

He looks like the last person you'd cast as a red-hot lover, but it's hard not to fall for David Tennant's Casanova, says LESLEY WHITE

For a show the tabloids have billed as a "sizzling bonfest", there's not much nudity in it, is there? David Tennant, the BBC's new Casanova, takes this as a complaint. "No," he laughs, rubbing his palms in mock salaciousness, "but there's lots of sex." While relieved that not too much of his whipper-thin body would be bared in the three-part drama, he fretted that a decorous approach to the sex might be dull without "a bit of bum now and again" — but now he is pleased they did it that way. "When you start looking at actresses' tits, it becomes a different thing — this way, it's fun."

Like most actors, Tennant is regularly mortified by the prospect of explicit love scenes, but the action here happens under covers, behind canopies, beneath skirts: a rompy, rather than erotic, affair. The worst bit, for him, was a flashback sequence of remembered encounters (the older, reminiscing Casanova is played by Peter O'Toole), including quickies with elderly ladies. One of them was at least 70, I tease him. "Yes, but all she did was rip off my shirt. It was, 'Hello, Cynthia. I'll be under your skirt, okay?' I felt sorry for them. It was easier for

—larky (Leslie Phillips); romantic (Richard Chamberlain); dark (Donald Sutherland, for Fellini) — but this one sees the celebrated lover as a wide-eyed innocent, a puppy bounding after adventure. He leaps from bridges into gondolas (Tennant was stung only when the producer insisted) and escapes across piazzas from furious husbands while society admires his invention and cheek. There is even the odd Alfie-style raised eyebrow to camera.

"He is not a computer in this," says Tennant. "People fall for him because he's a modern metrosexual among 18th-century stuffed shirts. And that depraved creature isn't what you get from reading his diaries. He loved women and listened to them when nobody else did." While filming in Venice, the unit called themselves Little Casanova, because the megamillion Hollywood version, starring Heath Ledger, was also in town and sharing their production facilities. When the city flooded, Big Casanova bided its time; Tennant's gang strapped plastic round their trousers and got on with it.

While Casanova is romping across our screens in peacock colours and Florentine lace, the actor has been wearing sideburns and a quiff as a hyper, twitchy, pacing Jimmy Porter in Richard Baron's production of *Look Back in Anger*, which celebrates — if such a word can be used about Osborne's bleak, spiteful, important play — its 50th anniversary next year. Tennant's Jimmy spits out his nastiest lines like mouth-wash, wishing a dead baby on his wife, the silently complicit Alison, but the actor can't help bringing a lightness to the character. This Jimmy is mean but not physically threatening, more a mixed-up kid, a coil of pent-up frustration; and, as he sits before you in a cropped blue jumper that shows his ribs, you find yourself wondering less about Porter's inner turmoil than whether Tennant is eating enough.

In a grand hotel in Bath, the morning after a performance at the Theatre Royal, he sips black coffee and water, a ball of nervous energy that keeps him "a skippy streak of nothing". He is neither edgy nor neurotic, let alone an angry young man. Jimmy may be a monster, but

the actor has sympathy for his disappointment, an apoplectic, even justified response to post-war lethargy in the hoped-for classless meritocracy in which nothing has changed. Tennant's interpretation is more personal than political, however, which has helped him recuse the play from its veneration as a period piece. "Jimmy is a deeply damaged person, and he is clever enough to understand that," he says, in his Scottish accent — which comes as a shock after Porter's cocky London tones.

"It infuriates him that he can't do anything about it. Playing him makes you feel

The thrill of the chaise



"I'm the only Scottish actor alive who hasn't been in Tannart": David Tennant; far left, with Nina Sosanya in *Casanova*

me. They were only there for the day to get orgasmic on cue."

To be frank, with his spectacles and owlish gaze (contact lenses for work, of course), his battered sneakers and seriously moth-eaten hoodie ("It comes like that — it's an urban-chic thing"), Tennant could pass for a mischievous cupid or a love-struck student, but never a libertine seducer. He agrees wholeheartedly: he may be a hot name right now, but this is the role he never thought he would get. Strangely, it could have been written for him. There have been many screen versions of Giacomo Casanova

bad, because it's up close and spitting abuse in someone's face, but as an actor, you have a lust for it. This is his strong as it gets. That's why it's up to date, in a gashly way. People are still tearing lumps out of each other in the privacy of their own homes."

