

*The Marriage
of Figaro*



THE PLAY BY BEAUMARCHAIS
TRANSLATED BY DAVID B. EDNEY



The Marriage of Figaro

An MFA Directing Thesis Production

The Marriage of Figaro

by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

translated by David B. Edney

directed by **MAREK CZUMA**

set design by **KEVIN McALLISTER**

costume design by **CHRISTINE REIMER**

lighting design by **MELISSA NOVECOSKY**

choreography by **SARAH FERGUSON**

music composed by **TIMOTHY PICKETT**

MARCH 13-22, 2003
Frederic Wood Theatre



theatre
at UBC

In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community,
Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to *The Marriage of Figaro*.

BEAUMARCHAIS: THE REAL FIGARO

by MAREK CZUMA

MFA Directing Candidate

Department of Theatre, Film, and Creative Writing

Watchmaker, inventor, musician, songwriter, businessman, judge, union organizer, builder of pipelines, aeronautics enthusiast, publisher, self-made millionaire, international arms dealer, hero of the American Revolution and (in the opinion of many) of the French Revolution as well, but monarchist to the core, close advisor to two kings, secret agent, spy, exile, social climber, philanderer, family man, celebrity, litigator, memoirist, essayist, poet, director... and, oh yes!... playwright too, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was simply too complex and multifaceted, too huge a character to even attempt to summarize his life in the

Beaumarchais' charmed life worked like the finely tuned watches he built

short space I've been allotted here except to add that he was born in 1732, that he enjoyed every moment of his life (his own assessment not mine), and that he died quietly in his sleep after a happy evening of dining and conversation in the company of his family on May 18, 1799.

He was the quintessential Enlightenment man, far more so than Voltaire, Diderot or the *philosophes* because he lived the tenets they only preached. He was the embodiment of humanism: the individual was at the core of his philosophy, his activities and his plays. But not in any dry theoretical sense. He truly loved people, and he was famous even in his lifetime for being extraordinarily generous not only to his friends but to his worst enemies, too. And his approach to life was nothing if not scientific: his curiosity was unbounded, his interests astoundingly far-ranging; if he encountered a thing he would immediately pick it apart and investigate it like a child, and no matter what he set his hand to he mastered and improved it. The story of how he first came to make a name for himself is typical. As a twenty-one year old apprentice watchmaker, he invented a new escapement that allowed watches to be miniaturized. When the king's official watchmaker stole his invention and attempted to pass it off as his own, the young Pierre challenged him, won his case before the Academy, and was given the old king's watchmaker's job as a reward. Then, to the astonishment of the entire court, he set a watch in a ring for the king's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, and immediately became the most sought after watchmaker in all of Paris. Beaumarchais' charmed life worked like the finely tuned watches he built. Its multitude of subplots interacted with each other the way the various gears interlock and turn together in harmony to move the hands inexorably forward in smooth and regular time.

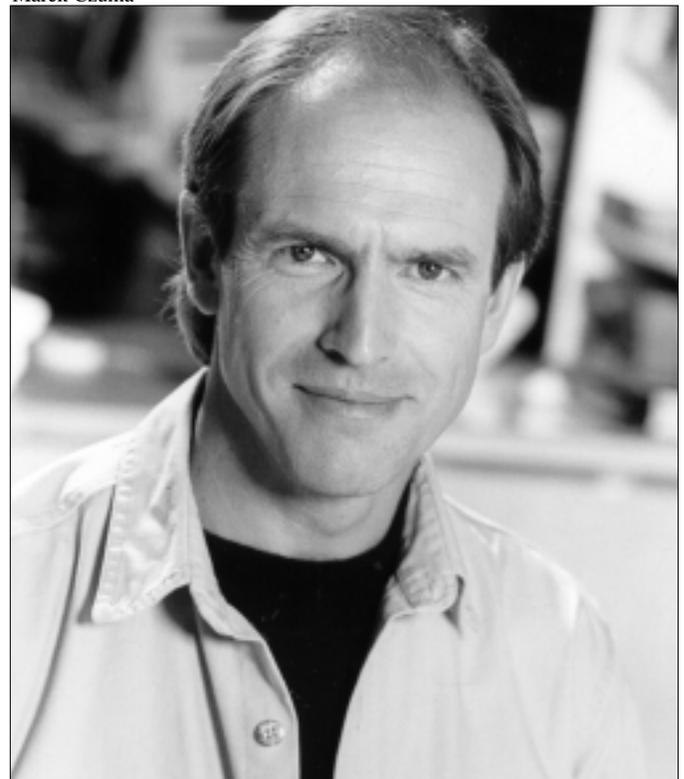
Brilliant beauty, exquisite complexity, elegant artifice, astonishing precision, inexorable forward motion: the words one would use to describe a well-made 18th century clock

