

## The Burning Chamber

### What is The Burning Chamber?

*The Burning Chamber* is based on events that occurred during the Affair of the Poisons, a scandal that shook the court of Louis XIV in the late 17th century. The play borrows its title from a nickname given to the courtroom formed specifically to try the individuals accused in the Affair.

At the centre of the story is Marguerite Monvoisin, a burgeoning herbalist and the daughter of Catherine Monvoisin, a notorious fortune teller and sorceress in the city of Paris. Abused and coerced by Catherine into being her servant, Marguerite finds herself seduced by the criminal magical underworld of Paris. She learns from her mother's rivals, trying desperately to forge her own mystical path between black masses and gruesome errands.

Meanwhile at Versailles, Athenais de Montespan, the King's official mistress, has noticed his eye drifting towards the beautiful but stupid Duchess of Fontanges. Unable to risk being ousted from her position and losing her life of luxury, Athenais conspires with her ladies-in-waiting to retain Louis' affections by whatever means necessary, including magic and murder.

The lives of these women gradually become more entwined as Athenais contracts Catherine and Marguerite for a series of black masses. When a fellow fortune teller runs afoul of the police, Catherine and Marguerite are pulled into the ensuing scandal which turns them against their colleagues and finally, against each other.

Enter Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie, head of the Parisian police, who has been tasked by the King with investigating the accused individuals and bringing them to justice. But neither de la Reynie nor the King himself are prepared for what perverse and harrowing details are brought to light, and it isn't long before both the aristocracy and the underbelly find themselves at risk of ending up in the Bastille, exiled, or hanging from the gallows.

### Why this story?

In my adult years, I have grown to love horror as a genre. More specifically, I have grown to love folk horror. But as well-loved as it is in film and literature, horror - let alone folk horror - seldom appears on stage. You could make the case for plays such as *The Crucible*, *The Weir*, and *The Woman in Black* falling into the folk horror subgenre, but I think it's more by accident than by design. Folk horror has a strong lineage of work that examines witchcraft, ritual, and magic as it relates to the position and power of women in society. We've certainly seen this in films such as Robert Eggers' *The Witch* and Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. I want these stories to live on stage as well. Theatre is its own type of unique ritual, so it only feels appropriate that narratives which explore occult rites be given a place onstage.

There are clear correlations between the socioeconomic circumstances of 17th century France and 21st century North America. The upper classes continue to be dismissive of individuals who have unconventional or uncouth ways of earning a living, treating them with disdain while continuing to

benefit from their labour. Those same elites fail to recognize or understand what circumstances may have led a person to make their living as a fortune teller or a house cleaner, a barista or a witch, because they themselves have likely never had to operate from a place of survival. I have always been fascinated by how frequently history does actually repeat itself and how we routinely fail to see patterns of outcomes or learn anything from each repetition. What is most interesting to me about the *Affair of the Poisons* - and where I think the dramatic potency of the story lies - is how the fortune tellers and the poisoners saw an opportunity to take advantage of the aristocracy. In doing so, they unleashed total chaos while securing steady income for themselves, but then were later vilified by the same people who had purchased their services as if they were somehow immune from their own actions.

### **Who am I?**

I am a playwright and dramaturg, newly arrived back in Montréal after having spent the better part of my life in Edmonton. I have a Bachelor of Arts in Drama from the University of Alberta and a Master of Fine Arts from Trinity College Dublin/The Lir National Academy of Dramatic Art. I'm also currently completing the Microprogram in Screenwriting and Film Producing at Concordia University's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, learning to expand my storytelling possibilities to include film.

I allow myself to be inspired by anything and everything, teasing larger concepts out of bits and pieces of whatever I catch in my net. I am inclined to believe that my role as a writer is often just channelling the intangible out of the ether and onto the page, that I am more conduit than composer. In my writing, I tend to shy away from clean, simple answers. I would much rather wade around in the murky grey area where so much of life tends to unfold anyway.

### **How can you support *The Burning Chamber*?**

Are you an independently wealthy individual looking to be the patron of an exciting early-career artist? Then have I got an opportunity for you...I'm only half-joking: funding is a critical part of getting new work developed. But it's not the only way to support the process of this piece.

If you are a dramaturg or a director, I would love to connect with you. This is easily the largest play I have ever written in terms of length, cast size, and production design elements. I intend to chew through everything I have bitten off, but I admit to being daunted by it. Having a collaborator to help me reflect on and strategize around this piece would help it feel more manageable. Similarly, if you are an artistic director or producer looking to invest in a weird and witchy play, please email me. I am hoping to connect with folks able to assist with workshop elements (space, actors, script printing, etc.) or those willing to provide mentorship in the writing of a large-scale piece.