

7 · SETTING THE STAGE
FOR *FIGARO*

AGE
ARO

The Burgtheater in Vienna during the decade up to 1786 operated under the close personal supervision of Emperor Joseph II. Bitten by the ambition to become his own theater director, he founded the so-called Nationaltheater in 1776.¹ In so doing he shattered the relationship between the two imperial theaters, which had hitherto seen a wide variety of spectacles including Italian opera, French plays and opéras-comiques, full-length pantomime ballets (a Viennese specialty), and dramas and musical comedies in German. The theatrical variety of which Vienna had boasted changed in an instant when Joseph dismissed the entire Burgtheater company: singers, dancers, orchestra members, and everyone else necessary to the functioning of an opera house. In their stead he installed the German company of players and their orchestra who had previously occupied the Kärntnerthor Theater. Patriots expected great things to come of the prominence to be given thenceforth to plays in German, but they were bound to be disappointed. Looking back at the winter of 1776–77 and the havoc wrought by the emperor on Vienna's long-nourished theatrical traditions, we are apt to reflect on the darker side of absolute monarchy and its caprices. There were more starving artists than usual on the streets of Vienna that winter.

In 1778 Joseph added a Singspiel wing to the German players, who had previously been restricted by their talents to quite modest musical offerings. Ignaz Umlauf's *Die Bergknappen* inaugurated this phase, which lasted until 1783. The great majority of lyric offerings during these years were opéras-comiques in German translation, just as a very large part of the spoken repertory was made up of French plays in translation. Vienna preferred Grétry to its local composers. A lack

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1. Franz Hadamowsky, *Die Josefinische Theaterreform und das Spieljahr 1776/77 des Burgtheaters: Eine Dokumentation*, Quellen zur Theatergeschichte, vol. 2 (Vienna, 1978).

of truly gifted poets and composers beset the Nationaltheater from its inception, but all its strivings were crowned with one supreme final accomplishment, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782). Even it was not enough to rescue the notion of an all-German theater. By 1783 Joseph tacitly admitted this fact by recruiting an Italian company of *buffoni* through the offices of his ambassador to Venice, Count Giacomo Durazzo, who, ironically, had been the theater director in Vienna when Joseph was a young man, and the architect of such operatic triumphs as Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* in 1762 and Traetta's *Ifigenia in Tauride* in 1763. The new Italian buffo company was installed in the Burgtheater in April 1783, alongside the German company, with whom they were to alternate. Antonio Salieri, long in imperial service, became their music director, and the newly arrived Lorenzo Da Ponte was given the task of adjusting their librettos as needed. The primo buffo was Francesco Benucci, the prima buffa Nancy Storace. Others included Stefano Mandini (barytone), Michael Kelly (tenor), and Francesco Bussani (bass).

Not everyone around the emperor approved his latest move, which was in fact a step back toward the way things had been before his 1776 reform. Joseph von Sonnenfels, author, critic, and one of the most enlightened of the emperor's advisors, made an impassioned plea that the work of the German troupe not be sacrificed on account of the Italians—this in the preface, dated 1784, to a set of critical reports that first came out in 1768, *Briefe über die wienerische Schaubühne*. The public, unswayed by appeals to patriotism, decided in favor of the Italians. As Friedrich Nicolai observed in the fourth volume of his *Beschreibung einer Reise* (1784): "Vienna again has an Italian buffo company, which plays half the days in the so-called Nationaltheater, and more than divides the applause with the German players."

The most telling account of the Burgtheater and its public in the 1780s is that of Johann Pezzl in his *Skizze von Wien*, published in installments from 1786 to 1790. Pezzl was a former monk, born in Bavaria in 1756, who became one of the leading proponents of Joseph's social and political reforms. Because the theatrical reform of 1776 could be regarded as part of the wider reform movement, in that new plays using the vernacular language familiar to most Viennese were deemed the most expeditious way of enlightening the public, Pezzl, one imagines, would speak only in praise of the German theater. Quite the contrary—he takes a position that is hardly complimentary to it:

At first everyone went eagerly and squeezed in to see the new *Schauspiel*. After a few years the house was again poor. Finally we were restricted for a while to nothing but the Nationaltheater. Soon people yawned at this eternal sameness, and the emperor, knowing the restless curiosity of his Viennese subjects, again gave them (in the year 1783) an Italian opera, or better, comic opera, and it is still the reigning form. This beautiful monster, as it has been called by Schubart (who is still lingering in a prison, put there by his prince), has become the favorite of the more refined public.

