

***The Chelsea Belladonna***

by

**Anna Carlisle**

**Scenes from the life of Elizabeth Blackwell  
(1707 – 1758)**

**First performances:  
Inchmarlo Gardens, Blair Castle, Lands of Loyal Hotel, Ross Priory,  
Threave Gardens and Kailzie Gardens, Scotland:  
July-August 2012**

**A play for three characters (two or three actors):**

**ELIZABETH BLACKWELL, botanical illustrator, originally of Aberdeen**

**ALEXANDER BLACKWELL, her husband, of Aberdeen**

**SIR HANS SLOANE of The Chelsea Physic Garden, London**

**(The roles of 'MESSENGERS' and 'PRISON WARDERS' will be taken by pre-selected members of the audience. And as many audience members as wish it will become botanical painters alongside ELIZABETH.)**

**The years: circa 1727 – 1748**

**The places: an Aberdeen garden, London lodgings, the inside and outside of Highgate debtors' prison and the Chelsea Physic Garden.**

**Extract from:**  
**Scene 4a Debtors' prison, London**

- ALEXANDER:** But you must act quickly. I will go mad here!
- ELIZABETH:** I will think of something.
- ALEXANDER:** Of course you will. You are resourceful, Elizabeth.
- ELIZABETH:** I am? What have I? ... Drawing skills? I suppose so. My painting? Hardly sellable commodities. Nothing else.
- ALEXANDER:** You have spent the idle moments here drawing wonderfully: dandelions, dill, dog-rose: they are very good.
- ELIZABETH:** There is no end to plants that I could draw and paint.
- ALEXANDER:** You have mounted them handsomely. You could -...
- ELIZABETH:** ... compile them into some form of -...?
- ALEXANDER:** *[pause]* ... Elizabeth, there has not been a decent herbal since Culpeper and Gerard ...
- ELIZABETH:** *[quietly interested]* Apothecaries *are* always dredging around for a better reference work ...
- ALEXANDER:** ... to improve their potions and pills ...
- ELIZABETH:** *[keener still]* ... and better serve the physicians ...
- ALEXANDER:** ... and heal the populace!
- ELIZABETH:** *[gently]* Oh, ho! You are always one for spying a space, Alexander, no matter how tight.

**ALEXANDER:** *[laughs]* Speculation, my dear, my only art.

**ELIZABETH:** It would be risky but there may be indeed be a market.

**ALEXANDER:** You would show them all in Aberdeen, *and* get me out of -...

**ELIZABETH:** Alexander, if we did this, we'd have to -...

**ALEXANDER:** We? What can I -...?

**ELIZABETH:** ... it would be together, Alexander. If I agree to break out of expected customs for you, then I will need all the masculine support I can get.

**ALEXANDER:** Masculine support? ... *[He bridles.]* That is never in doubt.

**ELIZABETH:** Now you – you have Latin, remember, Alexander? I shall draw; you will write the accompanying texts.

**ALEXANDER:** But that is more than -...?

**ELIZABETH:** ... more labour than you have ever done before, Alexander? We halve the time, we double the output.

**ALEXANDER:** All this from a prison cell, Elizabeth? You dream ...

**ELIZABETH:** We *shall* create a proper Herbal and I shall get it sold. Mine will be the slogging and the flogging, whilst you -...

**ALEXANDER:** Stop! We've not explored other routes. Surely we can think of –

**ELIZABETH:** Find us another way to get you out of here! Hmpph?

**ALEXANDER:** A lady out tramping the streets? But, Elizabeth, this is never done. Not in 1731 ...