



## Wright, Doug (b. 1962)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2011 glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Doug Wright ca 2010.  
Still from a promotional  
video for *Standing on  
Ceremony: The Gay  
Plays*.

The works of award-winning playwright, screenwriter, and librettist Doug Wright often focus on the unconventional lives of society's outsiders. Among these are the iconoclastic artist Marcel Duchamp in *Interrogating the Nude*; the Marquis de Sade in *Quills*; Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an East Berlin transvestite who survived persecution by both the Nazi and Communist regimes, in the Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning *I Am My Own Wife*; and "Big Edie" and "Little Edie" Bouvier Beale, two eccentric American aristocrats who ended up living in squalor, sharing a once-elegant mansion, in the musical *Grey Gardens*, based on the cult classic documentary film of the same name.

Wright also helped adapt the animated Disney film *The Little Mermaid* into a Broadway musical.

Despite this diversity in subjects, Wright's body of work is unified, as Jeffrey Schneider notes in his appreciation of the writer, "by its devotion to witty, nuanced language as well as its untiring exploration of the macabre."

Wright's plays are also infused with passages of surprisingly mordant humor as well as fierce anger, provoked perhaps by "growing up gay in the Bible Belt," as he has a character named "Doug Wright" explain onstage in his play *I Am My Own Wife*.

### Early Life and Career

A Texas native, Wright was born in Dallas on December 20, 1962, and grew up in the Dallas suburb of University Park. "University Park was a very privileged place to grow up," Wright once remarked in an interview. "There was a premium placed on education. . . . There was a great teaching staff at the school. In that respect I was extremely fortunate."

Wright was, however, the target of schoolyard teasing and playground attacks throughout elementary school. Overweight and awkward as a child, and not athletically inclined, he was routinely taunted by classmates as a "sissy," a "queer," and worse.

"When you are the subject of attack on the playground," Wright explained, "you don't fight back, because you won't win. You're being labeled and condemned in a certain way. That calcifies over time into real fury."

Despite the torments he was forced to endure in elementary and middle schools, once he entered Highland Park High School, outside of Dallas, Wright found acceptance in the theater department.

"I was good in plays, and I was funny, and I had a sense of humor," Wright noted. "I carved out a niche for myself." He was ultimately voted President of the Highland Park High School Thespian Club in 1981, his senior year.

He entered Yale University in the fall of 1981. He achieved early success while still an undergraduate, when

one of his first works, *The Stonewater Rapture* (1983), a two-character play about teenage sexuality and religious repression in a rural Texas town, was performed to acclaim at Scotland's Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 1984. The play was later published in *The Best Short Plays 1987*, edited by Ramon Delgado.

*The Stonewater Rapture* remains one of Wright's most produced plays to date, routinely being performed by secondary schools, colleges, and acting classes.

Wright received a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree, with a double major in theater and art history, from Yale in 1985.

He then enrolled in a graduate playwriting program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, from which he graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in playwriting in 1987.

His master's thesis was the play *Interrogating the Nude*, which attempts to reconstruct the creation of Marcel Duchamp's Modernist masterpiece, "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2."

In the guise of a homicide investigation--Duchamp reports the dismemberment of his female model, whose body parts have been scattered down a staircase--the play becomes a droll exploration of the value and nature of art, and the cultural gap between unorthodox artists and mainstream conformists. It was first produced by the Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut in 1989.

After graduating from New York University, Wright began work on his first musical, *Buzzsaw Berkeley* (1989), with music and lyrics by Michael John LaChiusa. A cross between a Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland musical and a serial-killer-on-the-rampage movie, Wright has called the play his "valentine" to the irreverent, trailblazing works of Charles Ludlam and Charles Busch.

The play was produced at New York's WPA Theatre in 1989 as part of its "Silly Series" of late-night reviews. It unfortunately received mostly negative notices from theater critics. Mel Gussow, writing in the *New York Times*, noted that Wright's idea "has some promise," but "the show is paltry as a musical satire." John Simon, in his caustic review for *New York* magazine, found it a "witless and unsavory show."

