

① CHARLOTTE KANN & narrator

AGE 9

so there's what they call LIFE.

AGE 9 XMAS TREE

large brimmed Provencal straw hat

thin spotted cotton blouse
free collar

organza plaid party dress hand smocked

BLUE WOOL SHIFT

Black cotton plaid dress

WHITE TIGHTS

White tights

FLAT RED SHOES

LEGGINGS OVER TIGHTS

PROLOGUE & Epilogue Sc. 1

Sc. 1 KANN APARTMENT BERLIN Sc. 2 1925

R20 R16

Fleshy, adorable and complex: new voice for work of Charlotte Salomon

A show about the painter Charlotte Salomon throws fresh light on her tragic family history. On the eve of the artist's centenary, **Judi Herman** speaks to the production's co-creators

Charlotte Salomon was born on 16 April 1917 in Berlin, into a cultured Jewish family, the only daughter of a doctor and his wife. She died in Auschwitz in 1943 aged 26, the year after she completed her seminal artwork, *Life? Or Theatre?* What is it about this young woman that engages so many to share an enduring interest in her life and work?

I think it is because the autobiographical work of genius she left reveals so much and yet leaves tantalising questions. The 765 gouaches of *Life? Or Theatre?* with texts incorporated or overlaid onto them relate a troubled family history during troubled times, beginning with the Great War and ending just months before her deportation from the South of France to Auschwitz.

In the piece, she begins the story before her birth with the suicide of her 18-year-old aunt Charlotte in 1913. As well as detailing her own life events, she charts the rise of Hitler, the escalating persecution of German Jews and the devastating effects those developments have on her

'characters'. With evident increasing urgency, she paints her *Epilogue*, the story of her years in wartime Provence, ending with the creation of the work itself.

The young artist had already proved her mettle as the only Jew to gain entry to the Berlin Hochschule (Academy) for Art in 1936, while Hitler was in power. Vivid scenes in *Life? Or Theatre?* depict

her time there, including a wittily realised life drawing class dominated by a nude male model.

Charlotte subtitled her work *A Tri-Coloured Play with Music*, applying her palette of red, blue and yellow in bold strokes and rich and subtle mixes. She prefaces it with a cast of characters, family members and others thinly disguised with playful names. She adopts a new surname

'Kann' (can) for her immediate family. Alfred Wolfsohn, the charismatic but habitually impoverished philosopher and teacher to whom she attributes the inspiration to create the work, becomes Amadeus Daberlohn, or 'Penniless Mozart'. She includes detailed musical scores, including arias identified with her flamboyant stepmother, the celebrated

opera singer Paula Lindberg (here Paulinka Bimbam).

Charlotte did not survive to answer the question: *Life? Or Theatre?* but theatre,

film, opera and ballet makers have sought to do so in pieces inspired by her life and work. The latest incarnation is *Charlotte – A Tri-Coloured Play with Music*, which is being performed in various stages of development in Canada during June. It too is tri-coloured – a

“Take care of this. It is my whole life”





Clockwise: Pamela Howard's costume designs for the play; section of Salomon's Life? Or Theatre?; Salomon and her father, ca 1927

"I have one, for example, on Degenerate Art. Charlotte says to her art teacher, 'Have you never heard of Kandinsky and Chagall?'" That comment led her to research Joseph Goebbels and the exhibition he made about Degenerate Art that showed work of Jewish and Communist artists in Berlin in 1937.

"I wanted to recreate Charlotte's world in three dimensions," says Howard as she shows me a prototype chair like a 3D cartoon, lovingly made in a workshop in Vilnius, Lithuania. She says that in the paintings, Charlotte is recalling being a lonely,

collaboration between British director and scenographer Pamela Howard, Canadian writer and performer Alon Nashman and Czech composer Aleš Březina, which has been three years in the making. "We talk about the three colours being music, text and visual art and the three artists, the triumvirate, working together. We all have a voice in its various modes," says Nashman.

