Brief Synopsis

The story takes place in a world beyond time inhabited by members of the French aristocracy who have been executed during the French Revolution. While most of them do not complain of this somewhat unsatisfactory status quo, Marie Antoinette cannot accept her destiny, as it was forced upon her by an unjust tribunal.

The ghost of the playwright Beaumarchais (who incidentally lived to a ripe old age and died of natural causes) has fallen in love with Marie Antoinette and resolves to alter her destiny by providing for her escape from the Terror during the plot of his latest, and last, play about Figaro and the Almavivas. (This is loosely based on his actual play, *La Mère coupable*, which concerns the star-crossed lovers—Léon, the illegitimate son of Rosina and Cherubino, and Florestine, the illegitimate daughter of the Count and some Unknown Lady.)

For the most part, the opera deals with two worlds: one inhabited by the aristocratic ghosts, the other by the *commedia* world of Beaumarchais' play. These worlds are contrasted and sometimes combine to show how his double plot (the star-crossed lovers and his efforts on behalf of his Queen) does or does not work out: Figaro, Susanna, and the Almavivas are 20 years older than they were in *The Barber of Seville* and, in the case of Almaviva, no wiser. He has promised Florestine's hand to Bégearss, an unpleasant Irish Colonel in the pay of the French Revolution, who intends to wed her and consign the rest of the family to the guillotine.

At first Figaro and Susanna are concerned with thwarting this plot, but when Figaro realizes the full import of his author's intentions, he finds that his politics will not allow him to help the Queen of France.

Beaumarchais is forced to enter the world of his own creation in order to remonstrate with Figaro to maintain his plot and so to free his beloved Queen. In doing this he sacrifices the powers of puppet-master with which, until now, he has controlled the proceedings. Figaro is adamant: he will not help the Queen to escape revolutionary justice.

Marie Antoinette's trial is restaged for him so that he may see how unjust the reasons were for her execution. As soon as he agrees to help, the worlds merge and Beaumarchais, Figaro, and the other *commedia* characters are plunged into the "real" Paris and the French Revolution itself. Finally Bégearss is outwitted and the Almaviva party escapes, but Marie Antoinette has decided her destiny is not to be changed. In sacrificing his powers, maybe even his soul, for love of her, Beaumarchais has touched the heart of his Queen: his sacrifice persuades her to accept her original destiny—and to return his love. She chooses to go to the guillotine and her reward is to find herself with Beaumarchais in Paradise.

MET

Synopsis

ACT I, Prologue and Scene 1: Marie Antoinette and the executed Court of Louis XVI are caught in a world beyond time because of the Queen's despairing refusal to accept her destiny and the conditions of her execution. Beaumarchais, the author of the Figaro plays, *The Barber of Seville* and *Figaro's Wedding*, is deeply in love with her and hopes to effect a change in her destiny by replotting her denouement in his new opera (based here on the play *La Mère coupable*).

The ghosts of the Court, preceded by the Lady in a Hat (representing the past glories of France), and the King himself, assemble to hear the new opera. The Gossips of the Court and the Marquis discuss the fact that a commoner is courting the Queen while an earnest quartet of opera-going ghosts expect to be bored by yet another Court entertainment.

Marie Antoinette rejects Beaumarchais' advances, yet again, insisting that the dreadful circumstances of her death still haunt her and prevent her from any such relationship even, it appears, with her own husband (Aria). However, Louis and the Court persuade her to allow the entertainment to take place in her private theatre at Versailles and Beaumarchais introduces his opera, *A Figaro for Antonia*, which features the latest exploits of the Almaviva household some twenty years after Figaro's marriage to Susanna.

Scene 2: The opera begins in the Paris house of Almaviva, now the Spanish Ambassador to France. Figaro appears, pursued by creditors of various kinds whom he traps in a closet before proceeding to regale his audience with his remarkable personal history (Figaro's Aria). The audience is all delighted with Figaro except for Marie Antoinette, who is saddened to find his energetic exuberance so contrasted with her own depression. Beaumarchais borrows the Queen's necklace as a prop and it now appears in the hands of Count Almaviva, who has sworn to effect the Queen's escape to the New World by selling it for a million pounds to the English Ambassador at a reception that night at the Turkish Embassy.

