

## Program Note

Josephine Baker was an acclaimed entertainer, a war hero, a wealthy businesswoman, an activist for civil rights, and a towering personality. As critic Michael Rogin noted in the *London Review of Books*, hers was “a triumphant career, honored by a full-scale military funeral, and yet it was contaminated at every major turn.”

And why should that life have been such a mix of triumph and disaster? What made her so mercurial, so volcanic, so alternately charming and volatile? That’s the question I pursued as I composed the opera.

In creating the libretto for Josephine, I was inspired by her own words. Indeed, the more controversial, more colorful statements are direct quotes. Musically, a snippet based on Bix Beiderbecke’s 1927 piano work, *In a Mist*, appears at several climactic moments in the score. In its Debussy-ish harmony and jaunty rhythm, the work seemed to me the perfect emblem of Jazz-Age Paris.

Jean-Claude Baker, often called the thirteenth of Josephine Baker’s twelve adopted children, wrote, “Josephine was like the sun. We need the sun for the flowers to grow, ...but if you come too close, you can get burned, you can die. Everyone who came too close to Josephine got burned.”

T. C.  
March 28, 2016

# JOSEPHINE

## A Monodrama in One Scene

Librettist: Tom Cipullo (2016)

*Josephine Baker is granting an interview in her dressing room shortly before her last triumphant appearance in 1975.*

*(On a darkened stage)*

### JOSEPHINE

I can't spare you much time.

*(Lights up in Josephine's dressing room.)*

We have a rehearsal, and we open next week.

So, you see, I can't spare you much time.

Oh do come in and make yourself comfortable.

Don't mind the cheetah! He's just a pet.

I never give interviews on rehearsal days, but I've admired your writing for many years,

and I never miss an issue of that paper you write for.

What is the story you want me to tell?

Is it about sex?

War?

Race?

Love?

Or perhaps you'd like to talk about people?

Who shall I tell you about?

Hemingway?

Picasso?

Juan Peron?

Charles DeGaulle?

Doctor King?

I knew them all, you know.

Shall I tell you of General Patton? How, once in the war,

I fainted in his arms?

Or perhaps in Cairo when I refused to sing for King Farouk?

You should have heard him bellow,  
“I am the King. You must obey the King.”

*(holding up a piece of paper)*

Look, a telegram from the President for opening night.  
“Fond wishes in the name of a grateful France  
whose heart has so often beaten with yours.  
Valery Giscard d’Estaing.”

*( Josephine kisses the telegram for luck.)*

Do you want to know the secret?  
How I made a career over all those years?  
A star for over fifty years?  
Well, I’m going to tell you...  
because I like you.

Change!

The public is like a man!

They’re happy to stay with one woman... as long as she keeps changing.

But the pose must be true. Nothing artificial!

Change!

Dresser!

Three steps to the left and a new costume... and another costume.

Wardrobe mistress!

Two steps to the right. Costume change!

And another costume change!

Manicured, pedicured, perfumed and pampered!

Feathers, laces, braces, spangles,

buckled, unbuckled, hooked, unhooked,

Dresser! Hurry my shoes! Zip up my dress!

Hurry, my necklace! Quick, my shoes. Hurry up! My wig!

Feathers!

More feathers!

Still more feathers!

A scattering of strategically-placed feathers!

After all, I’m not twenty years old anymore.

A towering umbrella of feathers, sprouting from my impossibly high chignon.

I was the best dressed nude dancer in history.  
A black lace jumpsuit with sequins and glitter!  
A high-necked satin gown with pearls,  
strings of pearls,  
ropes of black and white pearls,  
and later, the bananas.  
Change! A comic song, a torch song.  
A joke, a blues.  
a dance, wild and primitive,  
a comic bit with crossed eyes,  
and corking up too, if that's what it takes.  
And always J'ai Deux Amours.  
Raconteur, provocateur,  
descending the grand staircase at the Follies Bergere.  
A femme vitale in the clubs of Pigalle.  
Comedienne, Grand doyenne,  
chanteuse, vamp, showgirl, tramp, elegant savage!  
Bring on the dancing boys!  
Look straight up at the balcony, throw them your smile.  
They're the ones who set the temperature in the room.  
Raise your arms in triumph like DeGaulle. This will bring the crowd to its  
feet.  
This audience, they're butter!  
But the pose must be true, the change must be true.  
The public wants to hear the beating of your heart between the notes.  
The public is like a man.

