

MARIE

Friends

&

Enemies

Meet the friends and enemies of the monarch

By Nancy Wozny

The backstory of Stanton Welch's epic ballet *Marie* could have easily been called "Marie and her friends and enemies," as the drama is often driven by the many political players surrounding her. It takes a village to topple a country, and Welch enlists a roster of intriguing figures to give his ballet historic heft and emotional dimension. Each character plays a role in the famed queen's tragic downfall, and it's Welch's ability to draw out their personalities and unique relationships to Marie that lends such gravitas to the ballet.

Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna, youngest daughter of Austria's black-widow empress, Maria Theresa, is indeed at the center of Welch's lavish story ballet. Equal parts master storyteller and history wonk, Welch immersed himself in Antonia Fraser's 2001 biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, along with the PBS documentary *Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution* to get a deeper picture of history's famous party girl. "I was astonished by what I learned," admits Welch. "All the assumptions that I had were wrong. She was actually a good mother and friend."

Having Marie's cold-hearted mother, Maria Theresa, in the opening scene helps establish the austerity of political mar- ▶▶



◀◀ Principal Nozomi Iijima as Marie. Photo by Claire McAdams

riages, in this case the union of Marie to Louis Auguste, the Dauphin of France, in order to improve the unstable relations between Austria and France. “We see a mother at work for her country, and Marie as a child, an innocent, taken to the border and stripped down naked by strangers at 14 years of age,” says Welch. “This scene was the seed of the entire ballet.”

Count Mercy, the French Ambassador, plays a key role in Marie’s fate. “He actually chooses Marie among Maria Theresa’s flock of daughters,” says Welch. “He translates to her mother what will happen, and he helps Marie fit into the court, like a parent.”

The child groom and later clock-obsessed king, Louis Auguste (Louis XVI), proved curious to Welch, in that he’s odd but also strangely endearing. He is quite a contrast to his grandfather, Louis XV, who was

handsome and charismatic and had a way with women. “Louis Auguste is awkward and a bit of a misfit,” says Welch. “It is very hard to fill the Old King’s shoes when he dies at 64.” Like Marie, we do see Louis Auguste evolve. “Although it’s not a great love story, they do become friends,” adds Welch.

Louis Auguste may not have been the life of the party, but he’s the best of the lot when considering his dim younger brothers, Charles and Louis Xavier. Welch quips, “They are like dumb and dumber, yet they both managed to escape.” Welch also finds some humor in Madame du Barry, Louis XV’s mistress. “She’s a villain and makes fun of Louis Auguste’s sexual problems,” says Welch. When she is ousted from the court, it’s clear she knows that Marie’s time will come, too.

Joseph II, Marie’s brother and Co-regent of Austria, captivated

Welch for a number of reasons. Joseph II negotiated the terms of Marie’s marriage to Louis Auguste with Count Mercy, and his advice proved helpful in the royal bedroom, as the couple’s sexless first seven years of marriage grew to be a major problem when it came time to produce an heir. “We know that it was after Joseph spoke to Louis that the couple was able to consummate their marriage,” says Welch. “And there were rumors that Joseph was the father of Marie’s children.”

Some characters come and go in the ballet, but Marie’s chaperone Comtesse de Noailles is present throughout. “She’s a good character in that there’s such a wonderful arc to her story. She’s Marie’s second cold mother, telling her how to dress, but not in a warm way. Yet she also ends up in the jail cell with Marie, and their relationship is transformed. She is

truly humanized at the end.”

It’s not a Welch ballet without a signature pas de deux. Marie’s love interest Count Axel Fersen fills that need and then some. Some of Welch’s most sweeping choreography happens in Act II with the dashing Swedish Count and Marie. Welch found the letters exchanged between the Count and Marie revealing. “Although we cannot be sure they had an affair, they had a deep passion and they were close friends,” says Welch. “He also plots a rescue mission.”

Perhaps the most tragic character besides Marie is her best friend and confidante, Princess de Lamballe. We see her tipsy and frolicking about in Act II’s rousing party scene at the height of the court’s display of excess. Then, tragically, in Act III, it’s her head that is put on a spear for all to see. Welch considers this act the ultimate violence towards Marie.

A conversation with Welch about *Marie’s* many multifaceted characters reveals both the depth of his research and commitment to telling an authentic and captivating story. He has mined the available resources to put forth a drama that is rooted in fact, but considers hearsay and rumor as well, since Marie was the subject of many a tabloid of the day. As for there being one character that is a clear-cut villain, Welch will leave that up to the viewer, as his ballet presents the full surround of the rise and fall of the famous queen, Marie Antoinette. ■

KEEPING UP WITH LOUIS

Louis, Louis, and Louis... same name, three different royals. Here’s how to differentiate between the three.

LOUIS XV

Also known as Louis the Beloved. He was the predecessor and grandfather to Louis XVI and father to Louis. Louis XV succumbs to smallpox at the age of 64 before preparing his grandson for the crown.

LOUIS

Also known as Louis, Dauphin of France. Father of Louis XVI and elder son of Louis XV. He died before ascending to the throne leading to his son’s early ascension.

LOUIS XVI

Also known as Louis Auguste. Son of Louis, Dauphin of France, grandson to Louis XV, and husband to Marie Antoinette. His young court governs with frivolity and opulence eventually leading to the French Revolution.

Principal Melody Mennite and Artists of Houston Ballet, photo by Armitava Saikar

Marie returns ►►
June 14-23, 2019

