

MORE THAN A QUEEN

A Life of Josephine, Empress of France

Cast of characters in order of appearance:

Rose Beauharnais, renamed Josephine after marriage to Bonaparte *dramatic soprano*

A Martinique sorceress *contralto*

Rose's father *baritone*

Rose's mother *soprano*

Her first husband, Alexandre Beauharnais *baritone*

Her lover, General Lazar Hoche *tenor*

Her two friends, Fortunee Hamelin* *lyric soprano* and

Theresia Tallien* *mezzo-soprano*

Her lover, a powerful head of the Directory, Barras *bass*

Napoleon Bonaparte, a poor general from Corsica, Barras' protégé *tenor*

Justice of the Peace *baritone*

Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's oldest brother *bass*

Rose/Josephine's lady-in-waiting, Claire Remusat* *contralto*

A servant *baritone*

*Theresia, Fortunee and Claire also function as the three fates/furies, particularly when their roles in real time are finished and they appear in "mythic" time.

Choruses of slaves, Parisians, prisoners, and Bonapartes

Note to producers: Barras and Joseph can be sung by one bass, Sorceress and Claire can be sung by one contralto, the father, Beauharnais, the Justice of the Peace and the

servant can be sung by one baritone. Soloists can sing the choral sections. A total of nine singers are required.

Synopsis Act 1, Scene 1

It is 1794, the height of "The Terror" in revolutionary France. Rose (later renamed Josephine by Napoleon) is in prison (a converted Carmelite nunnery) with her ex-husband Beauharnais. They are both awaiting a trial which will certainly condemn them to the guillotine. Rose reflects back on her life as a child on her father's sugar plantation on the island of Martinique, which was then a French colony, and on her meeting with a sorceress, who predicted she would be "more than a queen".

ACT I, scene I

Main stage is dark; stage left is a small raised platform with stairs linking it to the main stage. This platform will be used at various times, and will represent various places, but will always signify isolation/imprisonment/separation. At the opening it is a prison during the terror of 1794. Rose stands on this platform, in prison.

Rose : (with tarot cards)
How did I get to this Carmelite cavern,
the worst prison in France.
Everyone here will bow to the blade.
I've dealt the cards thrice
but they never showed this.
Must my head and my body part ways?
Is that why I left Martinique?

Barely visible chorus on main stage in black hoods, with red scarves around their necks. They are accompanied by all the leads, including the two who will join Rose on the platform. The effect should be something like a game of chess in progress. The chorus as black pawns lined up upstage, the leads as other pieces scattered across the board.

Chorus:
Chop chop bangs the blade

Another head and its body are parted
The Guillotine kills with equality and fraternity
Citizen Robespierre is its trainer

He is a man of enlightenment
Above superstition

He sees darkness all around him
Assassins in dress shops
Traitors at the butchers
Heads need to be severed from bodies

He's above superstition
There's no heaven or hell –
Robespierre has decreed it

It's the Age of Reason
The head has no need of a body -- ha ha
The body politic has no need of a head
Chop chop bangs the blade

Rose:

For ten years I've suffered
Unloved and unwanted
I had such dreams – to dance at the balls
With my husband, the viscount.

Lights up on main stage. A dilapidated plantation in Martinique (Rose's father was an incompetent manager, and their plantation was devastated by hurricanes in the recent past)..

Chorus of slaves (*the same chorus as before, but having shed their black coverings*):

Rat a tat rat a tat rat a tat (*imitating sound of gunfire segueing to sound of rattlesnake*)
Ratt -el rat-el rat-el
Hiss

We the west Indies
the pearl of the Antilles
A tropical paradise

Jasmine and lily
unfurl like umbrellas
scatter their scarlet perfume

Snakes wind through the petals,
Uncoiling black lances,
ready to strike

The “grand blanc” are careful
They heap their white gold
At night they stay in their houses
Sweet sugar rotting their teeth

While death slithers through gardens
and slaves creep up hillsides
Drumming and dancing

Casting shadows
Over rooftops
Incanting cantations and curses

Sorceress, *stepping forward from chorus:*

Give me your palm
I can see your death!
Or the thread of your life
Fate is no secret from me

Rose runs down from the raised platform and asks her fortune (in running down from the platform she also runs into the past)

Rose:

Tell me my fortune!
Am I doomed to waste away here, all alone,
Or will I fly away to my prince
on the tradewind?

Sorceress:

I see people swarming like moths
Around millions of fires
Mmm, a big city for sure

Two men for you to marry
From one you'll beget children,
The other will make you
more than a queen

Rose: More than a queen!

Sorceress:

More than a queen,
But your crown roll off your head
Before the day you die

Rose disappears, back to the platform

Sorceress:

Her fortune was easy to tell
We make our own destiny
From the dreams we wake up to

That girl give her eye teeth
To be Papa's little princess
And her mama's lesson lies
Curled up inside her

Chorus:

A woman accepts what her master will give her
A bare-knuckled fist or a kiss

Hiss
Rat-el

Sorceress slips back into the chorus and Rose's parents enter.

