2011

The Illustrious Adventuresses

Jane M. Bergeron  
*University of Notre Dame Australia, jbergeron@nd.edu.au*

Carrie Ann Quinn  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference)

This conference paper was originally published as: 

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/26](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/26). For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
THE ILLUSTRIOUS ADVENTURESESS

A theatrical exploration of the ‘other voice’ in early modern Europe

In the seventeenth century, Marie and Hortense Mancini broke all sexual and culturally established taboos by abandoning their aristocratic husbands and travelling unchaperoned throughout Europe. These two Italian-born women’s adventures were well documented by others and even more shockingly, the sisters wrote and published their memoirs; “to defend ourselves against calumny” as Hortense writes in her opening paragraph.

We are creating a play that will re-frame the historical narrative of the Mancini sisters’ journey as a poetic, evocative, and thought-provoking piece of original devised theatre that addresses contemporary feminist issues.

Historical Research: the ‘Other Voice’

The number one issue that held women back from having a ‘voice’ in early modern Europe was the appearance of Chastity. The whole integrity of the aristocratic family bloodline depended on her appearing chaste. Excessive speech and too much knowledge was a sign of un-chastity that prevented women from writing and speaking publicly. Hortense’s memoir was the first piece of life writing to be published by a European woman under her own name in her lifetime. Marie’s memoir was published two years later. By taking their private life stories into the public sphere the Mancini sisters asserted their right to defend their reputations at a time when the ‘other voice’ was typically silenced.

For the past six months, on opposite sides of the globe, we have been independently researching the Mancini sisters’ lives, gathering primary and secondary sources and exploring our own impulsive responses to these sources. Through discussions with one another via email we have developed a back-story to give us a starting point from which to begin the devising process. The back-story is based on facts corroborated by first-hand accounts (written correspondence, court chronicles and published memoirs), interwoven with second and third hand accounts (court gossip, political pamphlets, hearsay, rumours, and perhaps downright lies) translated from French, Spanish and Italian.

Historical Background

These are the key plot moments that have given us our starting point:
Marie & Hortense Mancini

were nieces of the richest and most powerful man in the French Court - Cardinal Mazarin, advisor to the young King Louis XIV. (Slide: the Cardinal)

Cardinal Mazarin brings Marie & Hortense (ages 14 and 7) from Italy to the French court to secure husbands. He makes his favourite niece, Hortense, heiress to his vast fortune.

Marie (Slide) and Louis (Slide) are playmates and gradually fall in love in their teens, but are not allowed to marry.
Louis is betrothed to the Spanish Infanta, and Marie is exiled to a fortress 500 kilometers away in Brouage. Louis sends her love letters and gifts (Slide: Marie w/pearls), including a pearl necklace that she wears all her life.

Her uncle, the Cardinal forbids them to continue their correspondence (Slide Quote).
They are both heartbroken.

- Marie (age 22) is immediately married off (Slide: Colonna) to Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna, Grand Constable of the kingdom of Naples, an Italian Prince and Duke of many territories and is sent to live with him in Italy.
Fifteen year old Hortense (Slide: young Hortense), thoroughly enjoying the amusements & pleasures of court life, becomes friendly with the future King Charles II of England (age 23) while he is in exile at the French court (Slide: young Charles) and he becomes smitten with her, but Charles' marriage proposal is rejected by her uncle. Hortense is then given in marriage to a clinically mad-mentally unstable French aristocrat, Armand-Charles (Slide: Duc Mazarin), who had been besotted with her since she was 9 and he was 21. Armand was emotionally and psychologically abusive, a religious zealot, and squandered Hortense's money. She bore him 4 children by the age of 20 (Slide: Hortense)
and upon discovering that he had stolen all her jewels, she demanded a separation, which was granted as long as she was confined to a convent.

- Hortense planned a clandestine escape and fled to her sister Marie in Italy. Over the next few years she would go in and out of convents, unhappy with confinement, asking for Marie's help to escape on numerous occasions.
- (Slide: Marie dangling pearls) Marie, after 3 children, a cheating husband and with dreams of returning to the French court under Louis’ protection (Slide: older Louis)

runs away from her husband as well, and the two sisters escape to France with their maid, Nanon, and petition the French court for protection from their husbands, demanding access to their fortunes and legal separations. Louis sends Marie a small pension, but she is not invited back to Court. All of which are denied.
Both husbands continue to send search parties and traps for the sisters, in desperate attempts to force their return. At this point their travels have become widely known. They have become infamous, scandalous - and rumors and gossip about their cross-dressing, lesbian affairs and lovers spread throughout France and Italy (Slide: Hortense).

Their names became generic terms for women who leave their husbands.

Hortense writes her memoirs in response to a fictional book published about her life. A year later, Marie writes her memoirs, after a “fake” memoir is published. In their pursuit of freedom of movement, their intention in writing their memoirs was to set the record straight, salvage their reputations, and to provoke the courts to hear their legal arguments.
• The women continue to travel together and separately - Hortense depending on various royal admirers to support her, ends up in the English court where, ironically (Slide: older Charles), she becomes the mistress of King Charles II.

![King Charles II of England](image)

• (Slide: Marie dangling pearls/Hortense in gold dress).

