More Than a Queen

Synopsis of the Libretto

by felicia klingenberg

In a treaty of 1763, Britain forced France to choose between keeping the "acre of snow" that was Canada, or the sweet white gold of the Antilles Islands . France chose the "sugar islands" and thus three months later when Rose (later to become the Empress Josephine, consort of Napoleon Bonaparte) was born on Martinique, her French citizenship was secure.

As a third generation colonial, her mother knew only life on a slave-holding plantation, but her father was a newcomer with ambitions to return his family to France. Rose grew up within the tensions of a tropical paradise populated by oppressive French landowners and exploited black slaves, an island mother and a European father, the wealth of sugar and the poverty of culture.

More Than A Queen explores the ways that what people call destiny unfolds from the circumstances of birth. It is a biography, a life of Josephine, but one that hypothesizes how and why she became the most powerful woman in France while simultaneously being victimized by a cruel and domineering husband.

In the years since her death, Josephine has been labelled a courtesan, an unfit mother, a vile gold-digger. But history has been written by those who continue to admire the man who abused her. Her primary motivation was always love. As a young woman her ideas about love, informed as they were by the inequalities and tensions of her childhood home, were faulty, and she often made bad choices in the name of love. But ultimately she developed the generosity of heart and spirit to triumph. Through the contemporary lenses provided by psychoanalytic, feminist, and cultural studies, the drama offers Josephine as a role model of a woman who will fight against multiple adverse circumstances while growing in dignity and acceptance.

Act One, Scene One begins in Paris in 1794, during the time known as "The Terror" . Rose is a prisoner in the most notorious prison, a converted Carmelite nunnery. Expecting a quick trial and execution, she contemplates her childhood and the marriage that brought her to France at age 14. She remembers the slave sorceress of Martinique who predicted she would be "more than a Queen" . Her ex-husband, Beauharnais, is also incarcerated. They sing a duet in which they express mutual love of the two children the marriage produced. Beauharnais leaves the stage and Rose is joined by her jailhouse lover, General Hoche. As they sing a love duet, they are joined by a chorus of prisoners who describe the desperate carnal love of those condemned to die as a sacred form of communion, as sacred as the love of the brides of Christ for their spiritual husband.

Act One, Scene Two takes place just after "The Terror". Rose has survived and she and her friends are enjoying a "victims ball", a macabre party where the guests mock the deaths they have so narrowly escaped. This is the most decadent period in French history, as well as a seriously impoverished time. Everything is for sale. Rose and her friends find ways to serve – and service – the most powerful men in order to procure food and shelter for themselves and their children. By the end of the act Rose has agreed to marry a poor Corsican General, Napoleon Buonaparte, who has fallen madly in love with her.

The four scenes of **Act Two** all take place after the marriage, as Rose (now renamed Josephine) becomes increasingly dominated by and dependent on Napoleon. She reverts inexorably to the tense inequalities of her parental home. Her friends observe, "her mother's lesson lies curled up inside her."

Scene One takes place shortly after the marriage, when Napoleon is campaigning in Italy. He calls for Josephine to join him when he has occupied Milan. She delays as long as she can, preferring to stay in Paris with yet another lover. When he goes east to conquer Egypt he calls for her again but Josephine is busy buying and selling army supplies with her lover.

In **Act Two, Scene Two** Napoleon has at last returned to Paris after his Middle Eastern military adventures. Josephine, who is not at home when she hears the news of his return, rushes to get there before his siblings, but she takes the wrong road and arrives home after Napoleon's siblings have filled him with spiteful stories about her infidelities. Napoleon

throws her out of the house, but she spends the night begging him to relent. When she at last submits totally to him, telling him "if I am not your wife, I am nothing", he relents but promises to curtail the freedoms of the powerful and independent women of France.

In **Act Two, scene Three**, Josephine is mad with jealousy as she hears Napoleon upstairs in their home with a mistress. Her friends counsel her to ignore it, but Josephine fears one of his mistresses will become pregnant, thus proving that Napoleon can father children. Since they have none, he will put her away for a fertile wife who can provide him with an heir. Napoleon comes downstairs and taunts her with his sexual infidelity.

In **Act Two, scene Four**, Napoleon's brother pressures him to put Josephine aside and take another wife, but Napoleon says "she is my luck/ My destiny demands her", and makes plans to crown her as empress. Six years later he does divorce her.

In **Act Three, scene One** Josephine is alone while in the distance a chorus sings praise and thanksgiving for the birth of a son to Napoleon and his new bride, the Austrian Princess Marie Louis. But Napoleon is defeated in his next war and the Russian Tsar, who has invaded Paris, wants to meet with Josephine. Bonaparte, exiled in Elba, anguishes over his lost empire. Josephine lies dying while a chorus of French citizens sing praises to her for her generosity and loving kindness toward all: "she showered her petals, like merciful rain, gentle and gracious, more than a queen." Her children, nurtured by her love, will raise their own children, who will occupy all the thrones of Europe and replenish Europe after the destruction caused by Napoleon. Josephine both fulfilled and transcended her destiny.