could also be used to characterize Beaumarchais' masterpiece, *The Marriage of Figaro*, the second in his trilogy of plays about Figaro and the Almaviva family (*The Barber of Seville* and *The Guilty Mother* are the other two). I suppose if I had to select a single word to categorize it, it would have to be "farce". But *Marriage* is so much much more than that. "Farce" is merely the clock's face, the polished gold case. Inside is a veritable tangle of interlocking plots (six in all; see if you can find them), events, revelations, conflicts, clashes and fates, all encased within the classically elegant unity of a single day and a single location.

But "farce" is misleading on another level too, for *Marriage* contains elements of virtually all the literary traditions current in France at the end of the *Ancien Régime*. Beaumarchais assembled the gears that run *Marriage* from every genre available to him, some still familiar, some now long forgotten except to specialists: *commedia dell'arte*, *parade*, *drame bourgeois*, *comédie larmoyante*, comedy of character, comedy of manners, *opéra comique*, grand opera, tragedy, philosophical discourse, dance, vaudeville. There are even hints of genres yet to come: 19th century melodrama, romantic theatre, Feydeau farce, American musical, even sitcom. Hard as it is to imagine today, for the opening night audience of April 27, 1784, *The Marriage of Figaro* was something completely unique, astonishing, and almost magical. And for a brief time – until Mozart stole his thunder – it made him famous throughout Europe.

Except in France, where his name is still revered as the true creator of Figaro, and the author of the last great play of the *Ancien Régime*, Beaumarchais is largely forgotten today. That is our loss. If this production succeeds even partially in restoring Beaumarchais to his rightful position as one of the foremost comic writers of the 18th century, I will be satisfied.

Marek Czuma



TRANSLATING BEAUMARCHAIS

by DAVID B. EDNEY

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Beaumarchais was the second author I translated. After dealing with the archaic language of Molière, I thought that the simpler, more modern style of *The Marriage of Figaro* would be child's play. To my surprise, I found it even more difficult. The habits I had learned with Molière did not work for Beaumarchais. As I found, when I went on to translate other playwrights, there is always a period of adjustment as I try to find a way into the universe of a new author. Once the adjustment is made, the work becomes much less effortful.

When the first draft of a translation has been completed and I work on the text as if it were my own, the main task is to simplify and remove excess words. In the first scene of *The Marriage of Figaro*, "Can't you give a reason?/I don't want to give a reason." was shortened to: "And the reason?/I don't want to say." Similarly, "Oh, my sweet, if ever a good green rod applied to the dorsal area has properly straightened a man's spine ..." became: "Oh, a few good strokes of the hickory stick, that's what he needs."

Difficult language, however, should not always be smoothed out. I now regret my modification of, "an ounce of intrigue will lead them into the Guadalquivir." to: "an ounce of intrigue will lead them wherever you like." My bland revision, though clearer, loses the concrete, picturesque quality of the original, and also the geographical allusion. A certain strangeness is admissible, even desirable, in a French work set in Spain; it is part of the fun.

I did conserve some foreign linguistic elements in my translation. On four occasions Figaro says a few words in Italian to show his culture and his mastery of language. I kept three of these Italian bits, adding a translation in one case: "*Tempo è galant' uomo*, say the Italians; time is a gentleman; he tells the truth, and he'll let me know who wishes me well or ill." When Figaro uses a Provençal phrase, *Qu'es aquo*, which is foreign for French spectators, I used French in my translation: *Qu'est-ce que c'est*. This has the advantage of being not only foreign but also understandable to most spectators.

