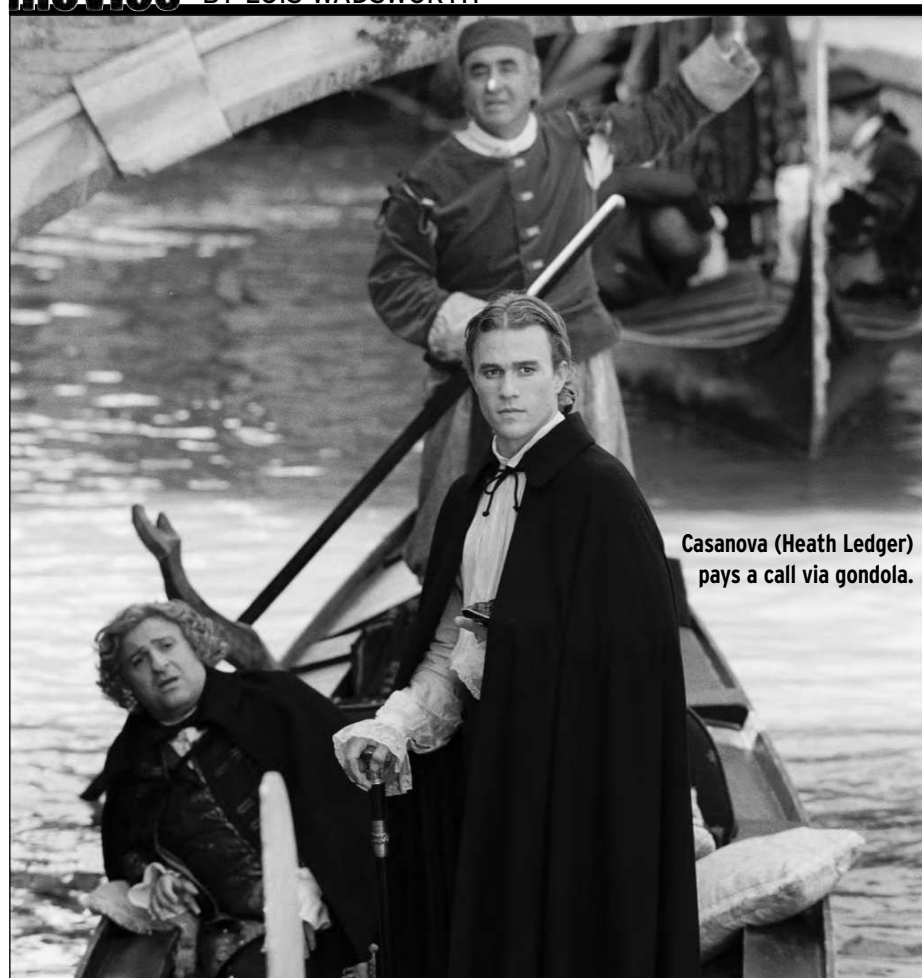




Casanova (Heath Ledger) pays a call via gondola.

The Fabled Fornicator

Meets the Venetian Jane Austen.

CASANOVA: Directed by Lasse Halström. Written by Jeffrey Hatcher, Kimberly Simi from a story by Simi and Michael Cristofer. Produced by Mark Gordon, Betsy Beers, Leslie Holleran. Executive producers Su Armstrong, Adam Merims and Gary Levinsohn. Cinematography, Oliver Stapleton. Editor, Andrew Mondshein. Production design, David Gropman. Costume designer, Jenny Beavan. Music, Alexandre Desplat. Starring Heath Ledger, Sienna Miller, Jeremy Irons, Oliver Platt, Lena Olin, with Natalie Dormer, Charlie Cox and Omid Djalili. Touchstone Pictures, 2005. R. 108 minutes.

This buoyant confection is a Renaissance romance, an unlikely tale of passionate love that grows between two unsuitable people: he a man pursued by many women and wed to none, she a virtuous literary woman and feminist who needs no man, least of all Giacomo Casanova, the amorous.

Francesca Bruni (Sienna Miller) writes philosophical books for women published under a man's name. Her mother, Andrea Bruni (Lena Olin), insists that Francesca submit to an arranged marriage to save the impoverished family. Her future husband, Paprizio (Oliver Platt), turns out to be a large man known as "the lard king," who has great reserves of wit and charm. Francesca's brother Giovanni (Charlie Cox), is smitten by the neighborhood beauty, Victoria (Natalie Dormer), but knows he cannot wed her.

Casanova (Heath Ledger) escapes from one illicit night of love to another, until his man Lupe (Omid Djalili) warns him that the pope has sent his arrogant enforcer, Bishop Pucci (Jeremy Irons), to Venice specifically to bring to Casanova the unpleasant justice of the Inquisition. Casanova's patron, The Doge (Tim McInnerny) has run out of excuses to protect him, or so it seems.

Now imagine this steamy mix of strong characters kept on their toes by political threat living in a most desirable city, 18th century Venice herself, and you have an obligation to fall in love. Real Venetian locations include the Church of Santa Maria della Salute, St. Mark Square, Piazza San

Marco, Palazzo Ducale. In the 18th century, even more canals than today carried its citizens, so much travel in the film glides along on the city's waterways.

Like the Bard himself (or at least *Shakespeare in Love*), this sweet concoction's creatures duel with swords as well as words, dress grandly for any occasion, sport masks (or switch them to doubly disguise one's identity) for the Royal Grand Ball at Carnevale. The crowd scenes in which commoners and the titled rub elbows (and more) are perfect vehicles to carry on the mistaken-identity theme developed between Francesca and Giacomo.

Carnivale is also the perfect time to introduce a young man such as Giovanni to the pleasures of love. And in an effort to get away from the crowds, Giacomo persuades Francesca to take a romantic balloon ride over the fabled city for a bird's eye view of the fireworks. This scene reminded me of the midnight flight over Los Angeles enjoyed by Howard (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Kate Hepburn (Cate Blanchett) in *The Aviator*. But these lovers make a rough landing. Never fear. Their complicated inability to elude the long grasp of the Inquisition turns into a grand opportunity for a desired reunion as well as a proper conclusion to the film's multiple story lines.

I came to the film because I wanted to see Ledger play this fabled lover of women, having just seen his extraordinary performance in *Brokeback Mountain* as a closeted gay cowboy. Ledger's physicality, easy access to his emotions and spontaneous good humor work to give Casanova intelligence and sexiness. That's good enough for me.

Now playing at Cinema World, *Casanova* is highly recommended as an entertaining movie experience that won't raise your blood pressure or remind you of your real life or the grim state of the world. It's escapist therapy, just for fun. **CW**



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