Following the disappointment of *Buzzsaw Berkeley*, Wright moved to Los Angeles to work for the television producer Norman Lear, creator of such classic television comedies as *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Maude*, among many others. Wright's one-act play *Dinosaurs* (1988), a satire concerning an evangelist and a country-western singer who battle over the site of a dinosaur theme park, written while Wright was still a graduate student, had been brought to Lear's attention.

Lear offered the young playwright a three-year contract to work on television shows for his production company. Wright ultimately worked on four sitcoms for Lear, but none was produced.

Wright struggled with the television sitcom format. As he later explained, "It's like writing a really rigorous poem. There are three acts and each has to fit into a seven-minute time frame. I couldn't stay interested in a character from week to week."

Writing a play, in comparison, Wright clarified, is like writing a cookbook. "It's giving a list of ingredients: who the characters are, where they move, what they say. You need other people to attempt to follow those instructions."

At the end of his three-year commitment, Wright's contract with Lear was not renewed.

## **Quills**

Wright returned to New York and began working on what would eventually become his award-winning play *Quills*. The play concerns the Marquis de Sade's final years in the Charenton mental asylum located outside of Paris and the repeated attempts to suppress his incendiary writings.

Wright's interest in the Marquis de Sade began when his partner at the time, a psychiatrist, gave him a biography of Sade as a Christmas present. While his relationship with the psychiatrist did not last long, Wright's interest in Sade was overwhelming.

Upon finishing the biography, Wright immediately turned to Sade's own writings.

"This was the most toxic prose I had ever encountered," Wright declared, "beyond anything by our contemporary shock jocks. Liberal as I happen to be, it challenged my tenets about freedom of expression."

The writing of *Quills* was also fueled, Wright has explained, by the "culture wars" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially the outrage expressed by Jesse Helms (among other conservative politicians) over a retrospective of the works of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe that was sponsored, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

The controversy focused mainly on the gay sexual content of several of Mapplethorpe's photographs, although conservative leaders also found some of Mapplethorpe's portraits of African-American men "racist," and branded the nude studies of young children (both male and female) "child pornography."

Helms denounced the use of federal money to fund the Mapplethorpe exhibit and demanded that the NEA end its sponsorship of "morally reprehensible trash."

Ultimately in *Quills*, Wright presents the Marquis de Sade, as the writer Gerard Raymond has noted, "as a representative of artists everywhere whose work is silenced by moralists on behalf of the public good."

*Quills* was first presented off-Broadway in late 1995. Wright won a 1996 *Village Voice* Obie Award for Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting and the Kesselring Award for Best New American Play from the National Arts Club for *Quills*.

He went on to write the script for a film adaptation of his play, making his motion picture debut. The 2000 film, directed by Philip Kaufman, and with a cast that included Geoffrey Rush, Joaquin Phoenix, Michael Caine, and Kate Winslet, was named Best Picture by the National Board of Review and nominated for three Academy Awards.

Wright's screenplay was also nominated for a Golden Globe Award, and he received the 2001 Paul Selvin Award, presented to the writer "whose script best embodies the spirit of the constitutional and civil rights and liberties which are indispensable to the survival of free writers everywhere," from the Writers Guild of America.

### ***I Am My Own Wife***

In 1990, before he had even begun work on *Quills*, Wright took a trip to Berlin. While there, he received a letter from his high school friend John Marks, who at the time was the *U.S. News & World Report* bureau chief in Germany.

"I've found a true character," Marks wrote. "She's way up your alley. (And, believe me, I use the term 'she' loosely.) I think she may well be the most singular, eccentric individual the Cold War ever birthed. Have I piqued your interest?"

Marks was referring to Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, born Lothar Berfelde, an East Berlin openly gay transvestite and furniture collector who survived persecution by both the Nazi and Communist regimes. (Charlotte von Mahlsdorf later published her autobiography, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau*, in 1992. She also appeared in Rosa von Praunheim's 1992 film of the same name.)

Wright's interest was indeed piqued and he traveled with another friend to a rural suburb in the former East Berlin to meet with von Mahlsdorf. "She had us for tea in her basement and started to spill the story of her life," Wright recalled of his initial meeting with her. As he listened to her talk, Wright knew immediately that her life story had to be put on stage.

