

THEATRE / AUSTRALIA

# A German Life

Written by Christopher Hampton Starring Robyn Nevin Directed by Neil Armfield

19 Feb - 14 Mar, 2021 Dunstan Playhouse Adelaide Festival Centre

**Duration** 

1 hr 30 mins, no interval

This play is as much about our contemporary world as it is about Hitler's Germany.

Neil Armfield









# **A German Life**

Co-produced by Adelaide Festival and The Gordon Frost Organisation.

Written by **Christopher Hampton** 

Starring Robyn Nevin

Cello

**Catherine Finnis** 

Directed by Neil Armfield

Associate Director **Chris Parker** 

Composer Alan John

Set & Costume Designer **Dale Ferguson** 

Lighting Designer **Nigel Levings** 

Sound Designer

Jane Rossetto

Producer **Kate Hillgrove** 

Production Manager Lachlan Turner

Stage Manager Amelia Mullinar

Rehearsal Stage Manager **Tanya Leach** 

Main Image James Green

Generously supported by Jill Hill & Bob Warner

Supported by **Amnesty International** 

**Archival video** from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Library of Congress.

Based on the documentary film *A German Life* by Christian Krönes, Olaf Müller, Roland Schrotthofer and Florian Weigensamer / Blackbox Film & Media Productions (www.blackboxfilm.at).

A German Life was first presented at the Bridge Theatre, London, on 6 April, 2019.

With thanks to Rachael Azzopardi, Patonga Progress Hall, Torrens Rowing Club and Annika Stennert.

### Note

The production contains graphic historical footage which may be distressing for some patrons.

# A German Life

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The Gordon Frost Organisation is part of the **Crossroads Live** group of companies.

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# **Background**

A German Life draws on 235 pages of transcribed interviews with Brunhilde Pomsel.

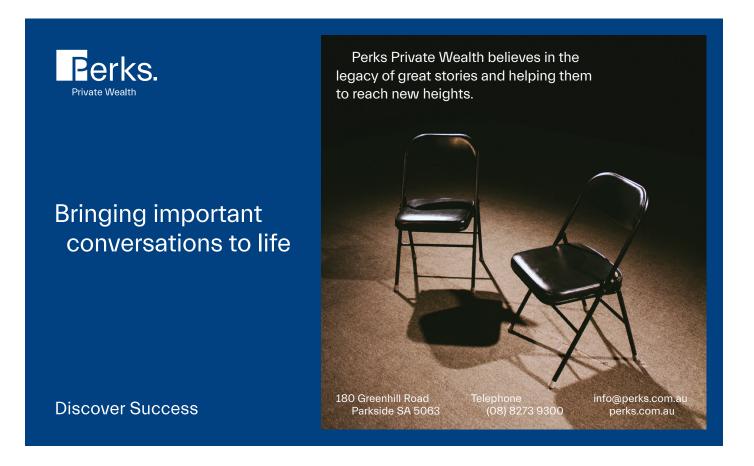
Pomsel's long life intersects with some of the most extraordinary events of the twentieth century. As a young German woman living during The Great Depression, she took a series of secretarial jobs. Her employers ranged from persecuted Jewish business owners to Joseph Goebbels; the Nazi Minister for Propaganda and architect of a narrative that enabled the most dangerous political movement in modern memory.

Playwright Christopher Hampton grew fascinated with her story

after seeing the film *A German Life*, directed by Christian Krönes, Florian Weigensamer, Roland Schrotthofer, and Olaf S. Müller. But it was the transcriptions of the full interviews the filmmakers conducted in 2013, when Brunhilde was 102, that opened the door for the theatrical version we see onstage today.

In the many pages of interviews, Christopher says he saw Brunhilde Pomsel come "vividly to life". His translation onto stage of this detailed and ambiguous character was first seen by audiences at the Bridge Theatre in London in 2019.

This is its Australian premiere.



# The Life of Brunhilde Pomsel Brunhilde Pomsel is born. Pomsel's father serves on the Russian front during WWI. He returns unharmed. She now has four younger brothers. The Pomsels live in the well-off Berlin district of Südende.

Pomsel leaves

Gläsinger & Co.

Finds work at a

Jewish Bookshop.

Meets her first boy-

friend Heinz, a journalist with Nazi connections.