Father (holding a letter):

My sister in France wants one of our daughters
For her stepson.
His mother left a fortune
He's too young to inherit unless he marry.
Fortune could come to our family
If we give him one of our girls

Mother:

It's too late for Rose.
The other is too young.

Father:

It will have to be Rose. It's time
For her to marry.

Mother:

You'll uproot her from her homeland
Sweet rain of this island has drained

Into her blood
French soil will be too bitter.

Father:

France is our fatherland,
How bitter my exile has been
Her husband will return our family
To its nourishing source.

Mother:

You'll uproot her from her motherland
French soil will be too bitter
She'll never find a home there

Father:

She'll go to a husband
He'll make her a home.
A woman married to money can never complain.

Lights down on main stage, up on Rose again on the platform.

Rose (*laying out cards on the railing*):

What is my fortune, will I live or die?
Will I see my children again?
Will Beauharnais be saved?
Will my poor children be orphaned?

She is joined by Alexandre Beauharnais, the husband from whom she has been separated for 8 years, but because of whom she is in jail and soon to be executed.

Rose:

How strange to be united in our final days
We were never united by love

Beau:

Do you have regrets? You came to France for me. I married you, but I confess, I could not love you.

Rose:

You had a mistress and a new-born child. What place was there for me in your heart?

Beau:

A man needs a woman of wit and conversation. You were naïve and uneducated, an ignorant child.

Rose:

I was in love with you. You were the prince of my dreams, how I wanted to be the queen of the ball.

Beau:

You've been a good mother. I'm proud of our children.

Rose:

You disclaimed your paternity.

Beau:

All that's in the past. We were young.

Rose:

I believed in happily ever after.

Beau:

Is there a happily ever after for us yet? Or are these
Our final hours?

Rose:

Adieu. Keep well through this night.

Beau:

Until tomorrow. Be brave through this night.

Chorus of prisoners in black robes in the background again. Repeat selections from
"chop chop bangs the blade"

Beauharnais leaves and Hoche, Rose's jailhouse lover, arrives. He caresses her gently as they sing.

Rose:

These Parisians go to their death with such sangfroid

Hoche:

You must stop your weeping

Rose:

I'm losing friends every day

Hoche:

When we've lost everything else
We can still keep our dignity.
No one can take that away

Rose:

I'm afraid I'll scream when the cart
Comes for me. My children! My children!

Hoche:

You must stop your weeping

Rose:

I don't want dignity; I want to live.
Oh Hoche, I want to love. Love me!

Chorus of prisoners:

They've turned an old convent to a hell-hole
For the living dead and the dying.
Corpses rot in the corridors
They've escaped their date with the blade.
Everyone's coughing but love is everywhere.

Old biscuits, bad water --
The wine and the wafer.
Love is sacred.
Love is sacred.

They're copulating in the corridors,
one last frenzy before the blade.
Unfaithful lovers, we're all betrothed to the blade.

.

Loud sound of the guillotine blade striking.

Rose: *Beauharnais! (collapsing into the arms of her lover).*

Lights dim.

ACT I, scene 2

Synopsis: After the terror ended, France entered its greatest period of decadence, as people, rendered almost insane by the events of the revolution, plunged into life despite a shattered economy and food shortages. "Victim's Balls" were a regular feature, as the well-to-do mocked the tragedies they had survived.

A Paris salon, a large bland room in the Luxembourg Palace

Chorus of “victims” at a “Victims’ Ball” :

The women wear simple white dresses (reminiscent of the shifts worn by the about-to-be-executed, and of the new Greco-roman fashions, and of the simple muslin dresses worn by Rose on Martinique). The dresses are revealing, in some cases transparent. They all have a red silk ribbon or thread around their throats (suggestive of the guillotine cut). The men wear shift-like blouses similar to the women’s dresses. Some carry loaves of bread (which they carry suggestively) as it became usual for people to bring their government-issued loaves to parties and dinners.

Chorus plus Rose, Hoche, Barras, Fortunee and Theresia:

I’m so sorry I didn’t die (bobbing their heads)
I don’t know what I was thinking!
I must have lost my head --
No! scheduling conflicts
delayed it

Barras *the most powerful man in France, a member of the directorate, salacious, lascivious, brilliant and greedy:*

That’s what everyone says. Nobody means it.

All:

Starvation may do it
Here’s bread for the party (*tossing loaves of bread into a bowl*)

Barras:

There’s money to be made in civil ruin

All:

Tomorrow I’m having a sale
I’ll sell all my Titians and Rubens

Barras:

It’s a good time to buy

All:

Then dance, drink and eat
And do it all over again!