Beaumarchais interrupts the proceedings to explain that the story takes place at a time when the King has been executed by the Revolution and the Queen languishes in jail. (These details do not however please his audience.) He outlines the plot and introduces the other characters. These include Rosina and Cherubino's illegitimate son, Léon, whom Almaviva refuses to acknowledge; Florestine, the illegitimate daughter of the Count and an Unknown Lady of Rank, with whom Léon is in love; and Bégearss, Almaviva's best friend to whom he has promised Florestine's hand in marriage. He is not as yet aware of Bégearss' affiliation with the Revolutionaries.

Scene 3: In The Count's salon Figaro and Susanna discover the jewels on the Count's person and Figaro's inquiries about them lead to his instant dismissal. They are interrupted by the appearance of Bégearss and his inefficient servant Wilhelm who, to his master's fury, is unable to remember to

whom Almaviva intends to sell the necklace, thus thwarting Bégearss' plot to expose the family to the Authorities and seize Florestine as his wife. He boasts of his intentions and extols the Worm, the symbol of evil, as the King of all Beasts (Worm Aria). Wilhelm suddenly remembers the details he has overheard and Bégearss leaves—not before Figaro and Susanna, who have overheard everything themselves, resolve to inform the Count.

Marie Antoinette compares Florestine's plight to her own when she came as a child-bride to France. The comparison does not please Louis, especially when he hears Beaumarchais alluding to his plans for the Queen's future with himself—in Philadelphia. To defuse the situation Beaumarchais quickly begins another scene.

Scene 4: In the Almavivas' garden Bégearss hypocritically implores Almaviva to forgive his wife's infidelity but the Count is unmoved in his vindictive refusal. Rosina is left to recall with nostalgia her affair with Cherubino and the night of her seduction in the gardens of Aguas Frescas which resulted in the birth of Léon. Beaumarchais uses the romantic situation to his own advantage: so moved by the story of the lovers, Marie Antoinette allows herself to become more intimate with the author (Love Quartet). A kiss is prevented by Louis who furiously challenges Beaumarchais to a duel. When Louis thrusts his sword through Beaumarchais, and Beaumarchais then returns it, the ghosts realize the impossibility of such a second death and the situation dissolves into farce with all the ghosts stabbing each other hysterically.

Scene 5: The sword play is interrupted by a change of scene to the Turkish Embassy where giant duelists are amusing the Pasha's guests who include the entire Almaviva family and Susanna. Under cover of further entertainment, Léon secretly declares his love to Florestine, Bégearss and his cohorts prepare to catch Almaviva redhanded with the jewels, and the Count and the English Ambassador attempt, unsuccessfully, to make their exchange, much to Bégearss' annoyance.

Figaro, who has disappeared, turns up disguised as one of the Turkish dancing girls who are the back-up team to Samira, the Pasha's favorite Egyptian Singer (Samira's Cavatina and Cabaletta). Further attempts to exchange the jewels are now thwarted by Figaro, who is determined to save his master from exposure by Bégearss; he prevents this operation by picking Almaviva's pocket and in doing so is unmasked. A chaotic chase ensues during which the entrance of a large band of Turkish musicians deflects his many pursuers. A Wagnerian stranger appears to question the nature of this opera shortly before Figaro makes a pyrotechnical escape from the Embassy and his Pursuers.

ACT II, Scene 1: The Ghosts, feeling all the better for the hilarity of Act One's Finale and the wine imbibed during the Intermission, return to the auditorium. Beaumarchais assures the Queen, to Louis's cynical disbelief, that Art can change the course of History. Marie Antoinette warns him that such

meddling might cost him his immortal soul but he replies that his only desire is to make her happy.