My Molière translations are always shorter than the original. I was surprised to find that this was not the case with *The Marriage of Figaro*. There is no redundancy in Beaumarchais, as there is in Molière. In spite of the asides and occasional *longueurs*, the style is sparse and economical. At first I thought the text poorly written; the language seemed careless and unpolished, alternating between overdone rhetorical pieces, plays on words, and sentence fragments. I came to admire both. A gratuitous delight in language for its own sake is one of the charms of Beaumarchais. The best examples are in *The Barber of Seville*: Figaro's account of his picaresque life (I.ii) is given in a single enormous sentence, which other translators break up. At first I did too, as I had so often done with Molière's long, complex sentences. Then I realized that this was a mistake. The unusual structure is deliberate, a virtuoso display of the character's indefatigability, and I found that the effect can work just as well in English.

Plays on words are a challenge for the translator. Once I was mortified when my word play drew a roar from the first audience (mirth or protest? I was not sure):

Antonio [*carrying a pot of flowers that have been crushed by someone jumping out the window onto them*]: "I'm the one who looks after the garden; a man falls into it, my reputation is deflowered."

I hastily replaced this play on words with a more innocuous one: "a man falls into it, my reputation goes to pot."

As for Beaumarchais' use of sentence fragments, it is an attempt at a new type of theatrical dialogue that is closer to everyday speech than writing for the stage had previously been. In the verbal duels that are frequently found in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the many very short lines give an effect of energy and dynamism. Often a character repeats a word of the previous speaker to alter the meaning or interrupts his interlocutor's sentence to finish it in a new way. This sparse, idiomatic, fast-moving dialogue marks the beginning of modern theatrical language, the like of which was not to be found again in French theatre for another hundred years, with Feydeau, Renard and Courteline, at the end of the nineteenth century. Colloquialisms can be difficult to translate. Beaumarchais poses fewer problems in this respect than the more recent authors. The key to a successful rendering is to be attentive to the rhythm, since sound is at least as important as meaning in this type of language. In working on three plays and several essays of Beaumarchais, I became very fond of the displays of wit and rhetoric and the brisk, elliptical style of the dialogue. The author's delight in words and his joy in life provided me with some of my happiest hours as a translator.

Beaumarchais by Nattier



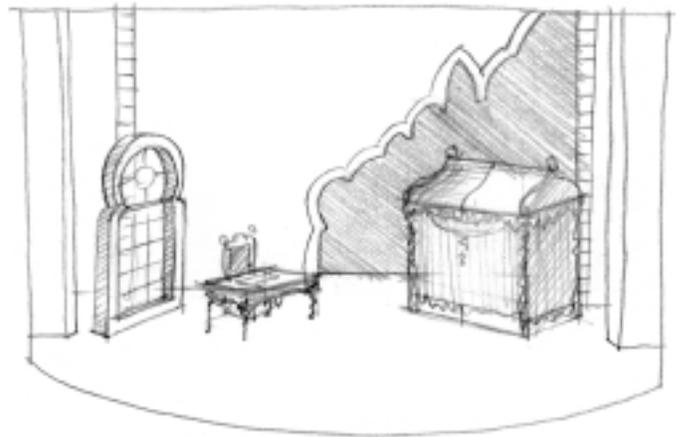
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

The costume inspiration for Figaro and Suzanne's looks came from a cross between *commedia dell'arte*, late 18th century fashion, and Spanish Moorish architecture. One could associate Figaro's character with the stock *commedia* character Arlecchino. Arlecchino's original costume was covered in patches which evolved into the diamond motif. At our first design meeting, Marek brought this beautiful book on Moorish architecture (which Kevin and I both happened to own as well). I knew Kevin was going in this direction with the set design so I started thinking about the relationship between the stunning tile-work prevalent in Moorish architecture and the tile-like patterns of the Arlecchino costume. This relationship inspired the idea of creating a fabric pattern for Figaro and Suzanne that mirrored the tile work in the set: a "uniform" for the household servants directly reflected in the house, so to speak. Matching the two lovers in similar patterns and colour schemes is also a *commedia* characteristic.