Howard intriguingly describes working with Březina: "He says to me 'sound is colour and colour is sound'. And that's the key of our relationship. So I do a drawing and I scan it and send it to him and he looks at it and creates a sound. Or he sends me a sound and my response is the compositions you see in my photo collages."

Březina has written an original score of great beauty – and wit, especially appreciated by Nashman, the script writer. "It's Charlotte's sense of drama and irony, her melding of the ridiculous and the tragic. I immersed myself in that voice."

Marthe Pécher, proprietress of the little hotel in Cap Ferrat in the South of France where Charlotte created the series, described her humming as she worked. Nashman says, "She describes humming a tune, which conjures an image, a relationship, a conversation, which might propel the tune forward, add a voice until there is a chorale – or a cacophony."

Howard did a 'Tri-Coloured workshop' with art students at Tel Aviv University. You can marvel at her costume sketches online, especially Paulinka's lavish costumes, and how such a rich palette can be mixed from just red, blue and yellow. Howard has underpinned the project with research into Charlotte's life and times, producing 11 A1 story sheets for the rehearsal room walls for the performers to consult and add to.

only child, so her images have a childlike quality. "She remembers the sofa and armchairs a bit wobbly, squiggly!" Audience members can look forward to an interactive set tour before the show.

The play begins and ends in the South of France, where Charlotte's parents Albert and Paula sent her to what they hoped was safety with her grandparents, and shelter with the wealthy American philanthropist Ottilie Moore in her villa in Villefranche. Albert and Paula survived the war in Amsterdam but when they sought Charlotte, they discovered only a brown paper parcel. It contained the gouaches she had entrusted to the kindly local doctor with the words "Take care of this. It is my whole life." Charlotte, newly married to a fellow refugee and five months pregnant, had been arrested and deported with her husband in September 1943 and deported to Auschwitz, where she died on 10 October.

The play's action begins in 1947. Albert and Paula find the parcel in an apartment presided over by a sullen concierge. "The concierge pulls off the dust sheets and there you see Berlin in 1930!" reveals Howard. Berlin is the main scene of the action,



"She chooses to paint rather than kill herself"

where the audience, but not Charlotte, witness her mother Franziska emulating her sister's suicide. Her father finds solace with the generously expansive Paulinka, and young Charlotte finds love with this adorable new mother. But as she matures, a new love enters her life, Amadeus Daberlohn. He seeks work as Paula's singing guru and a love triangle develops between Daberlohn, Charlotte and her mother.

Remembering her intimate moments with Daberlohn sustains the young artist in France, even in the darkest times when her grandmother, too, commits suicide and her grandfather brutally reveals the family's suicidal tendency.

There is an extraordinary scene in which Charlotte poisons her grandfather. This is not a sensationalist invention. Theirs is the first stage retelling of this story, which was originally made public when a fragment of a letter Charlotte had sent to her parents appeared in Franz Weisz's 2015 documentary film *Life? Or Theatre?*.

Nashman quotes the letter: "I had had enough. I put Veronal [a sleeping drug] in his omelette and he expired." Along with other scholars, Nashman believes that Charlotte's grandfather "was the source of deeply inappropriate sexuality and at the root of the family trauma and his daughters' suicides."

"All her intuition and instincts about something happening in her family are clarified and confirmed," says Nashman. "It becomes an important pivotal point late in her life. It could destroy her or in a sense create her and she chooses creation. The climax is when Charlotte chooses to paint rather than to kill herself."

"The question she poses with her title resonates this way. Which of those versions of her is more alive? This extraordinary human whose life was snuffed out so early? Or this incredibly vibrant, creative being, so fleshy and adorable and complex, whose very essence is being discovered as time goes on? The more we study her paintings and writings, the more is revealed. There is a sense that the life of the theatre trumps that of life." ■

Life? Or Theatre? will be shown for the first time in full at the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, from 20 October to 25 March 2018. www.jck.nl. For details of Charlotte – A Tri-Coloured Play with Music see www.theaturtle.com. **Judi Herman** is JR's Arts Editor.