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Playing Paradis, performed by Claudia Stevens

Department of Music, University of Richmond

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RICHMOND

JEPSON THEATRE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1996, 8:00 PM

Playing Paradis

performed by

Claudia Stevens
Playing Paradis

A comedy with music
performed by
Claudia Stevens,
keyboardist, singer and actor

Text, music and staging by Claudia Stevens

Additional musical excerpts
by
Maria Theresia von Paradis
Gustav Mahler
Eaton Boating Club
Fred Cohen
Wolfgang A. Mozart
Rudolf Sieczynski
Johann Strauss, Jr.
Program

Act I
Vienna, at the home of Maria Theresia von Paradis

• Intermission •

Act II, scene I
A short time later at the home of Franz Anton von Mesmer

Act II, scene II
The same location, several weeks later

Epilogue
Paris, six years later

About Playing Paradis
Created for the 1994-95 season of the Baltimore Theater Project, Playing Paradis opened to sold out houses and critical acclaim. After a return engagement at Theater Project in spring, 1995, Stevens performed the European premiere of Playing Paradis in Budapest, Hungary as part of her arts residency there, funded by the International Theater Institute and R.S. 9 Színhaz.

Lighting Design: Reed West
Technical Direction: Bill Luhrs
Program Note

Maria Theresia von Paradis (1759-1834), Viennese, multi-talented and blind, enjoyed a career as concert pianist, singer and composer of operas and songs. Medical records conflict as to the cause and nature of her blindness, suggesting it may have been psychosomatic. At the age of two or three, Paradis was known to have experienced a terrible trauma in the night, somehow involving her father. Both her parents were prone to attacks of extreme hysteria.

Patronized by the Empress of Austria, Paradis enjoyed many privileges. She received the most advanced medical treatments of the day, ranging from herbs to electric shock therapy. In her late teens, she began therapy with Franz Anton von Mesmer. Based on his theories of "magnetic fluids" and "animal magnetism," these treatments called for the application of magnets, the use of Leyden jars and other imaginative devices. To the accompaniment of ethereal music, wearing a purple robe and waving a wand, Mesmer would press the subject's thumb while inducing a hypnotic trance. Trembling, convulsions, catatonia and (allegedly) relief of symptoms would ensue.

Accounts vary over Paradis' response to these treatments, suggesting possible "cover-up" or fabrication. She may have regained her sight partially, becoming so sensitive to light as to require a blindfold. Other records suggest that she regained her sight completely but became severely depressed. Her abilities as a musician apparently deserted her.

Amid rumors that Mesmer was holding her captive at his home, Paradis' parents tried to remove her by force. A violent confrontation occurred. A short time later, Paradis returned to her parents, reverted to blindness and resumed a brilliant musical career. Mesmer was denounced by an international medical and scientific community, including Lavoisier and Benjamin Franklin, and lived out his life in obscurity. Paradis became a teacher of other blind women. She had a street in Vienna named for her.

Playing Paradis is dedicated to my parents, M. and H., with gratitude for their stories.

About Claudia Stevens

Claudia Stevens' unique musical and dramatic performances, numerous original works for the stage and solo appearances on television and radio have earned her a significant place in the emerging field of interdisciplinary art. Since 1995 her European and American tours have included Budapest, Atlanta, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Toledo, Omaha, Nashville and Albuquerque. She has received project grants and touring support from the International Theater Institute, the NEA Regional Interdisciplinary Program, the Virginia Commission for the Arts and other foundations. Highlights of her fall, 1996 schedule include the premiere of her newest work, Danger Angel, at the Gunston Art Center near Washington, D.C., and engagements in Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Stevens is also a classical pianist who has specialized in contemporary music. She has been presented as a solo concert artist at Carnegie Recital Hall and in full-length National Public Radio and Public Television broadcasts. A student of Leonard Shure and Leon Fleisher, Stevens was educated at Vassar College, the Rubin Academy of Music, Tel Aviv, the University of California at Berkeley and Boston University.