Christine Reimer
Costume Designer

set design by
KEVIN McALLISTER
costume design by
CHRISTINE REIMER
lighting design by
MELISSA NOVECOSKY

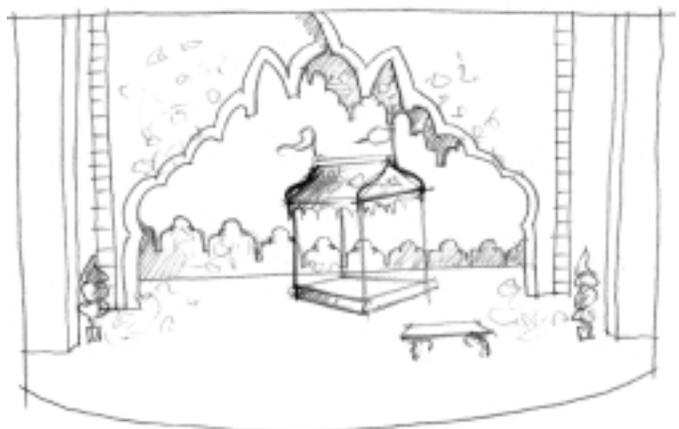
The Countess' Room



The Courtroom



The Garden





Suzanne

Figaro

FIGARO: PROPHET OF THE REVOLUTION?

by JO-ANN McEACHERN

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A humble watchmaker's son who rose to become the King's Clockmaker, an unscrupulous businessman who made a fortune in the slave-trade, an inveterate litigant who gained notoriety through his numerous lawsuits, an international spy in the service of King Louis XVI, a gun-runner for the American revolutionary forces: Who was Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais? In addition to these varied activities, Beaumarchais turned his attention to the theatre early in his career, publishing a theoretical *Essay on Drama* in 1767. Following the lead of Diderot, Beaumarchais argued that French tragedy, which had attained the summit of its glory in the Classicism of the 17th century, was no longer relevant to the concerns of his contemporaries, and that comedy, after the heights of Molière, had degenerated into a trivial amusement. Like Diderot, he called for a new form of theatre: serious drama. Such a renewal would restore relevance by depicting characters and situations of the contemporary middle-classes and would restore significance by popularizing the ideals of the 18th century French *philosophes*, ideals which were later to form the basic creed of both the American and French Revolutions: the right to life, liberty, equality, fraternity and the pursuit of happiness. Thus, from the beginning, Beaumarchais established a direct connection between the theatre and the philosophical movement. Sadly, despite this sound theoretical basis, Beaumarchais' early plays, in which he attempted to put his theories into practice, were, like the dramas of Diderot, hopeless failures.

Beaumarchais found his true theatrical voice when he turned to comedy: *The Barber of Seville*, first performed at the Comédie-française in 1775, enjoyed an immediate and lasting success, not least because of his great comic creation, the character of Figaro. In his preface to the first published edition of *Barber*, Beaumarchais promised his public the further adventures of Figaro, to take the form of one additional act to the play. This proposed single act quickly evolved into an entirely new play, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Beaumarchais completed a first draft in 1778, and, as was the custom of the time, held readings of his new manuscript in the literary

Salons of Paris, revising his draft in light of the criticisms of his literary and philosophical peers. Thus the existence of this new comedy, and much of its content, was widely known long before its first performance. Finally in 1781, Beaumarchais read his revised manuscript to the actors of the Comédie-française, who greeted it with enthusiasm. But before any public performance could take place, the play required the approval of the royal censorship authorities. The procedure was the same as for any printed book: submit the manuscript to any one of the many censors responsible for granting approval; in the case of a refusal, submit it to another censor, and carry on doing so until one censor approved. The first censor who read the manuscript suggested only minor cuts. However, in this case, the play's pre-performance notoriety attracted the attention of King Louis XVI, who demanded a reading for himself.

At first sight, *The Marriage of Figaro* may appear to be an entirely traditional comedy: the wily servant running rings around his master was a long-standing stock character, already well-established by Molière and a continuing presence in the plays of Marivaux; and the moral corruption of the French aristocracy was hardly news to anyone. However, Figaro's corrupt master is not merely thwarted in his nefarious designs, he ultimately suffers a public humiliation in front of all his servants. Furthermore, the servant Figaro openly and explicitly denounces the many abuses of the *Ancien Régime*, its absurdities and arbitrary exercise of absolute power. In a powerful soliloquy, Figaro poses his famous rhetorical question, applicable not only to his master, Count Almaviva, but to all the aristocracy, "What have you done to deserve your privileges?" and he provides the provocative answer, "You have taken the trouble to be born."

