



## walk the line

james mangold



Your sibling doesn't have to die in a freak accident for you to become a successful musician, but Hollywood would suggest that it sure does help. Likewise, you don't have to come from humble roots, struggle with drugs, conquer your demons, and become a pop icon for you to become the subject of a biopic, but that formula sure makes for an entertaining movie. At first blush, *Walk the*

*Line* may seem like the Okie version of *Ray* and, indeed, the story arcs are similar. However, *Walk the Line* is ultimately a more successful movie, its narrative carried by its compelling love story rather than by its soundtrack. *Walk the Line* is a blessedly humorous, entertaining, and moving movie.

The film plays pretty fast and loose with the facts: Johnny (Joaquin Phoenix) did not meet June (Reese Witherspoon) while touring with Elvis, his first hit was not "Folsom Prison Blues," and there is no lake in Wheeling, W.Va. But, as James Frey might observe, spewing out hard facts is not necessarily the best way to capture the paradox that was Johnny Cash: drug addict, soft-time criminal, failed husband, romantic with daddy issues, country-rocker with Dylan's number in the Rolodex. Cash appealed to Christian toe-tappers at the Grand Ole Opry and to the hard-assed inmates at Folsom. But *Walk the Line* is effective because it does not

try to dissect the notes and bars, but merely to keep the beat. The beautifully cast Phoenix admits he did not try to impersonate Johnny Cash, but his every gesture—the way he cocks his chin or slings his guitar behind his back—rings true.

Johnny Cash's musical talent was not profound: Many of his songs seem set to the same back beat, and his singing was decidedly blue-collar. What he had, however, was an urgency, a defiance. He was "steady like a train, sharp like a razor," a charismatic force; but first he was an underloved child. At nine,

## Witherspoon transcends her distracting chin.

in his dreams and dogged in their fulfillment. In the movie, Cash admits he doesn't know why he sings the way he sings, or wears black, or feels like kissing June. But, of course, he is being disingenuous. He does those things because he instinctively knows they are right for him, convention be damned. Like that fellow in Reno who shot a man just to watch him die, Cash lived life on his terms. *Walk the Line* shows that man—and does so very winningly.

—Lacy Ketzner

The good views in the two films aren't limited to the star's faces: In their distinctly different locations, the films are aesthetically stunning. *Cold Mountain* pans across the 19th-century American Southern countryside, its summer greenery and winter snow accentuated by sounds of the fiddle in the background. Similarly, *Casanova* makes love to 16th-century Venice; Halstrom adoringly bathes the cityscapes in yellow light and occasionally adds computer-animated touches to perfect the picture. And just in case the viewer has yet to lose himself in Casanova's breathtaking world, swelling music recorded with Renaissance instruments keeps your senses fully engaged.

Indeed, between their beautiful people, beautiful images, and beautiful sound, *Cold Mountain* and *Casanova* should be guaranteed hits. But in the end, the major difference between the films is what determines the failure of one and the success of the other: *Cold Mountain* is, ultimately, a serious drama with high intentions and, as history has

## Ledger embraces his chiseled features in all their glory.

shown, its pretentious aesthetics couldn't win it the favor of most critics. Meanwhile, *Casanova* has no such aspirations whatsoever; its combination of slapstick and one-liners renders it strikingly similar to the comedies of mistaken identity that have graced the screens—and stages—of years past. Whether it is Venice bathed in sunlight or a close-up of Heath Ledger's jaw line, the pleasing image you see before you merely serves to heighten the harmless fun of it all: an unabashedly concrete sign of successful, unoriginal, yet ultimately pleasing fluff.

—Mimi Levine

## the white countess

james ivory



*The White Countess* spends so much time talking about contrast and tensions that it never gets around to creating any. Blindness and sight, the natural and the artificial, war and peace, countess and hooker: All are juxtaposed so exhaustively that the film becomes a tepid list of opposites. Ralph Fiennes plays Todd Jackson, an American diplomat in pre-World War II Shanghai who has lost his family

and sight in some generic explosion. Despite his blindness, he has a great amount of vision—a point played up to an unintentionally comic effect—a vision, specifically, of a bar, a perfect bar, a peaceful oasis in a chaotic world. Natasha Richardson plays Sofia, the white countess, an exiled Russian noble reduced to a shameful life of taxi-dancing and the namesake of what is repeatedly referred to in labored English as "the bar of your dreams, Mr. Jackson." The lives of Sofia and her family in Shanghai, we learn, differ a bit from the ones they led in Russia, where children played tennis in white dresses and couples danced in slow motion under a steady shower of artifi-

## It's not exactly a convincing 'world,' no matter how much Ralph Fiennes sightlessly gazes into the middle distance.

cial snow—or perhaps confetti. And so the script, by *Remains of the Day* novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, begins with hints of tragic pasts and convoluted narratives, but glosses over the complexities of the historical situation. It ignores the potential for wrenching personal relationships in favor of incessant platitudes about how there used to be peace and children in white, but now war's coming and the countess is a prostitute.

