

Sunday Herald - 25 February 2001

Giacomo Casanova – that self-mythologising spy, entrepreneur, freelance soldier and seducer – has become a true sex symbol. In the modern world, his name conjures licentious success of an almost supernatural nature. But in their recasting of the legend, Scotland's Suspect Culture are more interested in the whys and wherefores of instant intimacy than the actual ins-and-outs, if you catch my drift.

Transposing the legend to what appears to be the present day (though later, characters allude to a nightmarish futureworld of guns and tranquillisers), Casanova's arena is the international art world. Sent forth by his wealthy first lover Miss Tenant, he's under instructions to curate an exhibition of his numerous conquests.

But – after Suspect Culture's usual modus operandi of workshopping ideas – playwright David Greig has come up with a lover that doesn't rely on Belgian chocolates, flowers and downright lying like the rest of us poor sods; he's a guileless, almost child-like bloke.

Gavin Mitchell brings an enthusiasm and transparency to the character, disarming a cavalcade of ladies (a range of roles played impressively by Vicki Liddelle) even when they don't speak the same language.

But it's the pace and bite of the writing – sinewy, episodic and ferociously direct – that gives this production its fire. Aided by swift set changes to intimate the globetrotting locations, the tale rattles along more like a crackling thriller than an examination of the nature of seduction and desire, perhaps because a subplot involving a hitman adds a murderous frisson to the mix.

But what really stands out is the ending; a brave coda that at first seems odd but somewhere in its protracted silences, illuminates all that's gone before. The production is about out set out on tour – lock up your daughters.

Graeme Virtue

Scotland On Sunday – 4 March 2001

A white vest with an ominous red lipstick cross hangs in an exhibition cabinet, a leaf from a modern Casanova's encyclopaedia of sexual encounters. An exquisitely concise symbol of the parallel commodifications of sex and art, the image also speaks to a society which combines prurience with the idea of sex as culpable homicide. David Greig's play takes on an altogether greater resonance in the light of the recent conviction of a Glasgow man for infecting his ex-partner with the HIV virus. If the notion of sex without consequences had an element of farce in Casanova's egoistic life, it is now repeated as tragedy.

Cleverly transforming the 18th century Lothario's trans-European saga into the story of a contemporary globe-trotting art curator, the play casts Casanova as a self-proclaimed 'spy in the sex war'. The fact he has been under the covers for so long that he has forgotten which side of the conflict he is on is just the first of a series of moral ambiguities. Greig's Casanova conforms to all and

none of the popular preconceptions. The self-assured pleasure merchant meets the repressed emotional inadequate, and the missionary of carnal equality merges into the uncomprehending misogynist. An arch-manipulator in the pay of a rich proprietress, he is a hopelessly interwoven combination of chessmaster and pawn.

If the piece is smartly conceived, the writing is equally compelling. This is Greig at his lyrical, hilariously ironic best. The nicely wrought sub-plot finds a cabinet-maker caught between the desire for revenge against the eponymous libertine who has cuckolded him, and his pursuit of a sexual idealisation of his dead wife. This narrative may take a predictable turn, but the playwright's fabulously Pinteresque denouement is entirely unforeseeable.

Looking every inch the 'skinny, bespectacled piece of cocksure slag', the contemporary Scottish rake who numbers among Greig's inspirations, the excellent Gavin Mitchell's Casanova comprehensively screws with our expectations. When he asserts that he never lies, at least in sexual matters, he does so with a smirk which is simultaneously boyish and fatal. The supporting cast, not least the brilliantly versatile Vicki Liddelle, has the measure of the multi-faceted script. Alan Williams is beautifully plaintive as the bereft and burgled cabinet-maker.

The sense of seamless stylishness, which occasionally threatens to encumber the production, is only strengthened by Graham Eatough's appropriately minimalist set. Nick Powell's similarly restrained, well-tailored musical score conveys the perfect combination of movement in time and space with developing tension.

A welcome return to form for Suspect Culture after the frankly flaccid *Candide 2000*, and *The Golden Ass*, *Casanova* sets a high water-mark for Scottish theatre for the year to come.

Mark Brown

The Scotsman – 22 August 2001

At the end of this reworked version of Suspect Culture's *Casanova*, I was left with the strangest feeling that this show should be part of the International Festival, not the Fringe.

It's not that it's a brilliant and flawless piece of work. On the contrary, it has profound dramatic problems. But there is something about the weight of it – its searching intelligence, its ambitious re-examining of one of the great stories of western culture, and the deep questions it raises about what can be made to work in the theatre – that makes you want to see it subjected to the kind of high-profile debate that only International Festival productions can generate.

In David Greig's *Casanova*, the central character is an ageing seducer who has spent his adult life travelling the world as an art collector on behalf of his wealthy patron, Mrs Tennant, but who is now returning home to curate a retrospective exhibition of objects commemorating the 1000 conquests he has made. On the way home, he notches up four or five more. Yet Greig's clever,

episodic text is full of an elegiac sense that his journey is ending, and a profound conviction that what he has been doing is not exploiting women, but opening a door of sensual possibility through which women can walk away from lives bounded by stale marriages and sexual boredom.

The show's difficulties, even shorter, sharper version, lie in the relationship between ideas and action, between the brilliance, pathos and fascination of what the characters say, and the sheer dramatic dullness of what they do, crossing a darkish stage in front of an exhibition cabinet and talking about acts of sex which always seem oddly distant and uninvolved.

But the five-strong cast – led by Paul Blair as Casanova and Vicki Liddelle as all his women – turn in fascinating, beautifully sustained performances. And the radicalism of Greig's vision, in daring to put women's desire at the heart of the story, makes this a Don Juan that uncomfortably challenges the unspoken sexual assumptions of our time, as surely as Mozart's soaring arias for women, fired and changed by desire, defied the conventions of his.

Joyce McMillan