Next Pezzl lists the comic operas given in the Burgtheater between 1783 and 1786 that gained the most approbation, in ascending order of popularity: *Il barbiere di*



Francesco Benucci



Anna Storace

FIGURE 12

The first Figaro and Susanna

Siviglia (Petrosellini-Paisiello); *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode* (Lorenzi-Sarti); *La grotta di Trofonio* (Casti-Salieri); *Il Rè Teodoro in Venezia* (Casti-Paisiello); and *Una cosa rara: Bellezza ed onestà* (Da Ponte—Martín y Soler). Pezzl wrote and published this installment of his *Skizze* in 1787, one year after *Figaro*, which was not enough of a popular success even to rate mention. He says in addition:

The singers at the opera are select and well paid. Mandini and Benucci are the most accomplished *buffo* actors one can see. The chief idol in this comic Pantheon, up to the present, was La Storace, of Italian descent, but born in London. She earned over 1,000 ducats yearly. To tell the truth, she sang very well, but her figure was not advantageous: a thick little head, without any feminine charm, with the exception of a pair of large and nearly expressionless eyes. Storace returned just recently to London.

Pezzl concluded this topic by saying that German opera was being given too, mostly in the Kärntnerthor Theater, but since it received less support than the Italian opera in the Burgtheater it made do with lesser singers and was generally inferior. Thus the relationship of the two theaters had revolved around to nearly the same state it had been in before 1776.

The first opera but one by the new buffo troupe in Vienna was a revival of Salieri's *La scuola degli gelosi*, on a text of Mazzola and Bertati. It had been making the rounds in Italy for several years since its premiere as a Carnival opera at the San Moisè in Venice in 1778, and it was the last opera that Storace had sung in Italy, also in Venice, before she came to open in it in Vienna. Salieri and Da Ponte revised the work so as to put the singers in the best possible light, principally Storace and Benucci (Fig. 12), who carried the day for this production and were to do so for most of its successors. Zinzendorf noted in his diary for 22 April 1783:

"*La scuola de' gelosi*. Mlle Storace the Englishwoman, a pretty, voluptuous figure, beautiful neck, and good as a Bohemian girl. . . . The buffo Benucci very good, Bussani the lover, less so. The audience was greatly pleased." And again on 9 May: "I went to hear the opera *La scuola de' gelosi* and was enchanted. The Englishwoman sang like an angel and the buffo is admirable."² The success of the opera was reported as far away as Berlin, with reservations about the acting, but not the singing of Storace; high praise for Benucci ("the best ever seen here with regard to the naturalness of his acting"); and a dismissal of the rest as unworthy of mention.³ The emperor was traveling during May and June. He wrote to Count Rosenberg on 2 June 1783 that since Benucci pleased the public, they should try to retain him until the following Easter, then sign him for a further year's contract, and likewise with Storace; as for the others, the best were to be retained if Benucci and Storace stayed, but if not, they were all to be dismissed. The fate of Vienna's buffo troupe hung on the wishes of its two principal singers—or more precisely, on the availability of Benucci. As Joseph wrote on 19 June 1783 to Rosenberg: "As for the opera buffa, since Benucci cannot stay, it is not worthwhile keeping the others. . . . It is opportune to distribute the roles of the *Barber of Seville*, in order to take advantage of Benucci while he is still present."⁴ Joseph held Paisiello in high esteem and was intent on staging *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, written the previous autumn for the court of St. Petersburg, while he still had the forces to do so. It was by imperial command, then, that the immortal figures of Beaumarchais's Figaro cycle first trod the Burgtheater stage.