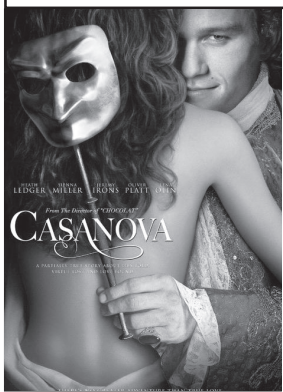
The idea that no paradise can last in a post-lapsarian world, though hardly original, can be fruitful; the problem with *The White Countess*, however, is not that the perfection upon which the war is so cruelly encroaching doesn't have any flaws, but rather that it doesn't have much of anything else, either. *The White Countess*, which we are repeatedly told is a perfect miniature world divorced from the "broader canvas" of politics, seems like a nice enough bar: There's soothing music, and some nice shots of ballerinas' fluttering forms reflected off the surface of a piano. But it's not exactly a convincing "world," no matter how much Fiennes sightlessly gazes into the middle distance and muses about its insular perfection. Leaving the bar one morning, Sofia, frustrated with Jackson's refusal to discuss the (actually pretty straightforward) accident that blinded him, shouts back, "Why do you have such heavy doors? You think they will keep out the world?" Without any subtlety of character, Jackson is compelled to respond, "Yes, that was my intention."

*The White Countess* has a kind of slow grace about it, with the wandering eye of the camera rolling over surfaces from every angle, but the utter lack of anything beneath those shiny shells reduces it to the ridiculously unnecessary. No matter how many times Jackson says something about how he can "see it, it's in here" and intently taps his forehead, it doesn't add anything to the contrast established in the first five minutes (or, for that matter, about 3000 years ago) between physical blindness and spiritual vision. Fiennes and Richardson paint delicate portraits on the not-so-broad canvas Ishiguro offers them, with sensitive but restrained portrayals that seem afraid to disturb the substanceless fragility of the film. The one truly poignant moment occurs near the end, after Sofia's ungrateful family attempts to escape to Hong Kong without her and restore her corrupted daughter's honor. As Sofia lifts little Katya out of the boat and thus proves the triumph of maternal love over petty social climbing, Katya's paternal aunt Grushenka (Madeleine Potter) lets out a visceral cry. It amounts to the only real complication among the film's simple contrasts, breaking down the harsh distinction between the cold materialism of fallen nobility and the natural warmth of maternal love. The rest of the film, unfortunately, is content to glide through static binaries, '30s contrivances, and flat cityscapes.

—Katie Kadue

## casanova

lasse halstrom



Just as cotton candy leaves no trace upon consumption, so, too, does *Casanova* upon analysis. I won't beat around the bush: *Casanova*, the latest project from director Lasse Halstrom, is pure, pretty fluff. On its own, the film, loosely based on the travails of the 16th-century Venetian lover-adventurer Giacomo Casanova (Heath Ledger), provides little for discussion.

But it does cook up a little food for thought, at least when you compare it to another film; *Casanova* bears a striking resemblance to the Civil War epic *Cold Mountain*. Hear, here:

It can't be denied that *Casanova* and *Cold Mountain* are both riddled with jaw-dropping, sweat-inducing star power. Their leading men, Heath Ledger and Jude Law, respectively, have both graced the cover of *People* magazine more than once. Not surprisingly, the films themselves contain enough close-ups to satiate ever-raging pre-teen hormones. The difference between these stud-packed films, however, is that poor Law must try to undermine his stunning good lucks via dirt and emotional strife, while Ledger is allowed to embrace his chiseled features in all their glory. After all, Ledger's Casanova is expected to wallow in his own self-admiration. He experiences a bit of doubt upon falling in love with Francesa Bruni (Sienna Miller), whom one could safely call a feminist in her own right, but of course Casanova returns to his old (albeit slightly altered) self-absorbed self in the end.

## bon bons

"If you're sad, and like beer, I'm your lady."  
—*The Saddest Music in the World*