

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

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Part 1 – A singular success

FM: Hello Alain Sandrier, together let's take a look at *The Marriage of Figaro* which is without a doubt the great comic success of the age of Enlightenment; a success which, incidentally, has never been replicated since. However, it is not the most representative of plays, nor the most representative of comedies of the Enlightenment. So how can this paradox be explained?

AS: Yes Fabrice. What a success and a success which effectively remains singular. Beaumarchais, who did not consider himself as a writer by profession but rather an amateur playwright, wrote this masterpiece following a rather complex process where he shifts from his initial theoretic ambition to plumb the depths of an approach which was not his. Before anything else, he wanted to put himself in Diderot's shoes and win renown for the "dramatic serious genre" as he called it, and that's how he made his way onto the French Comedy stage in 1768. But after several mixed successes, he converted to comedy with *The Barber of Seville* which would bring him great success and necessitate a renewed vision of comedy, even if Molière's influence was far from being forgotten as this play could be seen as brilliant variation of *The School for Wives*.

The novelty that he provided is in the rhythm and dramatic discoveries that we must look for. The articulacy of characters, great comedians on their own, Figaro as well as the Count Almaviva who would make an appearance here, comic situations of misunderstanding pushed to a degree of unbelievable virtuosity and then also, not without scandal, the pleasure of music and song, although the French Comedy would do everything to not be confused with Comic Opera which was a speciality of this mix.

In short, Beaumarchais pushed French comedians in their corner by attempting to bring back, these are his own words, "our fathers' frank gaiety". There is something very astute and opportunist in Beaumarchais. He made it seem like he was there to restore Molière's simple pleasure of comedy and revive it and in fact, he put comedy on a new path, quicker and which little by little revealed its true potential.

Part 2 – Aesthetic and political

FM: So precisely, what does this novelty consist of, which would be the characteristic of the world of *The Marriage of Figaro*?

AS: It is with *The Marriage* that Beaumarchais's originality is indeed acclaimed. Everything is a step above the first comedy, more speed, more characters, and also more intertwined plots, so much so that we end up with a monstrous play with an impressive number of scenes and many pieces of bravery, like this famous monologue by Figaro, a real challenge that has literally amazed the contemporaries.

It is a new policy, and which shows a rather original, critical ambition, by implying the opposition between the master and the valet, around Suzanne for whom they compete. Beaumarchais manages to slip into this rule of love stories with rather clearly libertine connotations, the bitterness of social antagonisms. Figaro is the spokesman for the frustrated among this society of order that is the Ancient Regime. In this way, a form of political dimension emerges, yet it flows perfectly into the comic game to the point of being unnoticed.

And it has often been pointed out that it is the aristocrats themselves, who are also great theatre lovers, who have the most fun at the time of Figaro's corrosive flights against the wealthy, in which they obviously refuse to recognise themselves. Beaumarchais, this author who is not one of them, this social climber, has almost unconsciously mapped the mythology of class resentment when he intended above all to revive a genre as sclerotic as society itself was, paralysed by conventions that hinder all innovation.

In this way, Beaumarchais became at the same time the social vehicle of claim and the agent of aesthetic subversion. Figaro, the character, this unattached being, is the symbol of it, of course. But women in particular are the vehicle for it. From this point of view, the tirade of Marceline, Suzanne's ex-rival who finally discovers herself, in a rather improbable way, Figaro's mother, is emblematic.

It is both a plea against the injustice suffered by women in a society where everything is done for the benefit of men, but it is also a truly aesthetic scandal since this moving flight breaks with the comic register and borders on drama, so much so that the actress refused to interpret it, to Beaumarchais' great dismay, who regrets it in the preface.

Part 3 – Comic recipes

FM: But then, apart from this political dimension, which you have highlighted in part, what is the concrete recipe for this comic success? Where did it come from? Can you give us some examples?

AS: Beaumarchais is not understood if we do not see, behind the apparent ease of writing, a know-how acquired through hard work; an approach that is ultimately artisanal and very humble. Beaumarchais dreamed of being a theoretician, but he is above all a practical, pragmatic man. He undoubtedly has a sense of scene, rhythm, sense of effect, comic too, comic of words and gestures. That is why he is a great inventor of the dramaturgical dimension. With the Cherub's scene hiding in the armchair in the first act, he invents a new depth of stage space.

This is what critics have called "the third place", i.e. the ability to dig from within the multiplicity of places likely to shelter the action and its developments. And that can only be invented if we have a perfect awareness of the spectacular dimension, the awareness of the stage as a place of imaginary production. You must be a theatre practitioner, sensitive to bodies, their movements and voices. All this is what makes Beaumarchais's magic, but it is not spontaneous magic. Beaumarchais has been searching for it for a long time.

It must be said that the play has a very long genesis since it was banned for several years. Begun in 78, it was not officially represented until 1784. Beaumarchais campaigned for its representation by reading it, submitting it in its different versions, to the censors. And every time, he listens to the comments and advice of actors, spectators of his private readings, or other practitioners such as Sedaine, for example. And what is wonderful is that we have the trace of this very laborious genesis.

For example, before 1781, we know that the opening of *The Marriage* was not done on this brilliant and so commented stage between Suzanne and Figaro, measuring their bedroom, but in music and songs with Cherub and Don Bazile, the count's squire and music master. Obviously, Beaumarchais agreed to sacrifice this musical exhibition which perhaps too much resembled that of *The Barber*, and which diverted attention from the beautiful novelty of *The Marriage*, namely the importance of the female roles for which Suzanne is obviously the symbol. Even if it costs him, he who loves good words

and good tunes so much, he knows how to thwart his own tendencies to aim for a more accomplished dramatic effect. Beware of the impression of spontaneity that emerges from reading. This whirling game has been carefully crafted and precisely designed and, if necessary, finely chiselled.

AS: Well, let's conclude on this expertise as a Beaumarchais craftsman. It is true that he puts comedy on the rails of the beautiful machines of the 19th century in the style of Feydeau, for example. Thank you, Alain Sandrier, for these insights.