Mozart watched the debut of the buffo troupe and reported to his father by letter (7 May 1783) that it greatly pleased the public and that the buffo, Benucci, was particularly good. His very next words concern the hundreds of librettos he had been poring over, finding hardly a single one that satisfied him—and even then much would have to be changed here and there, and if a poet were willing to do that, he could perhaps as easily make a whole new book, which is always preferable in any case. This train of thought leads him to mention a certain Abate Da Ponte, who was madly busy with all the revisions he had to make for the theater, and who was obligated to make an entirely new libretto for Salieri, which would not be ready before two months, but then, says Mozart, he had promised to make *him* one. "Who knows now if he will be able to keep his word, or willing to!" An unkind remark about crafty Italians leads him back to Salieri: "If he is in league with Salieri, I'll never get a thing out of him—and I'm dying to show what I could

2. "*La scuola de' gelosi*. Mlle Storace, l'inglesina, jolie figure voluptueuse, belle gorge, bien en bohémienne. . . . Le buffo Vennuci [Benucci] très bon, amoureux Bussani moins. L'auditoire fort content. . . . Je fus entendre l'opera *La scuola de' gelosi* et en fus enchanté. L'inglesina chanta comme une ange, le buffo est admirable"; Michtner, *Das alte Burgtheater*, p. 150.

3. "Die erste Sängerin singt vortrefflich, dagegen ist ihre Gestikulation unausstehlich. Der Buffo wird in Ansehung des natürlichen Spiels für den Besten gehalten, den man hier sah. Die übrigen sind nicht der Rede wert"; *Litteratur- und Theaterzeitung*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 151.

4. "Quant à l'opera buffa dèsque Benucci ne peut point rester, il ne vaut pas la peine de garder les autres. . . . Il sera tems de distribuer tout de suite les rôles du *Barbiere de Seville*, afin d'en tirer encore parti pendant la presence de Benucci"; Payer von Thurn, *Joseph II als Theaterdirektor*, p. 33.

do in an Italian opera."⁵ More than a hint of self-delusion emerges here. How could the imperial theater poet be anything but "in league" with the theater's music director? He would soon lose his job were he not.

Da Ponte was indeed busy with his revisions. Viennese versions of Cimarosa's *L'italiana in Londra*, Sarti's *Fra i due litiganti*, and Anfossi's *Il curioso indiscreto* followed in quick succession after Salieri's opera. Zinzendorf commented on each in his diary. Mozart inserted his foot in the door, as it were, by writing substitute arias for Aloysia Lange and Valentin Adamberger, the first two German singers to perform alongside the Italians, in Anfossi's opera. Mozart implies in a letter to his father (21 June 1783) that these arias were commissioned; yet the strenuous efforts by Salieri, under orders from the theater director, Count Rosenberg, to dissuade Adamberger from singing K. 420, also reported by Mozart (2 July 1783), would suggest the contrary.

The Viennese premiere of Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* took place on 13 August 1783. Joseph reported the next day in glowing terms on the troupe's acting, which exceeded his expectations: "As for their acting, they acquitted themselves even better than was hoped, above all Benucci, who in certain moments copied and all but became Schröder [principal tragic actor of the German troupe]. La Storaçe sang an *aria cantabile* very well."⁶ The lyric number in question was probably Rosina's cavatina "Giusto ciel!" which closed act 1. As to the acting of La Storaçe, Joseph complained of some coarseness, lapsing from French into Italian for the term *sguaiatezza*. *Il barbiere* held the stage of the Burgtheater for five consecutive seasons. In several senses it paved the way for an operatic version of the second play in the Figaro cycle, which first became known to the world at large during 1784.

Paisiello himself returned in triumph to Vienna in 1784. He had been fêted there when he passed through in 1776 on his way to Russia with a special performance of his opera *La molinara*. On his return he was heaped with new honors. Joseph asked him to write an original work for the buffo troupe. A new libretto was prepared expressly for him, not by Da Ponte, who was considered too inexperienced still, but by his archrival, the Abate Casti. Thus emerged *Il Rè Teodoro in Venezia*, fashioned from an episode of Voltaire's *Candide*. The 1783–84 season had languished for lack of successful productions, not because of the operas, but because of the absence of Benucci, who honored his commitments to Rome. When he returned in May 1784, even the mediocre scores caught the public's imagination.

5. Letter of 7 May 1783: "der Buffo ist besonders gut. er heist Benuci . . . wir haben hier einen gewissen abate da Ponte als Poeten. — dieser hat nunmehr mit der Correctur im theater rasend zu thun. — muss *per obligo* ein ganz Neues büchel für dem Salieri machen. — das wird vor 2 Monathen nicht fertig werden. — dann hat er mir ein Neues zu machen versprochen; — wer weis nun ob er dann auch sein Wort halten kann — oder will! — sie wissen wohl die Herrn Italiener sind ins gesicht sehr artig! — genug, wir kennen sie! — ist er mit Salieri verstanden, so bekomme ich mein lebtag keins — und ich möchte gar zu gerne mich auch in einer Welschen opera zeigen."

