimsical cuckoo clocks, and the latest and greatest technological audio transmitting devices of the day such as phonographs and record players, von Mahlsdorf's curiosity was noted by not only American soldiers passing through the town, but by the Nazi government, who surprisingly employed her among their ranks, with the task of keeping a finger on the pulse of the movement of the aforementioned soldiers throughout her purview. Though von Mahlsdorf passed away in April of 2002, her unusually large and esoteric collection of antiques, curios, and knick-knacks still exists today in Mahlsdorf's *Gründerzeit* Museum, a testament to the some of the more aesthetically pleasing elements of German domestic life before World War II.

Initially, Wright planned to create a piece based on the life of this mysterious and unique yet forgotten figure in history. He saw Charlotte von

Mahlsdorf as truly one-of-a-kind; she was someone who had existed in the background for years, but a character of her caliber hadn't been brought center stage as of yet. Transgender characters are a challenge to portray in general, due to the life choices that they have had to make and the struggles that they have had to deal with which most people have not. There are many facets to the transgender experience, but one safe constant is that each person who discovers this fact about themselves undergoes a unique journey and transformation in search of his or her true individual identity and expression. Family dynamics, gender politics, and political situations all affect that process of change that is inherent in transgender – the word itself is a transformation. Adding on a layer of the Third Reich, a regime defined by intolerance of infidels and adherence to a strict social order made the challenge for von Mahlsdorf even greater, and expressing it in a dramatic interpretation even more difficult.

In a 2006 interview by Saviana Stanescu, Doug Wright mentioned the many ways he mulled over the concept of creating a plot from this larger-than-life story. In Wright's own words, he was dealing with a "portrait of an enigma" (Wright interview, 102).

"I'd call my play a "portrait of an enigma." I was tantalized by the prospect of trying to craft a character study of someone so slippery, someone who, to a great degree, invented herself. How do you dramatize contradiction in a way that adds up to some singular, ineffable truth? That, I think, was my task" (Wright interview, 102).

Wright's self-proclaimed "obsession" with the obsessive von Mahlsdorf gave him an epiphany: to create a documentary play based on the life of this transwoman, and his own interactions with her. The decision to use just one character to play many, however, was a choice that seemed to be the most correct to the playwright. As Wright says in the opening to the text of *I Am My Own Wife*, this task was utterly daunting at first glance.

"...the characters who [sic] populated Charlotte's life were legion; how many people would I need? The cast was potentially huge! 'Just one actor to start,' I told myself. 'Someone to play Charlotte herself. Until the play truly locates its shape, it seems presumptuous to ask for more'" (Wright xvii).

With help from Moisés Kaufman, Wright located actor Jefferson Mays, who, upon reading a few pages of the transcript of an interview between Wright and van Mahlsdorf, and playing both characters, made Wright realize "...I didn't need a bigger cast. In a play about a character that has to adopt a variety of guises in order to survive, it made sense to let one actor play all the roles" (Wright xviii).

**DOCUMENTARIAN AS INTERPRETER: JEFFERSON MAYS IN DOUG WRIGHT'S *I AM MY OWN WIFE***

In reference to the issue of hearing the performer's voice in the midst of all the other personae, it is not hard to imagine the response of *I Am My Own Wife*'s Jefferson Mays to this question as one that might come from Anna Deavere Smith. Leonard Jacobs, in a May 2004 interview of the actor for *Back Stage*, noted Mays's curiosity upon discovering his own relationship with the character and the script upon his involvement in Wright's burgeoning work.

"Mays also had another concern as he developed the panoply of voices and characters that makes *I Am My Own Wife* such a tour de force. 'One of my worries was where the hell am I in this piece? I felt like there was no neutral voice for telling the story, no room for me, Jefferson Mays. What I finally concluded is that I am in this piece rather like an interpreter, a technician or a medium of sorts, channeling all the different people'" (Jacobs 31).

Putting aside the fact that Jefferson Mays was not a character in this particular play, nor was there a "narrator," Mays did not feel compelled to petition to include his own viewpoints in this group of colorful personalities, much like Anna Deavere Smith. Unlike Smith, this must have heightened Mays's stakes as an actor to portray more accurately characters as he did not see most of them face-to-face, thereby assessing his judgments of them as a solo performer merely on their voices recorded and words transcribed by Doug Wright. Also, unlike Smith, Mays was not the playwright or compiler. It is interesting to note that Doug Wright, knowing he was not going to be performing this piece, chose to insert himself in this situation whereas Anna Deavere Smith chose to leave herself out of the picture in *Fires in the Mirror*. Perhaps this choice has to deal with the fact that Wright's exploration of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was merely an exploration – based on fascination, rather than something in the news. Anna Deavere Smith was alive, though not present, in 1991 when the Crown Heights incidents occurred. Therefore, separating herself from this by not including herself as a character was a choice displaying her objectivity as a person. Through most of Charlotte's story, Wright was not alive, so his commentaries on Charlotte's war stories face less criticism, as they are not taken as recapitulations of facts – rather, they are commentary on something that happened long ago. Also, Wright openly admits that this project was not fueled by some grander sense of duty to society; rather, he used *I Am My Own Wife* to showcase his fascination with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. Maybe by inserting himself into the play, the Doug Wright character and his true-to-life keen interest in Charlotte von Mahlsdorf provided a counterpoint to the latter's lack of feeling any different from any other survivor of that era. In this sense, Jefferson Mays acts in a similar function to Anna Deavere Smith – an empty vessel, not only disconnected but in constant flux in their own relationships to the main issues that drive their respective documentary dramas forward.

