

# Lasse Hallström's direction of *Casanova*: more purposeful than usual

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*Casanova*, directed by Lasse Hallström, screenplay by Jeffrey Hatcher and Kimberly Simi

Swedish-born director Lasse Hallström has been making films in the US since the early 1990s—*What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Cider House Rules*, *Chocolat*, etc. In general, his work (including the earlier *My Life as a Dog*, made in Sweden in 1985) has seemed rather innocuous—intelligent, humane, but innocuous.

About *The Cider House Rules*, based on the John Irving novel, I wrote in 2000: “Lack of malice, however, is not the same thing as artistic or intellectual strength and conviction. What strikes you forcefully about Hallström's film is the lack of genuine unconventionality in a film formally advocating the unconventional. Everything, unfortunately, has been quite carefully calculated. Idiosyncrasy ... amounts to little more than charming quirkiness. The various acts of crime or passion neatly balance out; no emotional or moral debt is left unpaid. The only character who truly steps over the line, pays for it in full.”

These tendencies have not disappeared, but more than a little water has flowed under the bridge since that time. All things considered, one has the right to assume that the violent and ruthless activities of US authorities in particular, at home and around the world, have alarmed and appalled Hallström. How else to explain the relative forcefulness and conviction of his latest work, *Casanova*?

The most recent in a series of American films to register an obvious protest against one or another of the current cultural and political circumstances, *Casanova* is a farce directed against repression of various sorts. It has relatively little to do with the historical figure of Giacomo Casanova (1725-98), famous lover and memoirist. Its intense contemporaneity is the film's greatest strength and perhaps as well one of its principal limitations.

We first see the adult Casanova (Heath Ledger) in Venice in the company of a licentious nun, Sister Beatrice (Lauren Cohan), a novice (“She was hardly a novice,” her famed lover later suggests under his breath). Dragged before the authorities and initially sentenced to hang for heresy and fornication, Casanova is instructed by the Doge (Tim McInnerny), Venice's ruler, to find a wife or else.

Having fixed his gaze first on one of Venice's few remaining virgins, blonde Victoria (Natalie Dormer), Casanova later falls seriously for the proto-feminist Francesca (Sienna Miller), who writes political tracts under a male *nom de plume*. Francesca's widowed and impoverished mother (Lena Olin), however, has arranged for her daughter to marry a wealthy Genoese merchant whom neither has met. Francesca's brother, Giovanni (Charlie Cox), is in love with Victoria, who lives ‘across the canal.’

The arrival of Bishop Pucci (Jeremy Irons), an Inquisitor from Rome, complicates matters further. By now Casanova, Pucci's chief target, is impersonating several people, including Francesca's betrothed, Paprizio (Oliver Platt). That genial, overweight lard merchant has fallen into the hands of Casanova and his servant, Lupo (Omid Djalili), who convince him that he needs to slim down before he meets his future wife. He has brought along a portrait which barely resembles him. Meanwhile Giovanni meets Victoria and Francesca shares a balloon ride with Casanova. The plot proceeds, not always convincingly or adroitly, toward its denouement, with authority thwarted and Casanova's legend, rightly or wrongly, only likely to be enhanced.

References to *The Merchant of Venice* (Francesca disguises herself as a learned male scholar from Padua), the Venetian comedies of Goldoni (*The Servant of Two Masters* and others) and perhaps Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, in the relationship of Casanova and his servant Lupo (in fact, the famous seducer, who was in Prague at the time, supposedly helped Mozart ‘with some of the details’ in the opera and attended its first performance in 1787), add bits of texture and color.

A great deal depends on the cultural-historical moment at which a work appears and the latter's relative ‘location’ in that moment. *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), for example, which won various awards in 1999, was in numerous ways a more promising film than this one. It had a cleverer script (by Tom Stoppard, who reportedly worked on *Casanova* as well) and more substantial figures to commemorate. Moreover, it could borrow some of its language from the greatest of English writers.

Yet John Madden's film seemed so self-consciously designed to please, and so pleased with itself, that it barely leaves a trace in the memory. I commented at the time: “Although the actors

make an effort and say all sorts of amorous and desperate things to one another, the intensity is lacking. Some of that has to do with the generally well-heeled and complacent state of filmmaking.”