Takes a job with Jewish

lawyer and insurance

agent Dr Goldberg.

At 21, Pomsel votes

Votes for the Social

Reichstag elections.

Bley and Pomsel work

after all the Jewish

directors are fired. At

at Broadcasting House

Bley's encouragement, she joins the Nazi Party.

Bley leaves and Pomsel

Department, where her

shorthand abilities are

Pomsel falls in love

with Jewish artist Fritz

Kirchbach moves back

to Amsterdam where

his wife, children, and

other girlfriends live.

Begins working at the

Pomsel's Jewish

Ministry of Propaganda

friend Eva Löwenthal is

deported to Auschwitz.

from a party as bombing

Pomsel arrives home

starts over Berlin. Her

family is evacuated as

their apartment block

led by Joseph Goebbels.

Gottfried Kirchbach,

Social Democratic

who illustrated

Party posters.

celebrated.

transfers to the Press

Meets Wulf Bley, a Nazi and WWI pilot. She

helps write his memoirs.

Democratic Party in the

for the Nazi Party.

She signs a two-year contract to work at

school at 15.

# The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich

For a more detailed timeline of events, please click here **WWI Begins** 1914 The Armistice is signed and fighting ends. Defeat is a shock for Germany and fuels (1918) rhetoric blaming Jewish and communist "enemies within". The Weimar Constitution 1919 Germany's new democratic Government is overseen by a President and Chancellor, and incorporates a Parliament called the Reichstag. 1923 Hyperinflation begins when the Government prints money to pay striking workers. Living costs begin to rise rapidly. The Munich Putsch The Nazis attempt a coup. Hitler is sent to Landsberg 1926) prison for his role, where he writes Mein Kampf. 1927 The Great Depression 1929 Unemployment in Germany increases by 30%. 1930 **Presidential elections** Hitler is disappointed after receiving 36.8% of the vote. Paul von Hindenburg is named President with 53%. 1932 Reichstag elections 37% of voters support the Nazis. The Party now holds 230 parliamentary seats. **Hitler appointed Chancellor** The Vice Chancellor and President believe they can control Hitler. 1933 Reichstag fire The Nazis use the burning of Parliament to pass a decree banning the Communist Party and suspending civil liberties. The Enabling Act hands legislative power over to the Nazi cabinet, bypassing the Reichstag. Hitler bans all other political parties from Germany. The Nazis organise a **boycott** of Jewish businesses, which is violently enforced. Hitler becomes Führer When president von Hindenburg dies, Hitler merges 1934 the roles of Chancellor and President to create the allpowerful role of Führer. The **Nuremberg Laws** decitizenise Jewish people and restrict their freedoms - making it illegal for Aryan and Jewish people to marry or have sex. 1936 **Olympic Games** are held in Berlin. Kristallnacht Goebbels incites a night of violence against Jewish people. The following day some 30,000 Jewish people are sent 1938 to concentration camps. **WWII begins** as Germany 1939 invades Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany two days later. Wannsee Conference and 1942 The Final Solution Hitler authorises the systematic genocide of the Jewish people. Attendees of the 1942 Wannsee Conference discuss 1943) options for its implementation. The Battle of Berlin Britain's second major air raid in Berlin causes immense devastation, killing 2,000 people and leaving 175,000 homeless. **D-Day** June 6, Allied forces land 1944) at Normandy after deceiving German intelligence about the location of the attacks. By late August, Paris is liberated. Attempt to Assasinate Hitler The plot by disaffected German military officers, rightwing politicians, police officials, and diplomats fails.

The Ministry of Propaganda bunker is surrendered to

Pomsel is in the bunker when it is surrendered, and is interrogated and imprisoned in Buchenwald Concentration Camp under the command

Russian forces.

in Buchenwald Concentration Camp under the command of the USSR.

from Buchenwald.

Chancellery in Berlin.

Germany surrenders. After

Japan surrenders, WWII ends.

1950

1945

**Death March from Auschwitz** 

SS units kill thousands

on foot.

of prisoners, and brutally

evacuate those remaining

Allied and Soviet forces

liberate a series of

concentration camps

Soviets and US troops meet up in Central Berlin

Hitler commits suicide

Soviets capture the Reich

# **Director's Note**

A year ago, when Robyn
Nevin gave me Christopher
Hampton's play drawn from
Brunhilde Pomsel's interviews
with a group of Austrian
filmmakers in 2016, I thought it
fascinating, and unique.