Scene 2: Susanna's bedroom: Figaro eventually returns with the jewels but refuses to restore them to Almaviva. He deviates from his script and, to the collective horror of his author, his audience, and his family, declares his revolutionary sympathies with a cry of "Down with Marie Antoinette!" and the intention of using the money from the sale of the jewels to help the Almaviva family themselves escape to London.

The curtain is rung down as Figaro disappears once again. Marie Antoinette turns on Beaumarchais and accuses him of treachery and insincerity. His passionate declaration of how history and her destiny will be changed through his Art (Beaumarchais' Aria) is barely able to prevent her from leaving the theatre. Marie Antoinette is finally persuaded of his sincerity, but begs him not to fulfill his intention to enter the opera in order to deal with the recalcitrant Figaro and put matters to rights. Nevertheless Beaumarchais fades through the curtains of the little theatre and vanishes into the play.

Scene 3: The story resumes where it left off. Almaviva reminds Rosina of the ball they are to give tonight: probably the last ball of its kind before the Revolution devours them all. Rosina and Susanna sadly compare their husbands of today with the lovers they married and deplore the passing years which have robbed them all of their youth (Duet: O Time!). Marie Antoinette, as much affected as the other female members of the audience, withdraws. Figaro, pursued by some nameless shadow, comes back to Susanna. Before he can answer her questions, Beaumarchais materializes in the play and demands that he return the jewels. Figaro refuses, just as the voice of Marie Antoinette is heard calling his name.

Scenes 4 and 5: (Passacaglia) Figaro and Susanna are transported by Beaumarchais to The Temple of Love where the Queen awaits to request the return of her necklace. When Figaro again refuses, suspecting some kind of black magic, Marie Antoinette commands Beaumarchais to restage her Trial.

The Trial of Marie Antoinette takes place with Beaumarchais playing the part of her judge and chief accuser. Figaro is so horrified at the miscarriage of justice that at last he agrees to help save the Queen. Instantly, Marie Antoinette disappears from sight and Figaro, Susanna and Beaumarchais find themselves transported to...

Scene 6: The Streets of Paris, which are peopled by a mob of Revolutionary Women and their children, incited to blood-lust by Bégearss who urges them to invade the Almavivas' ball and capture the aristocrats (The Rat Aria). Figaro and Beaumarchais resolve to warn the Almavivas and the Queen.

Scene 7: The Last Ball. The remaining nobility of Paris gather for one last time, haunted by their own ghosts. A short-lived romantic episode, in which Léon gate-crashes the ball to find Florestine, while the Count is almost

persuaded by Rosina to forgive her son (Quartet), is scotched by the arrival of Bégearss and his blood-thirsty crew. In an attempt to pay off Bégearss and to save the family, and in spite of the objections of Beaumarchais and Almaviva, Figaro returns the necklace to Bégearss, who accepts it in the name of the Revolution but persists with the arrests. He gives Almaviva until morning to agree to his marriage with Florestine. In the confusion of the arrest, Susanna helps Figaro and Beaumarchais escape but is captured herself. At Figaro's insistence Beaumarchais has attempted to use his powers as puppet-master to have them all released. He has failed. The Queen realizes her predictions have been fulfilled and that Beaumarchais has sacrificed his powers for love of her.

Scene 8: The Prison of the Conciergerie. The ghosts who made up the audience of the opera are here imprisoned in real life, along with the historical Marie Antoinette. Here the Almaviva family is incarcerated with them. In this predicament, the Count realizes the shame of his former behavior and forgives both his wife and her son: the family is reunited. All this is observed by the ghost of Marie Antoinette whose former self is heard in prayer, asking God's forgiveness for herself and for her enemies (Quintet and Miserere).