I wasn't really naked. I just wasn't wearing any clothes!

And I had to admit, I had a very intelligent derriere.  
Most people's were only good to sit on.

*( Josephine, breaking the fourth wall, sees an older man in the front row of the audience.)*

Ah, too late. Too, too late.

A woman my age has no business with a male lover.

*(from offstage, the voice of the Stage Manager is heard.)*

### **STAGE MANAGER**

We're ready to rehearse your number, Madame.

**JOSEPHINE**

Not now.

**STAGE MANAGER**

The musicians are waiting.

**JOSEPHINE**

*(controlled but firm)*

I said, Not now.

*(softening)*

But you are most kind to visit me.

You know, to be a curiosity is a painful profession.

It wasn't easy at first, you know.

When I auditioned for *Shuffle Along*, fifty years ago,  
the fashion was for light skinned girls.

What they used to call the, pardon the phrase, "high yallers."

And those yellows wanted nothing to do with us darker girls.

And the light brown girls like me, the color of coffee with cream, we had our  
own circle.

Down South, they'd say if you weren't the color of the paint on the church  
door,

which was yellow, you had no pew in that church.

Of course, light or dark never meant anything to me.

Still, I had to wonder,

"Lord, why didn't You make us all the same color?"

It would have been so much easier."

But don't you want to hear of my children? My Rainbow Tribe?

Akio and Janot from Japan,

Jari from Finland,

Luis and Mara from South America,

Koffi from the Ivory Coast,

Jean-Claude and Moses from France,

Brahim and Marianne, discovered under a bush in the Algerian War,

he the son of an Arab, and she the granddaughter of a colonial,

and Noel, abandoned in a trash bin on Christmas Eve.

Twelve children,  
twelve forsaken children rescued from the corners of the globe.  
Their races, their faiths, a rainbow for the world.  
In the faces of these children, a mirror of the Earth.  
In the flame of their eyes, a beacon to show the way, to light our way.  
Twelve guiltless children, abandoned children,  
and perhaps a mother lost as well.  
All colors, all creeds, a rainbow for the world.

We wanted a boy from Israel,  
but Israel being a small country and needing her people...  
We could adopt but only if I had been willing to let him remain in his  
homeland.  
But for the Rainbow Tribe to have true symbolic value,  
our children had to be raised together, to have true symbolic value.

*(The interviewer asks about the children, but Josephine misinterprets the question and believes it refers to the cheetah).*

Exploitation? No!  
Why would it be exploitation? Chiquita is very happy here!  
Where would you rather be, in the jungle?  
Or strolling in Paris on a golden leash with me?

What paper is it you write for?  
Hmm,  
Never heard of it.

*(from offstage, the voice of the Stage Manager is heard once again.)*

**STAGE MANAGER**

The musicians are waiting, madame.

**JOSEPHINE**

Not now. Come back later.

*( Josephine softens again and turns on her charm.)*

Why are we speaking of unpleasant things?  
You haven't asked me one interesting question.  
There are so many things we could talk about.  
Star turns at the Follies Bergere,  
my triumphant comebacks, of which there were many!

Or during the war, smuggling the German troop movements  
written in invisible ink on the sheet music of J'ai Deux Amours.  
That's why I was given the Legion of Honor.

*(spoken)*

I was born in St. Louis.  
My mother, Carrie, worked as a laundress, and my father was...a Jewish  
tailor.

I left for Paris in 1925, when I was 19.  
When I saw the Statue of Liberty recede in the distance, I felt, for the first  
time in my life, free.

I came back to America in 1936 to star in the Ziegfield Follies at the Winter  
Garden Theater.

I was the No. 2, the No. 1 was Fanny Brice.  
Fanny and I wouldn't hit it off too well.  
She didn't seem to care much for my speaking French.  
She would say, "Josephine, speak English."

Pepito was my third husband, ...or perhaps he wasn't.  
He and I sailed from Paris to New York on the Normandie,  
the fastest, most luxurious ship in the world.  
We landed and went straightaway to Central Park South and the most  
exclusive hotel in the city.  
I was born in a slum, and now I was returning to my homeland, an empress.