Barras:

I’m always willing to give a loan
At a generous rate of interest

Rose and Fortunee and Theresia:

The women of Paris are very resourceful

Barras:

They're not British angels
Or Italian madonnas

R,F,T:

We're powerful women of wit
The women of Paris are very resourceful

Barras:

The directorate supports political,
financial and sexual freedom
for women.

R,F,T:

We stormed the Bastille
We plucked a queen from her boudoir
We murdered a king
A woman plunged a knife in the
Priest, Robespierre

Theresia:

I shamed my lover into toppling the beast

Chorus:

She's the hero of France
For making men dance

R, F, T:

We host the salons
Have many connections
Pull manifold strings
And when we've no money
We know what to sell

Male Chorus:

They have good heads
On pretty shoulders

Barras:

Their husbands are dead or divorced;
They need money. It's a good time to invest.

Rose:

I'll need a monthly retainer

Fortunee:

A cottage on the Left Bank

Theresia:

A service of Sevres fine china

Male Chorus:

Don't think she's a whore
Who charges by the hour
She has a good head
On valuable shoulders

Now a series of duets as people come together and separate to the sounds of a fractured, frenetic waltz (the waltz, with the couple clasped in each other's arms, was considered almost obscenely sexual).

Barras and Bonaparte duet

Bona:

These women of Paris
Are utterly enchanting
Have they no masters
To keep them at home?

Barras (laughing):

No man is master of a woman here;
Woman is mistress of us all.
The directorate supports their freedom
To marry, to inherit, to divorce

General Bonaparte, I think you should marry.
Politics demands it.
Citizen Beauharnais is
gracious and good natured.
She knows all the powerful men.

Bona:

Does she have money?

Barras:

She lives like a queen, all men are her bankers.
If she has no money she knows how to get it.
Her style and manners commend her to everyone.

She will help them overlook your crudeness.
Her gentleness will help them forgive your brutish demeanor.

Rose and Hoche duet

Hoche:

I adore you, my beautiful Rose of Martinique, my pearl of the Indies. I don't want to leave you.

Rose:

You were my light in the prison, an island I clung too.

Hoche:

My wife has given birth, I really must go to her now.

Rose:

You are my lover king.
Your hair is like golden sunshine,
your eyes are like blue lagoons.
When I'm with you I remember my homeland,
the warm beach, and the sea.
to be held in your arms is to be rocked
in a boat in a harbour.

Hoche:

The army has called me.
Dear Rose I have to leave you.
Though I love you, a man has his duties.
My wife needs me.
The army calls me.

Rose and Barras duet (*She is his official mistress, presiding at his salon.*)

Barras:

Do you have everything you need dear Rose?

Rose:

I do. Thank you so much for your loan. My children have a home and food to eat.

Barras:

I'm happy to help such a charming family.
Let me know if I can be of more assistance.

Rose:

I've been thinking, Barras, that maybe I should marry.
A woman alone is always in danger.
A man would give security and respectability.

Barras:

How do you feel about my protégé, Bonaparte?

Rose:

Bonaparte? He's just a penniless general, isn't he?

Barras:

Penniless now, perhaps, but he's an exceptional military man.
He's certain to go far, though he's a coarse Corsican lacking in social graces.

Rose:

I love my independence. If I marry, I may find my freedoms curtailed.

Barras:

Bonaparte is a soldier and will be often in the field.
He's determined to conquer Italy. I believe he's a romantic at heart.
He'll be a hero to win his lady's favour.

Rose:

I was a romantic once. It was so long ago.
I dreamed of a prince in shining armour.
I've come to love my independence.
If only money weren't a constant source of worry.

Rose and Bonapart duet

Bona:

Good evening madame. Are you enjoying this party?

Rose:

I always enjoy seeing my friends' pleasure.

Bona:

When I first saw you, I knew I had to love you.

Rose:

How can you love a stranger?

Bona:

It is my fate to love you.
You are my luck; my destiny demands you.
Whenever I see the moon I think only of you, her reflection.
You are all that I need. With you I can conquer the world.

Rose:

I am not the moon. I am not a goddess,

only a poor woman trying to support two children.

Bona:

Marry me. I'll take care of you and your children.
I'll look at the moon from the mountains of Italy
and worship you, only you, my goddess Josephine.

Rose:

Must I give up my name?

Bona:

What's a name? You shall be my goddess Josephine.

Lights dim and everyone leaves.

Act 1, Scene 3

The wedding (a civil union), which can take place in the same setting

Enter a justice of the peace, Barras, and Josephine.

JP:

This civil ceremony is scheduled for eight p.m. Where is the bride?
Where is the groom? Where is the witness?

Barras nods, Josephine nods.

Nobody sings.

After some time, the jp looks at his watch, and walks off stage.

After some more time, Barras looks at his watch and walks off stage.

Josephine sits down.

After some more time, Bonapart rushes onstage, breathless and excited.

Bona:

Hurry, hurry, let's have the wedding. In two days I'm off to win Italy.

Curtain. End of Act 1.