In the early hours of the morning Figaro and Beaumarchais arrive to rescue the party: Figaro, apparently now invested with the manipulative powers of his creator, Beaumarchais, has obtained the prison keys by bribery, but the key to the Queen's cell is in the possession of Wilhelm. Susanna organizes the women: Wilhelm is seduced, knocked out, and relieved of the essential key. The escape is foiled by the reappearance of Bégearss, come to claim his bride, but he is unmasked by both Figaro and the ungrateful Wilhelm when the jewels are found to be in his possession. Pandemonium in the prison as Bégearss and Wilhelm are dragged off by the Revolutionary soldiers, and the Almaviva family escapes—not before Figaro restores the jewels to his author. Beaumarchais takes his farewell of both Figaro, his favorite character, and of his own hopes for a future with Marie Antoinette, who he believes will never love him.

Scene 9 and Finale: The ghost of Marie Antoinette refuses to let Beaumarchais effect her escape (Aria). She explains that his love and his art have enabled her to rid herself of her bitterness and to accept her destiny: her surrogate self must go to the guillotine while she herself now humbly reciprocates Beaumarchais's love. The blade falls, history is fulfilled, and Marie Antoinette finds herself in Paradise with Beaumarchais.

Background of the Opera

Opera-goers familiar with the French Revolution from *Andrea Chénier* or *Dialogues of the Carmelites* may find themselves on new ground in *The Ghosts of Versailles*. Though that bloody event is incorporated in John Corigliano and William M. Hoffman's new opera it is set in a somewhat unfamiliar world, one that eliminates the conventional continuities of three-dimensional space and one-way time. In this fourth-dimensional fantasy, time is both "now" and "then"; space is not only "here" but "there" as well. Moreover, the characters themselves inhabit a world without boundaries. They come from the world of the stage, from the history book, and the creators' imagination, integrated and intermingling on the operatic stage in a way they could not in life. Master and servant, ruler and subject, author and character, actor and audience, famous and forgotten— in *The Ghosts of Versailles* all of them cohabit and interact.

In the opera's play within a play, however, audiences will recognize familiar faces from *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, as well as a few new ones from Beaumarchais' last play, *L'Autre Tartuffe, ou la Mère coupable* (*Another Tartuffe, or the Guilty Mother*). First produced in 1792, it was revived, with enormous success, five years later, after Beaumarchais' return from exile in Hamburg. So great was its popularity that Napoleon would refer to Beaumarchais as "that fellow who wrote *La Mère coupable*." The play was intended as the culmination of the Figaro trilogy and takes place twenty years after the events of *The Marriage of Figaro*.

In *La Mère coupable* the Almavivas have left the castle of Aguas Frescas, near Seville, and are now installed in a mansion in Paris. The "guilty mother" is Countess Almaviva, whose girlish fling with Cherubino, while her husband was off in Mexico, has produced a son, Léon. Almaviva, too, is far from blameless—though not convicted in the play's title. His dalliance with a marquise has produced an illegitimate daughter, Florestine, who is living with the family as their godchild and ward. A forty-something Figaro and oddly childless Susanna, still working for the Countess, are also on hand.

The "other Tartuffe"—the first, of course, being the religious hypocrite and intriguer of Molière's imagination—is Honoré Bégearss, an Irish regimental adjutant and Almaviva's former secretary. If Bégearss does not sound particularly Irish, it is because it is an anagram of Bergasse, a young lawyer who had slandered Beaumarchais in a real-life pamphlet war. (That his name works out to "big arse" was no accident and must have delighted the playwright.) Assisted by his valet, Wilhelm, the treacherous scoundrel is a "Tartuffe of integrity"

—a schemer, manipulator, and all-purpose rogue, who is exposed just in time for the final curtain.

Bégearss' Act I "Aria of the Worm" is an anthem to evil suggested by Arrigo Boito's 1865 "fable," *Re Orso*. In this epic poem, the librettist of Verdi's *Otello* warns of the grave that awaits, ruled by the all-devouring worm that consumes the corpse of king and commoner alike. Bégearss' hosanna to everything that is low and ignoble in man has its counterpart in Iago's credo in a God of cruelty that created him the plaything of Evil.

