

*The Marriage of Figaro*  
Program Notes by Daniel Smith

**Dramaturg's Note**

*The Marriage of Figaro* premiered at the Comédie-Française on April 27, 1784, five short years before the French Revolution began. Beaumarchais had completed a draft of the play by 1778, and the actors of the troupe accepted it for production in 1781. But King Louis XVI stood in the way, concerned about the play's incendiary politics. According to Madame Campan, Marie-Antoinette's lady-in-waiting who read the play aloud to the King, Louis became incensed upon hearing Figaro's monologue at the beginning of Act V. Ranjit Bolt renders Figaro's indictment of the Count as follows: "But what did you ever do to get rich? Chose your parents well, that's all! Take them away, and what are you? Nothing." The plot is set in motion by the Count's invocation of *droit du seigneur*, the "lord's right" to deflower the bride of a vassal. While the historical existence of such a right is dubious, *droit du seigneur* stands as a palpable symbol of aristocratic excess not only in Beaumarchais' play, but also in other literary works of the period, including a play by Voltaire entitled *Le Droit du Seigneur*.

Linked to political culture through its critique of aristocratic privilege, *The Marriage of Figaro* also engages with major aesthetic movements of the eighteenth century, in particular the cult of sensibility. Along with an emphasis on rational thought, many Enlightenment thinkers believed in a healthy emotional engagement with the plights of virtuous heroines in the novels of Samuel Richardson or the scenes of wholesome (and not-so-wholesome) domesticity painted by Jean-Baptiste Greuze. The return to marital bliss at the end of the play is the most obvious example of sentimentality that remains in Bolt's translation. This version does not include the character Marceline, who in the French original wants to marry Figaro until she figures out that she is his mother. Their tearful scene of recognition near the end of Act III is followed by an even more tearful scene in which they impart the news of Figaro's newfound parentage to Suzanne. The Marceline plot owes much to the development of "tearful comedy" by Nivelle de la Chaussée in the 1740s and of *drame bourgeois* proposed by Diderot in the 1750s. In fact, the first two full-length plays written by Beaumarchais followed Diderot's model of "serious drama."

Beaumarchais does offer some criticism of sensibility by presenting the "man of feeling" in the adolescent form of Chérubin. Originally a "breeches role" played by Mademoiselle Olivier (who died three years later at the age of 23), the lovesick Chérubin sighs for all women, particularly the Countess. Throughout *The Marriage of Figaro*, Chérubin progresses from hiding in closets to jumping out of windows to dressing in drag. Gender disguise gives way to class disguise, with the Countess substituting herself for Suzanne in a garden tryst with Count. Figaro reminds us that this play is a sequel to *The Barber of Seville*, and reminds the Count of how Figaro once helped him to woo Rosine. Here Suzanne helps Rosine to disguise herself as a maid in order to woo the Count by giving him the thrill of the chase. In the third play of the Figaro trilogy, *The Guilty Mother* (1792), we learn that Chérubin's love for the Countess has borne fruit in the form of a son, who falls in love with the Count's illegitimate daughter. Given Beaumarchais' three marriages, his skepticism about his characters' recommitment to monogamous marital bliss is not surprising.

Remy Bumppo's production finds an analogue between these playful gender politics and the strict gender roles of the 1950s, which would give way to tremendous social change in the 1960s. Indeed, the French compare 1968 with 1789. Louis XVI apparently stated that the Bastille would have to come down in order for the play to be performed; his fears proved to be well-founded. While Beaumarchais edited the text to remove references to the Bastille, a prison where the playwright had spent some time, the King was ultimately unable to keep the play from being staged. *The Marriage of Figaro* became one of the most popular plays of the eighteenth century, and enjoyed further success when Mozart adapted the play as an opera in 1786. On July 14, 1789 revolutionaries stormed the Bastille, a hated symbol of royal power. The French continue to celebrate Bastille Day on July 14. You might read about these celebrations in a French newspaper called *le Figaro*, named after the character created by Beaumarchais.

### **About the Playwright**

Pierre-Auguste Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) was himself an even more colorful character than those he created for the stage. The seventh of ten children, Pierre-Auguste Caron was the son of a watchmaker and entered his father's trade, in which he excelled. After inventing a device that allowed him to make a watch that fit on a ring, he gave the prototype to Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV. He then parlayed this success into a post as harp tutor to the King's daughters. After his first marriage in 1756, Caron took the name "Beaumarchais" from land owned by his wife. During the 1760s, Beaumarchais wrote a number of *parades*, fanciful and bawdy one-act plays staged in private theatres. His first full-length play, *Eugénie* was produced with some success at the Comédie-Française in 1767. A companion "Essay on the Serious Dramatic Genre" was published around the same time, as Beaumarchais attempted to develop Diderot's stage reforms. After he married his second wife, a second play, *The Two Friends* (1770), was produced with far less success. Beaumarchais was embroiled in several legal disputes from 1770-1774. In a remarkable piece of self-fashioning (the *Mémoires contre Goezman*), he argued his case before the court of public opinion and became something of a celebrity. He then served as a secret agent, carrying out diplomatic missions including a notable encounter with the Chevalier d'Eon, a transvestite French nobleman living in England. *The Barber of Seville* premiered in 1775, though Beaumarchais' enemies tried to keep the play from being performed. Beaumarchais next tried his hand at arms dealing, raising money and sending weapons in support of the American Revolution. After founding the first playwrights' union in 1777, he finished a draft of *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1778 and submitted it to the Comédie-Française for production. The play would not be produced in public until 1784. Beaumarchais married for the third time in 1786. His last play, *The Guilty Mother* was produced in 1792. Beaumarchais was briefly imprisoned that same year. While trying to make another arms deal in Amsterdam in 1793, he was denounced as a traitor to the Revolution and was unable to return to France until 1796. He died in 1799.

### **About the Adaptor**

Ranjit Bolt was born in Manchester, England and read Classics at Oxford University. After eight years working in the financial sector, Bolt embarked on a career as a theatre translator in 1990. He has translated more than twenty plays from such languages as Greek, Latin, German, Italian, and Spanish. He is perhaps best known for his accessible verse translations of seventeenth-century French plays, including three by Pierre Corneille (*The Liar*, *The Illusion*, and *Le Cid*)

and eight by Molière (Bolt's version of *Tartuffe* was produced by Remy Bumppo in 2006). Other French playwrights translated by Bolt include Marivaux, Scribe, Rostand, Anouilh, and of course, Beaumarchais. His translation of the Fables of La Fontaine was published by Barefoot Books in 2006. Bolt is the author of a novel in verse entitled *Losing It* (2001) and has written lyrics for two musicals: *Hard Times* (2004) and *Merry Wives* (2006). In 2003, Bolt was honored with the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) for his services to literature. In addition to his uncle Robert Bolt (author of *A Man for All Seasons*), Ranjit Bolt cites his father, a literary critic, and his mother, an English teacher, as influencing his work as a writer.