6. "Ils s'en sont tirés pour l'action en verité au dela de l'esperance, surtout Benucci qui dans des certains moments a copié et presque frisé Schröder. La Storaçi à tres bien chanté un air cantabile"; Payer von Thurn, *Joseph II als Theaterdirektor*, p. 35.

EXAMPLE 7.1A-B.

A: Paisiello, *Il Rè Teodoro a Venezia*, No. 2

B: *Figaro*, No. 4

A
Allegro moderato



B
Allegro con spirito



Zinzendorf summed up the situation in three words with respect to a 1790 revival of *Il Rè Teodoro*: “Benucci anima tout.”⁷ Of the premiere on 23 August 1784 he reported that there were many beautiful pieces but the opera was long and the public did not enjoy it. He cited in particular the piece sung by Mandini in the title role: “The aria ‘Io re sono’ scarcely pleased me.”⁸ Can it be coincidence that Mozart chose the same general tempo, meter, key, and head-motif for Bartolo’s revenge aria “La vendetta” in *Le nozze di Figaro* (Ex. 7.1A–B)? Mozart had friendly relations with the Neapolitan master, as is evident in his letter to his father of 9–17 June 1784: “I am fetching Paisiello in my carriage, as I want him to hear both my pupil and my compositions.”⁹ Beginning a bass aria with identical music (but then going on to write an entirely different piece, as his text demanded) may have been Mozart’s way of expressing friendly emulation, as only one composer can emulate another.

Salieri cannot help but have been overshadowed by the presence of Paisiello in Vienna, but he had the good fortune to be called to Paris in 1784 and again in 1786–87 as an opera composer in lieu of his now aged mentor, Gluck. Joseph was instrumental here, too. He remained in close touch with his sister Marie Antoinette, queen of France, and they corresponded about theatrical matters, among many other things. Back in Vienna in late 1784, Salieri set Da Ponte’s original libretto, the long-deferred work mentioned by Mozart in May 1783, *Un ricco d’un giorno*.

7. “Benucci animated all”; Michtner, *Das alte Burgtheater*, p. 394.

8. “L’air Io re sono ne me plut guère. . . . Bref il y a beaucoup de beaux morceaux, mais l’opéra est long et le public ne l’a pas goûté”; *ibid.*, p. 393n26. For a list of incipits in some arias in *Il Rè Teodoro* and an attempt to compare them with Mozart, see Wolfgang Ruf, *Die Rezeption von Mozarts “Le nozze di Figaro” bei den Zeitgenossen* (Wiesbaden, 1977), p. 63.

9. “ich werde den Paesello mit dem Wagen abholen, um ihm meine Composition und meine schülerin hören zu lassen”; 12 June 1784. Michael Kelly, in his *Reminiscences* (London, 1826), I: 234–35, comments on the friendly meeting of the two; and Rochlitz, in his “Anekdoten” in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 1 (1798/99): col. 115, says he heard Mozart speak favorably of Paisiello, whose works he knew very well (“So habe ich ihn z. B. sehr vorthellhaft von Paisiello, dessen Arbeiten ihm sehr wohl bekannt waren, sprechen hören”).

The opera was a total failure, leading Salieri to swear he would never work with Da Ponte again. Yet Da Ponte retained the confidence of the emperor and remained theater poet—which meant that he could look to other collaborators. Mozart's hour was approaching. Salieri's preoccupations with Paris, his failed Viennese collaboration with Da Ponte—these conditions were combining to prepare the coming to pass of a miracle.¹⁰

The small theater next to the palace that witnessed this miracle was plain, almost homely, during the 1780s, in keeping with Joseph's vaunted severity and simplicity. An Austrian engraver, J. E. Mansfeld, rendered the stage and audience in a partial view for Joseph Richter's *Bildergalerie weltlicher Misbräuche* (1785; Fig. 13): four tiers of boxes without adornment continue directly onto the apron of the stage, under an undecorated proscenium arch. The boxes are also documented on a contemporary engraving showing the plan of the ground floor and the first level above it (Fig. 14). These documents should be studied together, for they confirm each other, though they do not reflect the many phases the theater went through in its long history.¹¹ There were only a few loges on the left side on the ground floor. At the level above, the choicest of all, box number 2 was rented to Prince Esterházy;¹² directly across on the right side was the loge of the director, Count Rosenberg, adjoining the imperial double loge, whence Emperor Joseph watched the productions of his companies and where he customarily sat at concerts, as when a forte-piano was played on the stage.¹³ In the "Parterre noble" Mansfeld shows many ladies, seated on benches, as well as gentlemen. The variety of costume depicted suggests a diversity of social class and a certain informality. On stage, the actress in wide pannier and feathered headdress gesticulating to her male partner is preaching a sermon to her husband.¹⁴ It is a pity the artist set so little store by depicting the members of the orchestra. From the plan of the ground floor we can see that the entrance to the orchestra space in front of the stage was on the left. In Mansfeld's