In performance style, Mays's portrayals of characters are both comparable to Smith and different. Mays's broad range of characters spoke in different

voices: a German accent for Charlotte, a deep Texan twang for John, a squeakier tone for the Doug Wright character. Unlike Smith, however, Mays performed all of his characters in the same getup as Charlotte: a black dress, black stockings, sensible shoes, a kerchief, and to top it off, a string of pearls. Wright saw this as a triumph for the transgender message he was trying to get across, as Mays played not only Charlotte, or even women, but also male characters like a Nazi guard, a German talk show host, and the playwright himself all the while wearing this attire. Mays's characters are also not as distinct as Smith's – his characters cut each other off in the middles of sentences or even words. Yet, the powerful effect of the performance, for some, was not abated; rather, it was enhanced due to Mays's focus on the characters rather than constantly changing costumes (Schiavi 208). In addition, Wright indicated in his script specifications for performance.

“Distinctions between characters are made by changes in the tonal quality and pitch of the actor's voice, and through his stance, his posture, and his repository of gestures. He glides fluidly from one personality to the next. Often his transformations are accomplished with lightning speed and minimal suggestion—a raised eyebrow, for example, or an unexpected smile” (Wright 4, Giesdorf 188).

To honor this, Mays did not attempt to imitate the stereotypical idea of “woman” in his movements or expressions, cementing Charlotte's similar nature being born male but displaying some characteristics of femininity (Giesdorf 188).

*I Am My Own Wife* presents the actor with a set of unique challenges. The first challenge of which is costume. Although the costume changes in this piece are minimal in comparison with *Fires*, the actor – who must be male – must be willing to wear a dress and act as a female who is actually a male for the majority of the show, effectively making it a “one-woman” show, versus a one-man show, which is in fact the opposite of both the reality of biology of both the actor and the main character. This costume, which affects so much of the movement and rhythm of the piece, must be adhered to even when the actor is portraying Doug Wright, the translator, or any of the male characters – characters who obviously have different physicalities and stances than the unique qualities of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. Unlike Anna Deavere Smith, a performer whose fluidity of movement and posture changes with her costume and abets her personal transformations within the performance, the actor in *I Am My Own Wife* is restricted by the black dress, sensible shoes, and pearls, all of which affect the posture and vocals of the actor. The second challenge is that of accuracy of conveyance. The challenges of the “vessel-like” nature of Mays, especially his distance from the project, create a wall of unfamiliarity. Mays, who did not meet von Mahlsdorf and only had Wright's text and some pictures and recordings to go on, is expressing a representation of words and thoughts of a playwright. This secondhand nature leads to a need for direction and dramaturgy in its initial forms. As the play continues further, more walls are raised distancing the actor from the material, as with Mays as a vessel who himself was admittedly secondhand, so too is the actor, in a sense, a vessel for Mays, rather than directly from von Mahlsdorf. It is not

hard to picture future performances as focusing on seeking accuracy of Mays' performance, rather than or added on top of the performance of transgender.

Gender plays a more distinctive role in the performance style of the actor playing Charlotte von Mahlsdorf as well, since concepts of gender are a backbone to the story, contrasting with Smith's portrayal of multiple characters. Although Smith changes costume, tone, and inflection, she is constantly a woman playing multiple personas, whereas Jefferson Mays as Charlotte constantly plays a transgendered character. The awareness of gender is ultimately ever-present in *I Am My Own Wife*. In the case of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, her gender was what kept her alive and could have conceivably contributed to death in her era; this urgency of situation translates onstage as an awareness of the character's predicament as the actor performs. Von Mahlsdorf's story is one of survival as a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing, not only as a biological male in female clothing but as a spy for the Nazis, trying to fit into the seemingly innocent activities of selling goods to American soldiers while keeping an eye on their whereabouts, as well as preserving the identities of those among her comrades who also defied gender and sexual norms. When watching *I Am My Own Wife*, the audience does not just see one man in a simple black dress, but rather a figure constantly disguising her true identity under layers and layers of appearances. These layers contributed to her success and survival as a transgendered person and as a spy in Nazi Germany; where Anna Deavere Smith casts off one gender to step into another, Jefferson Mays is continually aware of his gender on stage as he acquires and sheds the characters portrayed without taking off or putting on a single piece of clothing.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As far and as varied as the genre has become, multi-character solo documentary theatre is still tricky for a performer. There remains no exact science or correct method to accomplish this. Even successes as large as *I Am My Own Wife* and *Fires in the Mirror*, two productions which are linked by being built around a solo performer playing multiple characters in a documentary fashion, contain unclear moments and many criticisms linked to their perceived convincingness, accuracy, and theatricality. Even so, the attraction to this form of documentary drama lives on. In his *Theatre Journal* article, Michael R. Schiavi starkly notes the attractions of the genre.