And a wonderful role for Robyn.

In July we began work on it.

Over the course of a week we slowly picked our way through, talking about her voice, and the kind of theatrical space we might place her in, and how much we could believe her testimony. And we talked of how resonant many of the things she described were for us today. Especially in a world dominated by the lies of Donald Trump.

Then we met again for four weeks from the end of November, with shifting Covid restrictions bouncing us from Adelaide to Patonga, NSW and back to Adelaide. Every day we talked about Trump - he had clearly lost the election

but was calling on frenzied support from every corner of the country to discredit the electoral process.

We returned to the play on February 1. The security of American democracy had been shattered by the storming of the Capitol on January 6, and we were reminded of just how fragile modern democracies are. More and more this play seems to be as much about our contemporary world as it is about Hitler's Germany. Brunhilde Pomsel died on January 27, 2017 seven days after Trump's inauguration. She had turned 106 two weeks earlier. In one of her last interviews she said, "Hitler was elected democratically, and bit by bit he got his own way. Of course that could always repeat itself with Trump, or Erdogan..."

This story is not over.

Neil Armfield, 2021



Image of Brunhilde Pomsel: Lifestyle Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo

Brunhilde, the woman, has given me insights into a life lived in relative innocence in Germany before Nazi rule, then living under Nazi rule and ultimately living and working close to Nazi leadership.

The complexities and questions lie in her denial of personal responsibility; and that's the challenge for the production. How much did she know of the atrocities ordered by her boss? When is she lying? Is she lying? How can one reconcile the choices one has made when young? Does she regret? Is it painful to recall, to know? Did she know? And on and on...

I recognise the complexities of understanding the dark recesses of another's mind, in this case one that has wrestled with mind stuff for more than nine decades.

Brunhilde offers us an opportunity to think about our world now, in 2021, and the dangers of revisiting the horrors of her time; the dangers of propaganda, of the gradual manipulation of a country's people. Witness the US now. As Brunhilde said, "the Ministry of Propaganda certainly worked on me".

Beware the slippery slope.

Robyn Nevin, 2021

# **Biographies**



# Robyn Nevin Brunhilde Pomsel

One of the greats, Robyn's career spans almost sixty years in theatre, film and television. Robyn has played leading roles at all of Australia's major theatre companies, in London's West End and Carnegie Hall in New York. Her credits include A Streetcar Named Desire, A Long Days Journey Into Night, Lally Katz' Neighbourhood Watch, Suddenly Last Summer, Queen Lear, My Fair Lady directed by Julie Andrews, and Oklahoma!. Robyn's recent television credits include Back In Very Small Business, Cleverman, Jane Campion's Top Of The Lake and three seasons of Upper Middle Bogan. She can most recently be seen in the feature film Relic and Foxtel's The End.



# Written by Christopher Hampton

Christopher wrote his first play at the age of eighteen. Since then, his plays have included *The Philanthropist*, *Savages, Tales from Hollywood, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, White Chameleon, The Talking Cure, Appomattox* and *All About Eve.* He has written the libretti for three Philip Glass operas, co-written three musicals, and translated plays by Ibsen, Molière, von Horváth, Chekhov, Yasmina Reza, Daniel Kehlmann and Florian Zeller. His plays, musicals and translations are multi-award winning as are his screenplays, which have garnered Oscars, BAFTAs and many more accolades.



### **Neil Armfield** *Director*

Neil is Joint Artistic Director of the Adelaide Festival 2017 – 2023, in partnership with Rachel Healy. Neil directs for theatre and film. He was Artistic Director of Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney from 1994 to 2010. He has directed for all of Australia's state theatre companies, London's national theatre, the West End and on Broadway, Opera Australia, Welsh National Opera, The Bregenz Festival in Austria, Zurich Opera, Canadian Opera, Houston Grand Opera, English National Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Glyndebourne Festival Opera and Royal Opera House Convent Garden. He was awarded an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2007 for service to the arts, nationally and internationally.