10. Johannes Brahms spoke of the opera using this very term: "Each number in Mozart's *Figaro* is for me a miracle; it is simply incomprehensible how anybody was able to create something of such an absolute perfection, never has anything like this been made, and not even by Beethoven" (*Billroth und Brahms in Briefwechsel*, ed. O. Gottlieb-Billroth (Berlin, 1935), p. 315; cited in Fellingner, "Brahms's View of Mozart," pp. 54–55).

11. On the evolution of the theater, see Daniel Hertz, "Nicolas Jadot and the Building of the Burgtheater," *Musical Quarterly* 68 (1982): 1–31.

12. Otto G. Schindler, "Das Publikum des Burgtheaters in der josephinischen Ära," in *Das Burgtheater und sein Publikum*, ed. Margret Dietrich (Vienna, 1976), p. 61.

13. According to Mozart, in a letter of 24–28 March 1781: "ich hätte kein Concert, sondern | : weil der kaiser in der Proscen loge ist : | ganz allein | : die gräfin thun hätte mir ihr schönes steiner-Pianoforte darzu gegeben : | Preludirt, eine fuge — und dann die variationen je suis lindor gespielt" ("I would have played all alone—not a concerto, because the emperor sits in the proscenium box and Countess Thun would have loaned me her beautiful Stein pianoforte, but rather a prelude, fugue, and then the variations on 'Je suis Lindor'"). Mozart's "Lindor" variations (K. 354) are written on the stage tune sung by the count as a serenade to Rosine in *Le barbier de Séville* by Beaumarchais, and thus constitute an early evidence of Mozart's fascination with the Figaro cycle.

14. Joseph Richter, *Bildergalerie weltlicher Misbräuche: Ein Gegenstück zur Bildergalerie katholischer und klösterlicher Misbräuche, von Pater Hilarion, Exkuzuzinern. Mit Kupfern und anpassenden Vignetten* (Frankfurt and Leipzig [actually published in Vienna], 1785), pp. 257–58, gives a detailed explanation of the plate, which is the illustration for his chapter 19, "Uiber öffentliche Schauspiele."