"When I first met Charlotte I wanted to write a real hymn to her," Wright has explained. "I thought that all the negative conditioning I had endured as a young gay man growing up in Texas was countered by her own extraordinary stories of survival." He believed that von Mahlsdorf's story could serve "as a powerful corrective for all of our gay self-loathing."

Von Mahlsdorf agreed to be interviewed by Wright for material toward a play about her life. Wright repeatedly returned to Berlin for nearly two years, recording hours of conversation with her. Ultimately, he amassed more than 500 pages of transcribed text.

As Wright delved deeper into von Mahlsdorf's life, he found that her story was even more complex than he originally thought. The playwright discovered that she had been an informant for the Stasi, the East German secret police, and may even have betrayed a friend.

The revelation was startling, and Wright felt he could no longer continue with the project. "I felt that to write the play," he revealed, "would be the betrayal of a friendship because I knew there were things I had learned that she would not necessarily want to be disclosed."

Instead, he began writing *Quills* to distract himself from the disappointment of suspending his work on von Mahlsdorf. However, two years after Wright had first learned about the Stasi file, the German press publicly revealed her informant past. Wright decided that now he could continue with the project. "It would no longer be *my* disclosure," he said.

In 2000, Wright was invited to work on his project at the Sundance Theater Laboratory in Utah. In turn, Wright asked the director Moisés Kaufman (who had himself adapted transcripts into theatrical texts for the plays *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* and *The Laramie Project*) and the actor Jefferson Mays (an original member of the New York cast of *Quills*) to join him at Sundance.

On their first day together, Wright asked Mays to read directly from the transcripts. As the actor altered his voice between the interviewer asking questions and Charlotte's answers, Wright knew instinctively that the work had to become a one-person show, with Mays ultimately embodying some 35 characters, including the playwright himself and the lead role.

"How wonderful," Wright later explained, "that a fascinating historical figure who had been forced to adopt a series of guises in order to live her life, how fitting that her story should be told by an actor forced to adopt a series of guises in order to impart it."

Wright's play, ultimately called *I Am My Own Wife*, with the subtitle "Studies for a Play about the Life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf," opened off-Broadway in 2003 and was transferred to Broadway later that same year.

The play was a critical, as well as commercial, success, and earned Wright some of the most enthusiastic

reviews of his career. Bruce Weber, writing for the *New York Times*, called it "the most stirring new work to appear on Broadway this fall."

Wright received a Tony Award for Best Play, a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, a GLAAD Media Award, an Outer Critics Award, a Drama League Award, a Lucille Lortel Award, and the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *I Am My Own Wife*.

On winning the Pulitzer, Wright announced "It's especially gratifying and exhilarating for someone who grew up with all of the ambivalence one has about one's sexuality, because this award sanctions my most overt and openly gay work."

### *Grey Gardens* and *The Little Mermaid*

Wright next worked as the librettist for a musical version of *Grey Gardens* (with music by Scott Frankel and lyrics by Michael Korie), based on the 1975 cult classic documentary of the same name by brothers Albert and David Maysles.

Both the film and the musical chronicle the lives of Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale (known as "Big Edie") and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale ("Little Edie"), the aunt and cousin, respectively, of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and their descent into squalor and neglect.

Frankel approached Wright about collaborating on the musical, but Wright was initially skeptical. He thought the documentary would prove impossible to adapt for the stage. "It's so nonlinear," the playwright explained. "It's edited within an inch of its life with a psychological logic, not a narrative. There's no story."

Also, the Beales, especially Little Edie, had become gay icons since the film's release, and Wright thought it was crucial "to do something that honored the women's pathos as much as their humor."

He described Little Edie as "perversely courageous," and believed "her best defense was an unerring sense of style and a caustic wit. I think that's where gay men find their own defenses. Edie's the patron saint of all those qualities."

Wright eventually agreed to work with Frankel and Korie on the musical and all three men decided their narrative should not begin as the documentary did, when the squalor and decay of the Beale's family estate, known as "Grey Gardens," had already set in.

Instead, the three collaborators thought it would be more interesting to go back in time and discover how these once-fashionable women had fallen into such decrepitude.