At the beautiful Saint Moritz Hotel, at the elegant Saint Moritz,  
where the well-heeled mix with the hoi polloi,  
where the raffish wannabees want to linger,  
where you'll want for naught, and need not ever lift a finger,  
'cause it's ritzier than the Ritz,  
The extravagant, affluent, peerlessly opulent, dare I say recherché,  
And as Cole Porter might say from the piano in the bar where he'd  
occasionally play,  
The elegant, swellegant, grandest Grande Dame of the Grand Hotels, the  
magnificent Saint Moritz.

And as the tourists stood gawking at the sumptuous lobby,  
my bags stood too,

lingering near the front desk, as the concierge studied my face.  
His finger never glancing the bellhop's bell,  
as if to say, ... "Go to Hell,"  
though politely,  
for at the beautiful Saint Moritz Hotel, at the elegant Saint Moritz,  
it was plain to see there were no guests there the same color as me.

Management apologized but what were they to do?  
So much of their clientele was from the South, it was true.  
What did they think I was gonna do to their damn hotel?  
Would I make too much noise?  
Would I wake up the light sleepers?  
Would I blow all the busboys and fuck all the housekeepers?\*\*\*  
Burn this hotel down to the ground?  
When they finally come to thinking about Black people,  
White people... have some imagination.

Pepito was welcomed at the Saint Moritz, and he felt he had to stay there.  
He was Italian royalty, you see...or perhaps he wasn't...

I was born in Saint Louey.  
My mother was a laundress, and my father was a prominent Washington  
attorney.

My happiest childhood memory?

Well, I really couldn't say. A Black childhood is always a bit sad.  
But I can tell you my worst....  
My mother woke me in the middle of the night.  
"Get dressed," she said.  
I asked, "What is it, mama?"  
"Get dressed. Hurry now."  
I said, "Is it a storm, mama?"  
She answered, "No, ... it's the whites.  
The whites are coming."  
A white woman had been raped, someone had said,  
though everyone knew this was about jobs and who would have them.

*\*\*\*alternate lyrics: [Would I drink with the busboys and sleep with the housekeepers?]*

and resentment and fear.  
But they were coming.  
Already, East St. Louis was aflame.  
We made it to the Eads Bridge and safety in the city, my family and two tiny  
puppies that I saved.  
But when I close my eyes, I can still see it—  
the homes of my neighbors burned to the ground.  
A man being beaten by a crowd with clubs.  
The only way I could tell he was Black was by his hands.  
All the rest of him was covered in blood.  
Before the group moved on, they gouged out his eyes.

By the time it was over, dozens were dead and hundreds of homes  
destroyed—  
but not ours, thank Heaven.

That's what I left behind in St. Louis, a city of fear and humiliation.  
That's what I left behind in America.

*( Josephine finds herself directly in front of the audience member she flirted with earlier. As she talks, she becomes more and more excited.)*

Do you think it was easy?  
To build the career I had—from that?  
Do you think it was fun to carry 30-pound headpieces down all those grand  
staircases?  
The endless rehearsals and the pointless interviews,  
a hundred farewell appearances, a hundred comebacks.  
Do you think I enjoyed putting that burnt cork on my hands and face?  
Or that I liked singing *J'ai Deux Amours* every night, over and over  
again, like a damned idiot?

*(She is interrupted by a knock at the door.)*

*(from offstage, the voice of the Stage Manager is heard once again.)*

**STAGE MANAGER**

Madame...

**JOSEPHINE**

*(screaming)*

I said, not now.

*(after a pause)*

What Fanny Brice really said to me was,  
“Ah, you nigger, why don’t you talk the way your mouth was born.”

*( Josephine, slaps the audience member—hard—across the face.)*

*(after a pause)*

I can’t spare you much time.

*( Josephine moves away.)*

At the March on Washington in Nineteen Sixty-Three,  
I was the only woman to speak that day.  
I stood on the dais, beside Doctor King, and spoke.  
“My friends,  
I am not a young woman.  
My life is behind me.  
There is not much fire burning inside me now. and before it goes out,  
I want to use what is left to light that fire in you.  
And when, my fire has burned out,  
and I go where we must all go, someday,  
I can be happy. Ladies and gentlemen,  
I have just been handed a note.  
It is an invitation from the President of the United States, to visit him at  
the White House.  
I am deeply honored.  
But I have to tell you that a colored woman,  
or as you say in America, a Black woman...  
It is a woman.  
It is...  
Josephine Baker.”