For background, he read Osborne's memoir and watched the kitchen-sink classic *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, also set in Derby, where Osborne lived in one room, his fury fermenting. (Such diligent research was not extended to his role as Barty Crouch Jr, who travels to the dark side in the forthcoming *Harry Potter* and the Goblet of

Fire, about which Tennant has not much to say, other than that it was "Um, fun." Did he even read the book? "I can't comment." Might he be one of the minority that sees JK Rowling's work as kids' stuff? "I can't comment on that, either.")

At 33, Tennant is the youngest of three children raised in a Renfrewshire manse. His father was a minister, and later moderator, in the Church of Scotland, though in the liberal, low-church tradition. There is no hint of the austerity associated with such a background, except perhaps a fear of caring too much about money and bourgeois



trappings; he cannot tell you anything he does with his new-found wealth except (he scratches his head, baffled) go for supper with friends. The church is still part of his life; his family even more so. At three, he told his parents he intended to act, and, though appropriately concerned, they let the "absurdly single-minded" boy have his way. His inspirations were Doctor Who and Blake's 7, which starred Gareth Thomas, who plays Alison's father in *Look Back*. Tennant was awestruck when they met, unable to look him in the eye, but asked the older actor to sign his DVD. "Pure adoration."

At 17, he entered the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow, where Emma Fielding and Greg Wise were classmates. He was the youngest student there, and finally able to stick two fingers up at double chemistry at Paisley Grammar. His first job was in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, with the socialist 7:84 Theatre Company, touring the Highlands and Islands in a minibus; his second was at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum in *Shinda*, the Magic Ape, a pantio. The usual openings weren't so easy: he failed to get a part in *Take the High Road*, and auditioned unsuccessfully

for *Taggart* 16 times. "I'm the only Scottish actor alive who hasn't been in *Taggart*," he laughs. "Some people have been in it five times, playing three different murderers." It was a Scottish television series, however, the black comedy *Takin' to the Asylum*, that changed his luck. Its star, Ken Stott, introduced Tennant to his agent, and he motored south in his Ford Fiesta. "I was terrified for the whole six-hour drive, thinking, 'What am I doing?'" He lodged with the writer and actress Arabella Weir, to whose youngest child he became godfather, only moving out a few years ago to buy a flat in

north London. Parts at the National Theatre and the RSC, an Olivier nomination for his role in *Lobby Hero* at the Donmar Warehouse, and television parts such as the ridiculous vicar in *He Knew He Was Right*, have slowly led to him being recognised in the street. The only autograph-hunters came after the recent BBC musical thriller *Blackpool*. "It was men of a certain age asking what it's like being in bed with Sarah Parish. I told her, 'Every builder wants to know.'" Yet he seems to regard as his greatest triumph to date his 2001 hat-trick at the RSC, playing leads in *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Rivals* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in rotation; and he is not in the least interested in modestly downplaying the experience. "You feel the weight of history there, and it's scary. But come on — to play *Romeo* at the RSC...." He used an English accent for the part, lest it be interpreted as a borders conflict.

Mention his film work and you get a wry smile: the founding of *LA Without a Map* (1998), with Johnny Depp, didn't surprise him, but he is proud and protective of *The Last September* (1999). Deborah Warner's delicate depiction of an Anglo-Irish family in Co Cork during the 1920s republican uprisings. Tennant played an ardent young captain, not rich or county enough to get his girl. "If it had been Polish, it would have won all the awards going," he says. Then there was *Ginger Littlejohn* in Stephen Fry's *Bright Young Things* (2003), another upper-class wit; his suitability for playing these, he cannot fathom. Maybe it's a certain aristocratic beatness and "not looking Scottish". Actually, he does: it's something in the colouring and a manner in his eye.

So far, he has been able to join up the work, no resting required. "I can't choose my work. Maybe Tom Cruise can, but I bet he's sitting there thinking, 'I wish I was Al Pacino.' The idea of planning a breakthrough — of saying, 'If, in three years' time, I'm not Colin Farrell, I'm going to kill myself' — would be mad. I just shuffle along. I don't know what I'm doing next."

In fact, he is planning a swim before the day propels him towards his supercharged rant as Jimmy. Friends are down from London tonight, and he is in high spirits. He is single, and still close to his former girlfriend, the actress Anne-Marie Duff, who helped him buy clothes on his twice-yearly shopping expeditions. "When I'm not working? I like to lie in a dark room with a cold flannel on my head. I have no interesting habits. I don't eat mussels from rough-hewn coconuts." How important is his Scottish heritage? He looks momentarily unsure, but pulls himself together. "More so since I've been away, but I'm wary of proselytising for Scotland and sounding like Sean Connery in his Spanish castle, talking about the SNP. Not that I'm missing Sean — he's the boss." □

Casanova is on BBC3 from March 13, 10pm