*Casanova* is messier, more clichéd to a certain degree, perhaps even more predictable, but considerably less complacent. (Far less complacent as well than Hallström’s own *Chocolat* [2000]). And that must be attributed, whatever the conscious intentions of the filmmakers, to the objective events of the past six years. (This process works both ways, of course. Audiences themselves are now also more susceptible to a critical viewpoint, more *on the look-out* for one.) The satirical edge, directed against censorship and repression and religious hypocrisy, is deeply-felt and not simply a matter of going through the motions. Clumsily farcical at times, *Casanova* nonetheless manages to catch at something genuine, something that people are obviously feeling keenly: a newfound disgust with everything official. Hallström’s film has a commitment that *Shakespeare in Love* and *Chocolat* largely lacked.

What the film claims to value—passion, rebelliousness, ‘free thinking’—is a potpourri entirely conducive to triteness under the right (or wrong) circumstances. Here, however, it means something, not in itself so much, but as a program of humane opposition to the forces in the film and, more to the point, outside them. The film has significance primarily because one feels that it encourages the audience’s own opposition to present ills and injustices, as it laughs at their perpetrators. *Casanova* makes fun, whether it fully intends to or not, of Bush and the Christian zealots and the whole filthy right-wing in America, and we don’t have nearly enough of that. One delights in the downfall of the Inquisitor and his project. What’s amusing is made more amusing by the obvious and intense dislike of the film for retrograde forces; that dislike itself, bolstering what is weak or predictable in the comedy, is one of its principal means of grappling with reality.

Most of the critics, as always, feel and understand nothing. They inevitably mistake self-involvement and cheap pessimism for ‘depth.’ When a film comes along that cheerfully skewers the powers that be, they claim to be bored and find it a waste of their time. The reviewers complain that a film about *Casanova* contains relatively little sex or sensuality; the reason is simple—the film is essentially a social commentary. A social instinct is at work here; the critics for the most part form a part of the establishment, and attacks on the latter generally make them nervous. They search for weaknesses, vulnerabilities. Inevitably, they can be found.

Yes, Jeremy Irons overdoes it somewhat as the Inquisitor (‘We’re the Catholic Church, we can do anything’); however, in that very ‘overdoing’ the actor reveals a degree of loathing that adds up to more than the sum of the character’s weaknesses. Yes, the comedy of mistaken identities is hardly novel, and we have seen lovers scrambling out of windows once or twice before, but is that all that’s going on here? And

Francesca’s zeal for the rights of women is perhaps historically out of place and ‘politically correct,’ yet there is something in Sienna Miller’s naïve and earnest expressions and movements (and Hallström, above all, must be credited for this) that speaks quite movingly to a courageous willingness to oppose conventional wisdom.

These are all partial achievements, none of them untainted by predictable or even mediocre elements, but they are real ones. Whereas *Shakespeare in Love* was merely constructed to satisfy the audience’s sweet tooth, *Casanova* is driven by a purpose, even if it’s a limited, diffuse one. The cynics miss everything.

The film’s ending is a bit conformist and convenient, including as it does the notion that Casanova or anyone else can only find happiness by ‘settling down.’ The lack of a serious historical approach weakens *Casanova* and gives it a rather loose, ‘universal’ character. The ahistorical Francesca is saved largely by the performer’s sincerity. Ledger gives another fine performance. The cast in general is enjoyable, particularly McInnerny as the Doge and Djalili as Lupo.

*Hostel* is a stupid and repulsive film directed by Eli Roth. Burdened with embarrassing dialogue and badly performed, the film recounts the fate of three travelers who find themselves the victims of an operation in eastern Europe that provides customers, for a large sum of money, the opportunity to torture and murder people. Roth made his film, with Quentin Tarantino as his executive producer, inspired by “the sickest thing you could find on the internet.”

Why would anyone want to do that? In the new ‘horror’ films, half-evolved personalities, with ten or twenty million dollars on their hands, are tapping into diseased moods whose source lies in a brutal, rotting social order that holds out no prospects whatsoever. ‘Tapping into,’ not understanding or criticizing. Tarantino and his acolytes are cultural arsonists, without the slightest understanding of the consequences of their actions.



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