### **Catherine Finnis** Cello

Catherine was born in Adelaide and studied at The Elder Conservatorium of Music. She joined the music profession as a chamber music player, a member of many musical groups, and as a freelancer before women were generally accepted in that world. After migrating to Sydney, Catherine was fully occupied as a freelance cellist, playing both modern and baroque cello and viola da gamba, teaching, and playing for visiting artists including Phil Collins and George Benson and as a member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Catherine then moved to England where she was in high demand and involved in many recordings, concerts and tours. She returned to Adelaide ten years ago and is proud to be part of the 61st Adelaide Festival in 2021.



### **Chris Parker** Associate Director

Chris is a director and graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. He recently directed the 25th Anniversary concert of *Jekyll and Hyde* starring Jemma Rix and Anthony Warlow, and a critically acclaimed production of *Oklahoma!* at the State Theatre, Melbourne.

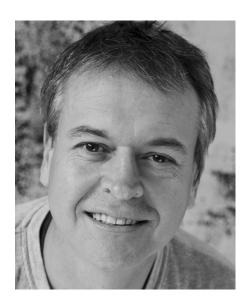
His work credits include *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, Sondheim on Sondheim, The Irish Boy, The Graduate, Les Misérables, Cry Baby, The Matchmaker, The Bodyguard, Avenue Q, Georgy Girl, Moonshadow, Twisted Broadway, The Last Five Years, Atlantis, Happy People, Blood Brothers, The Gathering, and a much-touted production of Paul Sirett's play Bad Blood Blues.



### Alan John Composer

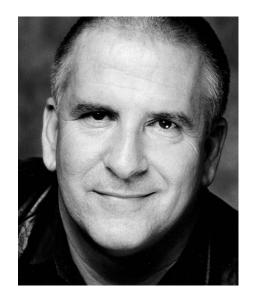
Alan is one of Australia's most prolific composers for theatre, opera, television and film. Theatre credits include *Things I Know To Be True, Twelfth Night, Summer Of The Seventeenth Doll, Stuff Happens, Once In Royal David's City, The Judas Kiss* (Belvoir); *I'm Not Running* (National Theatre London); and *Much Ado About Nothing* (Bell Shakespeare).

Opera credits include *The Eighth Wonder* (Opera Australia), *How To Kill Your Husband*, and *Through The Looking Glass* (Victorian Opera/Malthouse Theatre). Musical Theatre credits include *The Adventures Of Snugglepot And Cuddlepie* and *Jonah Jones*.



**Dale Ferguson** Set & Costume Designer
Dale has worked extensively with major theatre and opera companies around the world. Theatre credits include the Broadway season of Exit the King, the English tour of The Convict Opera and the West End transfer of The Judas Kiss. His recent opera credits include Tosca for Opera Queensland; The Magic Flute for Lyric Opera of Chicago; and The Riders (Victorian Opera).

Dale is the recipient of multiple Helpmann Awards for *August: Osage County*. In 2019, he received five Green Room Awards for *Counting and Cracking*.



Nigel Levings Lighting Designer
Nigel has lit opera in St Petersburg, Paris, Washington,
London, Cardiff, Berlin, Baden-Baden, Innsbruck,
Bregenz, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston,
Dallas, Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne, and Toronto. He
is a Fellow of the Illuminating Engineering Society.
Awards include a Helpmann Award, a Green Room
Award, an Ovation, a Dora Mava Moore, two Outer
Circle Critics Awards, a Drama Desk and a Tony.

Nigel's recent work includes *Tartuffe* (State Theatre Company SA), *170 Days in Nanjing* (Jiangsu Performing Arts, China), *Hydra* (Queensland Theatre), *Les Miserables* (Queensland Conservatorium), and *Memorial* (Brink and Adelaide Festival).



Jane Rosetto Sound Designer

Jane is a graduate of the School of Audio, Diploma for Sound Production and AC ARTS Diploma Live Theatre and Events – Sound. Jane's very first paid theatre show was STCSA's *Hedda Gabler* with Robyn Nevin AM. Starting out in 1998 as a radio microphone technician, she was lucky to work on classic musicals like *CATS* and *Les Miserables*. Jane has worked extensively on a variety of shows for many companies and arts organisations. Design credit highlights include Brink's *Memorial*, SOSA'S *Cloudstreet*, STCSA's *Metro Street*, SOSA's *The Ring* cycle 2004, and WOM-AD 2010-2012 and 2019-2021. In her current role as Head of Sound at Adelaide Festival Centre, Jane manages a talented team of sound engineers.