Although the King rarely intervened personally in matters of censorship, he did have the final word. He forbade any public performance of the play, making the eerily prophetic (possibly apocryphal) statement, "The Bastille would have to be destroyed in order that the performance of this play not be dangerously irresponsible." But given the notoriety of this play, the matter was not allowed to rest there. In all, six censors read the manuscript and issued varying judgements. Public interest continued to run high. Finally, the King agreed to a performance at court in 1783, but changed his mind again just as the curtain was about to rise! A private performance, not subject to censorship, took place not long afterwards. Then, early in 1784, the King suddenly and inexplicably changed his mind once more. The Comédie-française was allowed to perform *Figaro* in public and it was an immediate and resounding triumph.

Through its content and performance history, *The Marriage of Figaro* stands as an indictment of the final years of the *Ancien Régime*: it reveals corruption in high places, the discontent of the under-privileged, the growing instability of French society, the absurd arbitrariness with which the King exercised his absolute power, the inconsistency of public policy, and ultimately the increasing fragility of the political régime in the years leading up to the French Revolution. It is hardly surprising, then, that after 1789 the character of Figaro achieved mythic status as a great hero of the pre-revolutionary period.



Le Marriage de Figaro, Act I, From an Engraving by Lienard

NOTES ON THE OPERA THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

by ALISON GREENE

Freelance opera director whose most recent credits include *Giulio Cesare* for Pacific Opera Victoria

In Vienna, in the spring of 1783, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart met the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. Although already busy writing a libretto for Salieri, court composer to Emperor Joseph II, da Ponte promised to write one for Mozart who was eager to try his hand at writing a comic opera in Italian. Initially sceptical, Mozart wrote to his father, "If he is in league with Salieri, I shall never get anything out of him. But indeed I should dearly love to show what I can do in an Italian opera." Of course, the result of this meeting was one of the most important collaborations in the history of opera and the creation of a work the writer Brigid Brophy describes

Mozart had found the ideal play and ideal subject for his first Italian comic opera

as, "the most purely erotic opera ever composed."

In 1785 Mozart approached da Ponte with the suggestion of setting the Beaumarchais comedy *Le Mariage de Figaro*. However, Joseph II had forbidden performances of the play unless sections he found offensive were altered. It was up to da Ponte to talk the Emperor into agreeing to this opera, which he managed to do reasoning that all offensive material would not appear in his libretto. Mollified, Joseph II had Mozart perform sections of the score and, amazed by what he heard, ordered that this opera go into production before all other commissions.

The political aspects of *Figaro* appealed less to Mozart than the plot with its intricacies and comedic situations. Just as Beaumarchais' play shows the influence of various theatrical genres, Mozart was able to reconcile those various influences with the wide range of musical styles he had at his disposal. Mozart's ability to emphasize the drama through his compositional range was perfect for the play's pace and numerous imbroglios. Even the set piece arias do not hinder the flow of action. Mozart and da Ponte were able to summarize multiple events and themes in single arias. The Count's Act III aria is a perfect summary of how the day's events have thwarted his plans.

the most purely erotic opera ever composed

Da Ponte created a wonderful libretto from the play. The cast of characters was cut from sixteen to eleven, and the five acts were reduced to four. Scenes were tightened, especially the long courtroom scene, or combined with others. The main lines of the Beaumarchais plot were retained and in some aspects improved. In the opera, for instance, the Countess does not appear until the beginning of Act II. Some of the

character traits are changed. Figaro is still an audacious rogue but has lost a lot of the character's bitterness, although Mozart is now and then able to express Figaro's anger through the music. Through the skills of both da Ponte and Mozart the characters gain an added dimension of warmth and humanity. Just as Beaumarchais' *Figaro* undermined the nobility, Mozart's *Figaro* sealed the fate of the grandiose form of the *opera seria* or serious opera. These static, aria-dominated pieces with little plot movement or character development were now supplanted by an operatic setting of a play constantly in motion. Mozart had found the ideal play and ideal subject for his first Italian comic opera.

Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* was first performed at the Imperial Court Theatre in Vienna on May 1, 1786. Michael Kelly, the Irish tenor who sang the first Basilio states that, "At the end of the opera I thought the audience would never have done applauding." Although the triumph of the opera was short-lived in Vienna, it went on to become a huge hit in Europe. It remains today one of the top ten most performed operas in the repertoire.

Opera *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Act III, Engraving after Heinrich Ramberg



THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO RESOURCE GUIDE

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