"We started to do research," Wright said. "We learned Big Edie was a flamboyant showoff. She'd been divorced by telegram. Little Edie's engagement to Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr. was broken off under mysterious circumstances. I thought, 'What if this all occurred on one momentous day?'"

He, therefore, set the first act of the musical in the past, when the estate is at its most lustrous, Big Edie is in her most elegant and charming prime, and Little Edie is about to announce her enviable engagement to the much sought-after Joseph Kennedy, Jr.

In the second act, set within the actual period of the documentary, with some of the film's actual lines replicated in the show's dialogue and song lyrics, the two women have now become recluses, sharing a flinty, although quick-witted, affection, and living together in the crumbling, neglected estate that has become infested with raccoons, cats, and fleas.

*Grey Gardens* opened off-Broadway in March 2006 and was transferred to Broadway in November that same year. It received mainly positive reviews.

David Rooney, in the trade publication *Variety*, wrote that "In less adventurous hands, *Grey Gardens* might merely have been a quirky musical about crazy cat ladies. . . . But Wright and his collaborators . . . have taken their cue from the Maysles brothers in portraying their multifaceted subjects with depth and dignity. Their show is a haunting account of lives derailed, a textured depiction of the warring, often simultaneous desires to wound and heal that characterize mother-daughter relationships, and a witty celebration of two defiantly maverick personalities."

Wright himself has said that, "despite all the baroque trappings," *Grey Gardens* is "a universal story about parents and children. Our parents are the ones who both wound us and administer the bandages."

*Grey Gardens* was nominated for the 2007 Tony Award for Best Musical. Wright was also nominated for both a Drama Desk Award and a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical.

Wright's next project was again a musical, this time adapting the family-friendly Disney film *The Little Mermaid* for Broadway (music by Alan Menken; lyrics by Howard Ashman and Glenn Slater).

The 1989 animated Disney feature was based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen about Ariel, the title character, who strikes a deal with Ursula the Sea Witch to transform her mermaid tail into human legs so that she can pursue the handsome Prince Eric on land.

Friends and colleagues were initially surprised that Wright would want to work on such a conventional project, but Wright said he actively lobbied for the job. "The quintessential outsider," he explained, "is Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid." "Besides," he continued, "Ursula the Sea Witch could give the Marquis de Sade a run for his money."

*The Little Mermaid* opened on Broadway in January 2008 to mixed reviews. The show closed, after playing some 685 performances, in August 2009.

Wright's other works include *Watbanaland* (1995) and three one-act plays collected under the title *Unwrap Your Candy* (2006).

His most recent credits include an adaptation of the Swedish playwright August Strindberg's 1888 play *Creditors*, which Wright also directed at the La Jolla Playhouse, San Diego in 2009, and a musical adaptation, with Amanda Green, of the 1997 documentary *Hands on a Hard Body*, which chronicles an East Texas endurance contest in order to win a new pickup truck.

Wright is a member of the Dramatists Guild and serves on the board of New York Theatre Workshop. He is a recipient of the William L. Bradley Fellowship at Yale University, the Charles MacArthur Fellowship at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and the Alfred Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University.

He currently lives in New York City with his partner, the singer-songwriter David Clement.

## **Bibliography**

Gussow, Mel. "A Serial Killer With a Grudge Against Performers." *New York Times* (August 21, 1989): C12.

McGrath, Charles. "The Cat Ladies Sing." *New York Times* (March 5, 2006): C1.

Raymond, Gerard. "Reviving the Marquis de Sade." *The Advocate* (December 19, 2000): 58.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Welcome to Berlin: Author Doug Wright Tells How a Memorable Meeting with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf Led to the Creation of the Bioplay *I Am My Own Wife*." *TheaterMania* (November 28, 2003): [http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int\\_news\\_id=4099](http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int_news_id=4099)

Rooney, David. "Grey Gardens." *Variety* (November 3, 2006): 65.

Schneider, Jeffrey. "Wright, Doug." *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*. Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Simon, John. "From Feeling to Fooling." *New York* (August 28, 1989): 57.

Weber, Bruce. "Inventing Her Life As She Goes Along." *New York Times* (December 4, 2003): C3.

Whitley, Glenna. "Feel My Rage." *The Dallas Observer* (November 16, 2006): 26.

### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.