“Particularly seductive [is]...the maddening impossibility of passing with certainty judgments upon a performance's truthfulness. What comprises staged truth, and how such truth tantalizes endlessly audiences who should know better, informs the most rudimentary mechanics of performance and spectatorship themselves. Trying to arrive at definitive articulations of truth or falsehood determines the pleasurable interpretive work that can keep audiences invested in spectacles of slippery credibility” (Schiavi 206).

When mixed with the restrictions of having one single actor portraying multiple characters, documentary drama takes on an additional pressure; that of

maintaining identity and facilitating introspection and examination of the historical event and its characters without falling victim to farce. Michael R. Schiavi focuses on the concept of “truth” as a key word in his rhetoric on documentary drama, and with only one performer on stage, someone viewing it can easily write off the performance as being untruthful, or “one-sided,” due to the fact that only one person is portraying all these distinct and sometimes very opposing multiple personalities. In *Fires in the Mirror*, Anna Deavere Smith’s characters speak for themselves, verbatim from interviews and telephone conversations. Smith even indicates in her script the slightest movements, facial tensions or releases, or mood shifts of those she is embodying, showing that though the text remains what was said and what is said, the subtext and actions of the characters can convey more than what’s on the page. This meticulous record gives the performer and the audience the sense of presentation, as each performance carries with it not only the same text but the same pauses for breath and movements of the face.

The concept of “truth” invoked by the work of Doug Wright is almost a complete reversal of Schiavi’s statement on truth. It is quite obvious that the performer is displaying an untruth merely by his attire and appearance; the audience immediately knows that the performer is a man. The audience may be tickled by the appearance of a man in drag, but not necessarily are they tantalized by it. As the play goes further, the “truth” becomes murkier and murkier with the constant additions of characters, yet it reveals a great deal about the core concept of documentary drama: that of preservation and survival, of keeping the identities within alive, breathing, and speaking. Their experiences, though distant from the performer and even more distant from the audience, are just as real as the lives we live. Audiences are not always tantalized by what they see, but by what they can identify with – the words and emotions that flow from the performer, emitting truths and reasons from a vessel that is anything but the truth. Doug Wright, in a 2006 interview, viewed the solo performer as a way to tell the true story, by taking away certain elements of truth.

“Charlotte adopted many guises in order to survive; how appropriate that one actor adopts many guises to tell her tale! The play has a very central tenet: that one person can embody a host of contradictions. Furthermore, I loved the idea that our fearless actor Jefferson Mays would inevitably be costumed in Charlotte’s customary black dress and pearls, so every other character he played would, by default, also be wearing a little black dress. In our production, transvestism would be the norm, not the exception. Everyone from the callow playwright (me) to the fiercest Nazi officer would wear a skirt. How very democratic! *I Am My Own Wife* is a one-woman show, performed by a man” (Wright interview 53).

In Anna Deavere Smith’s book *Talk to Me*, she reasons that “in the theater, the performer cannot simply *cover* the material; they *become* the material. In fact, the job is to *uncover* the material” (96). In a manner of speaking, Smith has shown us that even though the solo performer is limited in a way by being just one person, being able to hold the audience in the palms of just one set of hands

is a remarkable power. Though Smith changes costume, posture, accent, and inflection, and Mays takes on more and more layers, the actions of changing and/or adding more layers allows the audience to focus on the nature of the performer him or herself. By stacking on characteristics and personae but still maintaining one body, the performer is able to become a prism of layers through which the audience can see the persona more clearly and absorb the performance more acutely, and if the messages are being conveyed purposefully, at times see themselves reflected as someone experiencing this skillful act of mimesis.

Ultimately, the performance's success does not impinge on the challenge for the actor or the playwright; rather, it is about the choices that the performer makes in his or her attempts to unify many viewpoints through difference. The success of this tenuous form of documentary lies in extracting the most pertinent and essential attributes of those portrayed to create a more focused message in correlation to the source material and to ultimately create from many, one.

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