History not only plays a role in *The Ghosts of Versailles*, as Beaumarchais' antagonist, but also figures as a kind of loom on which the raveled threads of tragic events are arrayed for re-weaving. Specific incidents that figured in the French Revolution are reconstructed for *The Ghosts of Versailles*, but in a context that transforms history even as it evokes it.

Among them is the scandalous Affair of the Diamond Necklace, which nearly toppled the monarchy in 1786—just before the Revolution itself accomplished that task. Notorious for her extravagance and frivolity, Marie Antoinette found herself accused—unfairly—of squandering a fortune on the world's most expensive necklace during a time of economic difficulty. The blameless queen had been ensnared in a web of forgery, deception, and swindling spun by an ambitious court adventuress who went to prison for her efforts—but not before the queen's shaky reputation had been savaged beyond repair. In the opera the incident is redeployed in a plot to save Marie Antoinette from the guillotine.

With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and Europe freed from centuries of onslaught, Turcophobia had yielded to Turcomania, which had been in vogue for thirty years by the time the opera's reception at the Turkish embassy in Paris takes place. Fascination with the harem and other Turkish delights would not be displaced until Napoleon's military campaigns set off an obsession for things Egyptian.

The first manned ascent in a balloon, which took place in Paris midway in Marie Antoinette's reign, is alluded to in the opera's opening and final scenes, and in Beaumarchais' aria in Act II. With its vision of man's capacity for flight, it serves as the apotheosis of *The Ghosts of Versailles*, a theatrical emblem of the Montgolfier brothers' belief that a balloon filled with heated air could lift mankind from the earth. Beaumarchais himself was one of the Montgolfiers' chief supporters.

Portions of the testimony taken at the trial of Marie Antoinette are quoted verbatim. The queen was indicted not only as a ruler but also as a parent, accused of incest with her seven-year-old son, among other charges.

There were many plots to save the royal family, of which the best known was the comedy of errors in 1791 that led to their arrest at Varennes. In the opera the plan is for Marie Antoinette to flee to the New World and safety in Philadelphia. Farfetched? Not at all. The ghost town of Azilum in northern

Pennsylvania sheltered French émigrés during its brief existence during the Reign of Terror, and plans were underway to bring the widowed queen and her children there when the guillotine intervened. France's ties with our emerging nation were reinforced by royal participation in our republican revolution. As a secret agent of the monarchy, Beaumarchais had supplied arms at the battle of Saratoga. The expected repayment was never forthcoming, and Beaumarchais' claims against the new republic were not settled for almost fifty years, through a congressional grant to his heirs.

Marie Antoinette's stage heirs have, so far, had in the operatic world only a brief and uneventful reign. The Greek composer Pavlos Carreris brought her throne to Rome in 1884, and she turned up in Turin twenty-four years later in an *opera seria* by another forgotten composer, Giuseppe Galli. Her most recent resurrection was in 1952, aided by the Italian composer Terenzio Gargiulo. History might have awarded the hapless (and headless) queen somewhat greater immortality, however, had Giacomo Puccini realized his plans for *La Donna Austriaca.*

Puccini was first drawn to the Habsburg queen while working on *Tosca*, and the subject continued to occupy him intermittently for several years. By 1907, with *Madama Butterfly* behind him, the composer again returned to Marie Antoinette, this time in a new plot of his own creation. He outlined the scenario in an excited letter to Sybil Seligman, his mistress and confidante: "The last days of Marie Antoinette. A soul in torment—First act, prison; second act, the trial; third act, the execution—three short acts, moving enough to take your breath away."

Like Cio-Cio-San, the queen was to have been the sole protagonist, supported by many minor roles and a prominent chorus. Puccini began researching French music of the time, and John Towers' worthy operatic dictionary-catalog of 1910 even lists the planned work among Puccini's other operas. But by the autumn of 1907 the project was foundering for want of a second librettist (Giuseppe Giacosa, co-librettist of Puccini's four previous operas, had died the year before). It is possible that the composer might have seized on Marie Antoinette after all, but the die had been cast by his visit to New York earlier that year. His next heroine was to be neither a *donna* nor a *regina* but a *fanciulla*—and an American one, at that.