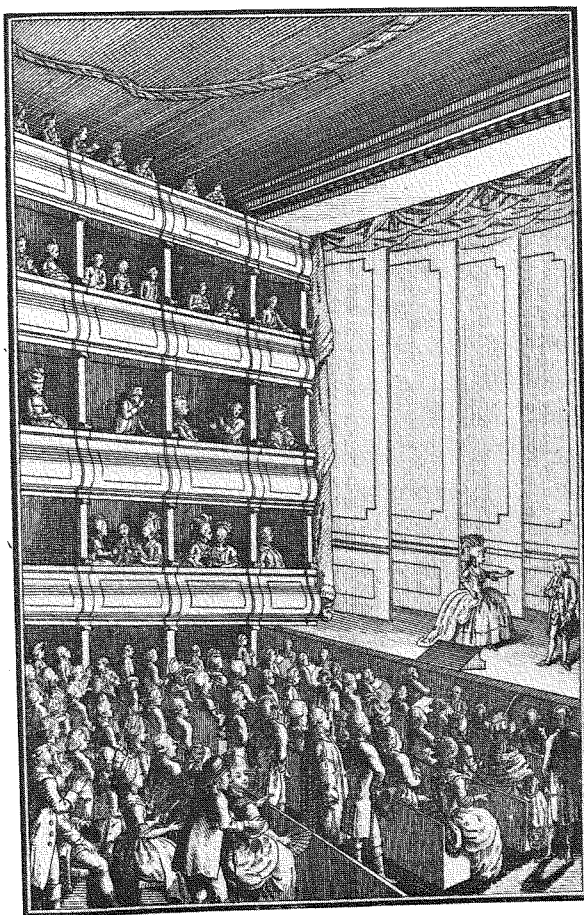


FIGURE 13
Mansfeld: Stage of the Burgtheater
in 1785

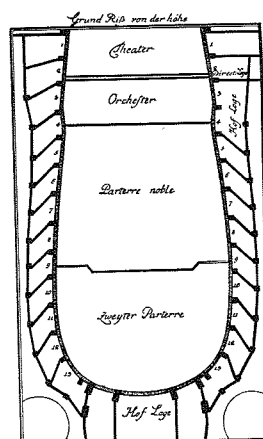
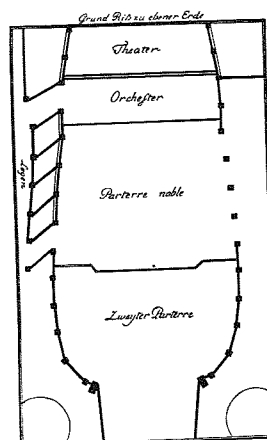


FIGURE 14
Floorplan of the Burgtheater in the
1780s

vignette we observe the prompter's box and the sparsely decorated flats to the side of the Viennese stage that first welcomed Figaro.

Beaumarchais conceived *Le mariage de Figaro* at the same time as *Le barbier de Séville*, as his preface to the first play makes clear. Many thematic strands, besides the obvious continuity of plot and characters, tie the two plays together. *Figaro* depends on its audience's full knowledge of the happenings in the previous play; hence it forgoes a proper dramatic exposition. The advantages to writing a *Figaro* opera in sequence to Paisiello's *Barbiere* were obvious: everyone knew and loved these characters. But the drawbacks were enormous, too. The second play, unlike the first, created a scandal when public performance was finally allowed by Louis XVI in 1784. What was shocking in Paris was hardly likely to pass the censors in Vienna, who had long been eviscerating relatively innocent plays and opéras-comiques from Paris.

Le mariage de Figaro was so shocking that it offended not only conservatives but every faction in the spectrum of French politics, including the radical left. Beaumarchais was attacked by the anti-royalist critic Brissot, for example, who railed against the play, calling it

a scandalous farce where, behind an appearance of defending morality, morality itself is held up to ridicule; where, behind an appearance of defending great truths, they are debased by the despicable interlocutor who voices them; where the aim seems to have been parodying the great writers of the century, but putting their language in the mouth of a rake's valet, and of encouraging oppression while leading people to laugh at their own degradation . . . and lending to the entire nation, by heinous imposture, this character of insouciance and triviality found only in the capital.¹⁵

A *succès de scandale* it may have been, but a success even so, especially with the ladies. According to Mrs. Thrale, a member of Dr. Johnson's circle who visited Paris in September 1784, women had favorite lines from the play engraved on their fans and pocket-handkerchiefs, as London women had done at the time of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Although London stages were used to indecencies that would not then have been allowed by Parisian censors, Mrs. Thrale was shocked, as she related in her travel diary:

[The Parisians] are all wild for love of a new comedy written by Mons. de Beaumarchais, and called "Le Mariage de Figaro", full of such wit as we were fond of in the reign of Charles the Second, indecent merriment, and gross immorality; mixed, however, with much acrimonious satire, as if Sir George Etherege and Johnny Gay had clubbed their powers of ingenuity at once to divert and corrupt their auditors.¹⁶

Mrs. Thrale understood better than most students today the obscene implications of the proverb cited by Bazile, with which act 1 of the play ends: "tant va la cruche à l'eau, qu'à la fin."¹⁷ The object of this remark was little Fanchette (Barbarina), but also, by extension, her cousin Suzanne.

The play spread quickly and widely by innumerable editions and translations. A production was proposed by Schikaneder's German troupe in the Kärntnerthor Theater in early 1785. The emperor expressed his concern at the prospect. His letter of 31 January 1785 to Count Pergen, chief of police and the official responsible for censorship, warned that the play would have to be either greatly revised or banned altogether because it contained so much that was offensive. The difference between Joseph and his Habsburg predecessors and successors is that they would have banned it outright without qualification.

15. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, p. 226.

16. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy, and Germany*, ed. Herbert Barrows (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1967), p. 12.

17. "The pitcher that goes to the well too often breaks"—but Figaro interpolates instead "gets filled."