**Marie and Hortense**

![Marie and Hortense](image)

• Marie spends much of her time in convents or in the protection of her various admirers.
• Hortense hosts a Parisian literary salon in London where she entertains intellectuals, writers and artists.
• Both women struggle financially all their lives, fighting their husbands in legal battles until the day they die.
Devising the Script

Some academics see a difference between male and female playwriting style. The traditional Aristotelian linear plot structure in which events move in a cause-and-effect progression towards a climax is considered to be more ‘male’. In devising, instead of plot, the focus is on the exploration of a thematic idea and the journey is metaphoric or symbolic rather than event-driven. The audience is the constructor of meaning, which like poetry, is often open to individual interpretations. This less linear structure is often considered to be more ‘feminine’. To explore the ‘other voice’ in a theatrical way it seems fitting to use a more feminine structure of play development.

Devising is effectively ‘writing on one’s feet’ and is usually a collaborative process. Research is sifted and tested collaboratively by the ensemble to identify themes that reflect a subject of cultural or political concern to the ensemble. These explorations become compositions that are gradually developed into scenes and then ‘cut-and-pasted’: interwoven and juxtaposed to create textural layers of meaning. Images or scenes that have been discarded are often reworked and new material may be developed to provide bridges and links between scenes. Editing the work is vital to creating fluidity and the whole must be carefully ordered so as to construct a coherent piece of theatre.

Thematic Explorations

We are interested in the place where past and present intersect. To that end we are exploring the following themes:

1. Boundaries of marriage: gender roles, inequality, legal contracts, freedom of movement, emotional and physical abuse, separation and divorce, financial issues (Slide: Google/WikiHow):
There are 14 points listed on the Wiki “How to Run Away from an Abusive Home” – the same 14 steps the sisters took leaving their husbands in the 17th century.
Find a place to relocate to where your abuser will not think to look. If you have a former boyfriend or girlfriend that you trust enough to keep a secret, go there.

Don’t leave any evidence of your plans at your house; if your plans are discovered, it will make escaping much more difficult in the long run.

Pick up a new identity. Consider changing your name, and everything else that makes you vulnerable to being tracked down, like your car license plates, cell phone number, etc.

Pack any things that you may need and some cash; you may never be able to return back home.

Leave quietly and carefully, and make the person you’re evading think that everything is as usual for as long as possible.

Notify the police department in your new neighborhood of your situation. Give them pictures of your abuser(s) so that they will know to be suspicious if that person shows up. Let your new neighbors know, also, if you feel comfortable doing so.

Take security measures in your new residence. Get an alarm system, lock your doors.

Always look over your shoulder! Don’t let down your guard. It’s not the best way to live, but it’s better than being stuck in an abusive situation.

Get a restraining order against the abuser. This is a first step in protecting yourself for life; if the abuser comes near you, tell the police, and they will arrest you. Your neighbors will most likely fight this in court and try to blame you in the situation.

If you feel your life is in danger, consider your options for personal protection.

If you are your own weapon, consider buying a firearm for personal protection. If you do this, you will be in control of your life, and not going to a gun store is not the solution to this problem.

If you are outside, consider the weapon outside of your home, be sure to get the necessary permits and license. Certain ownership of firearms is illegal in some countries, be sure to know your local laws & abide by them.
2. Forms of written communication (Four Slides):

3. Crossing Borders, travelling, literally. Below is an actual illustration in a gazette depicting the Mancini sisters going through this particular town (Slide: horse and carriage):
And figuratively: cross-dressing, bisexual affairs, travelling as a metaphor for self-discovery (Slide: Blog):

Journeying from the private sphere (female) to the public sphere (the male) (Slide: Salon):
Creative Inspirations

- Set design: the marriage bed (Slide: The Bed)

Marie’s bed as the central metaphor representing the women’s sphere, her private domain where everything about being a woman takes place: the boudoir; sex; birthing; hosting literary ‘salons’

- Time period: shifts in time (Slide: Memoirs) and perspective;

Marie’s Memoirs

Overlapping of scenes to show parallel themes between past and present (Slide: Salon blog)
Visitors to the Salon would have included various artists, playwrights and writers of the time, including Aphra Behn, who dedicated one of her plays to Hortense, and there is evidence that they had a love affair (Slide: Aphra Benn's plays)
• Structure: intersecting modes of communication: pen and ink/laptop; memoirs/blog; court gossip/paparazzi; (Slide: old lady)

• Textual: lines from Moliere's play, *Tartuffe*. It was said at the time that the character of Orgon in Tartuffe was modeled on Hortense's husband, Armand.

• Aphra Benn's poetry (Slide: Poetry book),
Quotes from period correspondence (Slide: Letters).

Letters from Marie

quotes from memoirs, pamphlets (Slide: Pamphlet), blogs, emails, social networking, messaging, texting;
• Sound: period music by Jean-Baptiste Lully, contemporary music, for example, Little Plastic Castle by Ani di Franco and creating original music by “sampling” or mixing music from both periods to make original new music (Slide: Concert at Versailles):

• Characters: ensemble of 2-4 actors playing multiple roles, as yet undecided, but to include Hortense’s servant, Nanon, who will be able to time-travel thereby connecting past and present, celebrity visitors to the literary salon: these might include famous period and contemporary female figures such as Madame de Pompadour, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, Virginia Woolf, J.K Rowling, Aphra Behn, etc

• and, of course, our illustrious adventuresses (Slide: Classical sisters), Marie and Hortense Mancini.