In 1938 M-G-M re-created the decline and fall of the French monarchy in a period piece beloved of late-night TV viewers. Surrounded by French antiques and Hollywood splendor — the ballroom set was advertised as considerably bigger than the real thing at Versailles — Norma Shearer as a Habsburg minx minced, giggled, and flirted, letting them eat cake while she dallied with Tyrone Power as the love-struck (some would say lobotomized) Count Axel Fersen. History, in this smaller-than-life version, rushed to its maudlin conclusion in a bathetic prison scene marred only by the

midwestern accent of the Fauntleroy-attired Dauphin.

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On a summer afternoon in 1901, while visiting Versailles two no-nonsense English tourists unwittingly may have trespassed into the Twilight Zone. While on their way to the Petit Trianon, they encountered oddly dressed figures, saw structures not in their Baedeker, and heard strange and distant music. They spent the next decade trying to understand their "adventure," as they called it, how they had come to walk along paths long since paved over, to see dresses and uniforms not worn for a century, to linger in gardens that no longer flowered.

The ghosts of Versailles, which so bemused the Misses Moberly and Jourdain, need not mystify us. Rather than intrude on our world, these apparitions will escort us into theirs. We have known them before and should find them neither elusive nor enigmatic. In meeting them again, we will share not only an adventure but a discovery as well.

—*Joel Honig*

Director's Note

This Director's Note could easily be filled with historical observations such as Louis XVI's passion for clocks and the march of science — the only interests he shared with Beaumarchais, the son of a clockmaker and formerly one himself — or the affinity between Beaumarchais and his creation and alter ego Figaro, whose name derived from his creator's sobriquet, Fils Caron. But there are weightier matters to consider.

For all who have compassion for those caught in the difficulties and tragedies of today's way of life, who work in or enjoy the Arts and rightly regard them as a gift to enhance life and enrich the soul, the sub-text of this opera is of great significance: without concern for others, there can be no resolution of your own problems or desires; without forgiveness there is no being forgiven; without self-sacrifice there can be no salvation.

Compassion, forgiveness and self-sacrifice are achieved through Love — not self-love, but unselfish love of your fellows. This is intrinsic to this story of romantic love and to its characters on all three planes of existence: the temporarily unsatisfactory relationships "upstairs" of the Almavivas and the French royal family (and Beaumarchais), and the fulfilled "downstairs" partnership of Figaro and Susanna. Many of them, Marie Antoinette, Beaumarchais, Figaro, Almaviva, discover this and act upon it. Those who do not, like Bégearss, who represents what Wilde called "the worst excesses of the French Revolution," head for historical disaster and self — or public — destruction.

When Beaumarchais' love and sacrifice open Marie Antoinette's eyes to the truth, and to her love for him, she redeems not only herself, but all those caught with her in the darkness. This has been achieved, she realizes, not only through his self-sacrifice, but through his Art — Art which brings insight as well as laughter, hope as well as tears.

The superficial world of *opera buffa* can often surprise its audience with its subtext: whether the authors intended it or not — and with their past records of compassionate attitudes toward humanity I cannot believe they did not intend it — *The Ghosts of Versailles*, too, is an allegory for our time.

It shares with the best of Shakespeare's comedies, as well as Mozart's operas, a wonderful and surprising volatility of movement between comedy and deeply serious matters which can cut like a sword and judge the thoughts and actions of us all. It exposes those who deserve to be exposed for the bigotry or hypocrisy of their *self*-ishness, whether it be Figaro's social prejudices, Almaviva's guilty jealousy or Marie Antoinette's self pity and inability to forget or forgive. Beaumarchais' new play conveys these sentiments both to his stage audience and to the audience in the real-life auditorium. At the same time our hearts are warmed by this story of romantic love; it shows compassion and offers hope to those who are left in this life to mourn. In comedy there must be sincerity as well as delight, just as in death there is life and hope of better things to come.

—Colin Graham