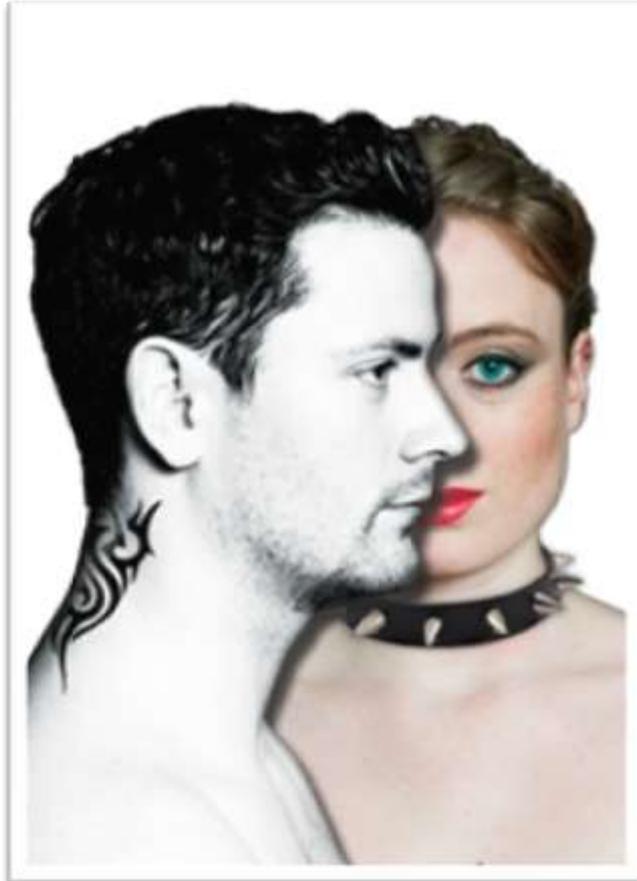


David Ives

Venus in Fur

The English Theatre Frankfurt 2014



***Venus in Fur* is a terrific night of theatre**

(Toronto Journal)

Teacher`s Support Pack

1 Synopsis



Thomas is desperate to find a female lead for his new work, a theatrical adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's erotic 19th-century novel *Venus in Furs*, but he can't find an actress with the right mix of youth, sophistication and sexiness. "Most young women who are twenty-four are like six-year-olds on helium," he rants on the phone to his unseen fiancée after a day of auditions. "Half are dressed like hookers, half like dykes."

Enter Vanda, desperate, needy, vulgar and seemingly clueless, who begs and whines until Thomas reluctantly lets her read for the part of Wanda von Dunajew. With a brash Noo Yawk accent and a loud, braying voice, Street's Vanda seems to embody every negative generalization Thomas has been complaining about — until she starts to play the part.

Vanda, clearly, is not what she seems. Adopting a classy mid-Atlantic dialect and a flowing 1870s dress (one of many uncannily suitable costumes and props she has brought with her in a large bag), she not only nails the character of Wanda, but even recruits Thomas into matching her note for note as Severin von Kusiemski. Barely even looking at her script, she not only knows the play and source novel far better than she has let on — she even seems to understand them better than Thomas does.

"So, basically, it's S&M porn?" she tells Thomas, who's under the impression that he's adapting a serious novel into his own work of art. As they reenact the story — about an Austrian aristocrat who wants the woman with whom he's obsessed to demean and degrade him — real sexual tension starts simmering between the pair. Their statuses change

gradually as they recite and improvise on Sacher-Masoch's story, interrupted by their disagreements on whether it's misogynistic fantasy or deep literature.

"You don't have to tell me about sadomasochism. I'm in the theatre," Vanda quips at one point, later adding that in Thomas' role as a director, "It's your job to torture actors."



But any intelligent audience member should be able to see that Thomas' and Vanda's play-acting is only an instrument through which Ives explores gender dynamics. Thomas, who doesn't see himself as sexist or objectifying women, obviously is, and it takes Vanda's quick wit to show Thomas who he really is under the surface.

2 The Author and his play

David Ives' *Venus in Fur* is described as a "taut, psychological play" (Frochtzwaig, 2013). The play's debut run at the Classic Stage Company off-Broadway in 2010 was extended due to its warm reception. In late 2011 the production moved to Broadway's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre where it quickly became the hot ticket of the season. The show was nominated for two Tony awards in 2012, including Best Play and Best Actress in a Play. For little known actress Nina Arianda, Vanda was a breakout role. She won several awards including the Tony, the Clarence Derwent Award, Clive Barnes Award, and the Theatre World Award.



