



BBC CENTENARY SPECIAL

The Incantation of Casanova

As part of our Centenary salute to the BBC, we present this very special screening of a major BBC production that resides in the BFI National Archive. We have remastered sound and visual elements from an original 35mm telerecording of this outstanding play from the *Theatre 625* series of prestigious dramas. This was the second and only surviving part of *The Magicians*, a trio of unconnected plays about magic and magicians, written by Ken Taylor. In this sensual period drama, con man and cod-magician Casanova hatches an elaborate plan to seduce a farmer's daughter. Jeremy Brett turns in a characteristically rich and eccentric performance as the mesmerising seducer, with Jacqueline Pearce equally commanding as the object of his desire.

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The celebrations of the BBC centenary this year have seen many BBC archive television favourites resurfaced, through regular showings on BBC Four and in our own BBC 100 Gamechangers season at BFI Southbank. Our list of 100 BBC TV Gamechangers highlighted programmes that we felt had changed the landscape of broadcasting, inspired future talents, resonated within society or were at the centre of technological change.

Beyond this, there are countless wonderful programmes in the BBC and BFI archives that aren't so well remembered – and which haven't been seen since the time of their original broadcast. Our 'Precious Things' strand at BFI Southbank aims to uncover some of these gems and show them to an audience for the first time in decades. For the BBC centenary we uncover something incredibly rare and special, a BBC play held only by the BFI National Archive: *The Incantation of Casanova*, an entry from the 1960s strand *Theatre 625* bringing together two actors with huge cult followings: a pre-Sherlock Holmes Jeremy Brett and a pre-Blake's 7 Jacqueline Pearce.

When Britain's third TV channel, BBC Two, launched in 1964 it was conceived as a home for less mainstream programming in general and more adult entertainments and challenging dramas in particular. Its flagship drama strand was *Theatre 625*, a prestigious anthology series of individual plays from TV's most exciting talents. The '625' suffix referred to 625 lines, the new UK broadcasting standard that would eventually replace the original 405 line system. Many BBC Two strands used the term: *Jazz 625*, *Opera 625* and so on.

BBC Drama overseer Sydney Newman launched the *Theatre 625* strand with an ambitious trilogy of plays known as *The Seekers*, written by Ken Taylor and exploring notions of faith. The success of these led to another trilogy in 1967, *The Magicians*, again all written by Taylor.

The Magicians dramatised incidents in the lives of three historical figures: Dr John Dee, Casanova and Edmund Gurney. The first play, *Dr Dee, Kelly and the Spirits* (directed by James MacTaggart and featuring Frank Finlay and Alan Dobie), and the third play, *Edmund Gurney and the Brighton Mesmerist*

(directed by Peter Hammond and featuring Richard Todd and Ray Brooks), have not survived, although the scripts for both plays are held in the Ken Taylor collection within BFI Special Collections.

The middle play, *The Incantation of Casanova*, was preserved safely on film in the vaults of the BFI National Archive. The play has now been digitally remastered by our specialists from the separate sound and picture 35mm elements held in the archive. Prior to this there was no existing viewing copy of the play, so it's safe to say it is unseen since its original broadcast in 1967.

Taylor had earned a reputation for crafting strong female characters. He would go on to write three plays in the BBC's famous *Shoulder to Shoulder* series, which dramatised the battle by women to get the vote. And in *The Incantation of Casanova* the role of Eva (beautifully played by Pearce) is more than a match for the flamboyant and scandalous Italian adventurer – not an easy task when he's played by such a mercurial talent as Jeremy Brett.

With its themes of magic and alchemy, and this mesmerising pairing, *The Incantation of Casanova* is a fascinating rediscovery. The play itself, which is bawdy and sexually charged in places, is a playful meditation on the nature of desire with a cautionary message.

Dick Fiddy, bfi.org.uk, 6 December 2022

THEATRE 625: THE MAGICIANS: THE INCANTATION OF CASANOVA

Director: Herbert Wise

Production Company: BBC

Producer: Michael Bakewell

Script: Ken Taylor

Designer: Natasha Kroll

Music: Humphrey Searle

Transmission Company: BBC

Cast

Jeremy Brett (*Giacomo Casanova*)

Anthony Webb (*stage manager*)

Geoffrey Bayldon (*Don Antonio Capitani*)

Anne Cunningham (*Marina*)

Patrick O'Connell (*Captain O'Neilan*)

Jacqueline Pearce (*Eva Franzia*)

Daphne Anderson (*Lucia Franzia*)

George Selway (*Giorgio Franzia*)

BBC2 tx 22.10.1967

UK 1967

91 mins

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

The Precious Things: BBC Centenary Special + intro

Sat 10 Dec 14:20

TV Preview: His Dark Materials + Q&A with Cast & Crew TBC

Tue 13 Dec 18:00

TV Preview: Ghosts Christmas Special + Q&A with cast and crew

Thu 15 Dec 18:20

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