

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

It can be argued that the French Revolution was a failure. The resulting dictatorial state which repealed as many cultural and social institutions as political created the Terror that followed, and caused the collapse of a movement which was necessary but very much missed its mark. However, even though the country was later ruled by two emperors and a restoration of the old monarchy, a monarchical reign would never return permanently. I would argue that this is because revolution is a process, not a *fait accompli*, and that with every succeeding generation there is a necessity to preserve and defend the rights that revolution has at its core.

In *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Poulenc illustrates this. Through fragmented, intimate moments, the layers of the Revolution are peeled back to reveal the truth under the mythology of Voltaire, Rousseau, and David. The opera shines a light on the true lack of rights of those on the margins during the Terror. The Carmelite community in this opera is made up of nuns. Much like in our country, the Revolution in France never fully acknowledged, much less guaranteed, the rights of women. Furthermore, even though these Carmelites are members of the Second Estate, they are in the margins of that class, because they live and practice in contemplative communities. They are not like other religious Orders. Instead, the Carmelites are like ancient hermits, isolated, on individual paths, in control of their relationship with God in a way that no one can or will disrupt. They live quiet, regimented lives which ensures their individual agency on their journeys.

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Under these circumstances, it feels inevitable that the characters of this opera will be some of the greatest victims of the Terror. However, they are anything but victims. They are the true revolutionaries. Poulenc's portrayal of the members of the convent makes it clear that these Carmelites find freedom from the pain in the world through the paths they walk. The work they do is essential to the well-being of society. And they are freer than the members of the Revolution despite their highly regimented, cloistered lives. This is the path Blanche is on. It allows her to find a grounding which she may have never known in her noble family. She faces the most human of fears that we all face- a fear of death. And she works not only to relieve her own fears, but those in an uncertain world.

In this production, I have chosen to present modern-day citizens and activists on stage. This is because we are the inheritors of this Revolution and, like the Carmelites, we must continue to work to ensure the rights at its core. Like the mobs outside the door, we have a choice. We must choose whether we will learn from our pasts, and empathize with each other, no matter our backgrounds. In presenting this opera today, we are offering a meditation, a reflection, and a fervent wish for peace, understanding, and compassion for and with all.

—Pat Diamond, director