David Ives (Chicago, July 11, 1950)

is a contemporary American playwright. A native of South Chicago, Ives attended a minor Catholic seminary and Northwestern University and, after some years' interval, Yale School of Drama, where he received an MFA in playwriting.

In the interval between studies at Northwestern and Yale he worked for three years as an editor at *Foreign Affairs* magazine. In the mid-1990s, after having been a contributor to *Spy Magazine*, Ives wrote occasional humor pieces for the *New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications. In that same period, *New York* magazine named him one of the "100 Smartest New Yorkers".

3 On Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and his novella “Venus in Furs”

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch`s works have held an established position in European letters for something like half a century, and the author himself was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French Government in 1883, on the occasion of his literary jubilee.



He was born in Lemberg, Austrian Galicia, on January 27, 1836. He studied jurisprudence at Prague and Graz, and in 1857 became a teacher at the latter university. He published several historical works, but soon gave up his academic career to devote himself wholly to literature. For a number of years he edited the international review, *Auf der Höhe*, at Leipzig, but later removed to Paris, for he was always strongly Francophile. His last years he spent at Lindheim in Hesse, Germany, where he died on March 9, 1895. In 1873 he married Aurora von Rumelin, who wrote a number of novels under the pseudonym of Wanda von Dunajew, which it is interesting to note is the name of the heroine of *Venus in Furs*. Her sensational memoirs which have been the cause of considerable controversy were published in 1906.



Venus in Furs is the man who could not existence, and so

writing down the things he felt and experienced. The reader who will approach the book from this angle and who will honestly put aside moral prejudices and prepossessions will come away from the perusal of this book with a deeper understanding of this poor miserable soul of ours and a light will be cast into dark places that lie latent in all of us.

confession of a deeply unhappy master his personal tragedy of sought to unburden his soul in

His principal literary ambition was never completely fulfilled. It was a somewhat programmatic plan to give a picture of contemporary life in all its various aspects and interrelations under the general title of the *Heritage of Cain*. This idea was probably derived from Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. Sacher-Masoch was the poet of the anomaly now generally known as *masochism*. By this is meant the desire on the part of the individual affected of desiring himself completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex, and being treated by this person as by a master, to be humiliated, abused, and tormented, even to the verge of death. This motive is treated in all its innumerable variations.

If any defense were needed for the publication of work like Sacher-Masoch's it is well to remember that artists are the historians of the human soul and one might recall the wise and tolerant Montaigne's essay *On the Duty of Historians* where he says, "One may cover over secret actions, but to be silent on what all the world knows, and things which have had effects which are public and of so much consequence is an inexcusable defect."

And the curious interrelation between cruelty and sex, again and again, creeps into literature. Sacher-Masoch has not created anything new in this. He has simply taken an ancient motive and developed it frankly and consciously, until, it seems, there is nothing further to say on the subject. To the violent attacks which his books met he replied in a polemical work, *Über den Wert der Kritik*.

INFO 1

Masochism

The word "Masochism" is derived from the name of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch who is the author of the novel *Venus in Furs* which the play *Venus in Fur* is based on. It is defined as:

1. The deriving of sexual gratification, or the tendency to derive sexual gratification, from being physically or emotionally abused.
2. The deriving of pleasure, or the tendency to derive pleasure, from being humiliated or mistreated, either by another or by oneself.
3. A willingness or tendency to subject oneself to unpleasant or trying experiences.

4 Historical References

Throughout the play, David Ives alludes to mythology, art history and even classic Greek tragedies. A closer inspection into some of these references assists in highlighting significant themes around fantasy versus reality, disguise or identity, and, perhaps most significantly, gender power relations.

4.1 The Goddess Venus/Aphrodite

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI: *If you don't mind my saying so, you are not only a Greek and a pagan – and an individual. You seem to me to be a goddess.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV: *Really? Which one?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI: *Venus.*

The Roman goddess Venus is known as Aphrodite in Greek tradition. According to the *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, Venus is: An ancient Italian goddess of unknown origin who was originally associated with springtime, gardens, and cultivation but also with the ideas of charm, grace, and beauty. She was later identified by the Romans with Aphrodite when her cult was introduced to Rome from Mount Eryx toward the end of the third century b.c., though legend suggests that Aeneas, her son,



brought her cult with him when he landed in Italy to found the Roman race. Thus she also personified love and fertility and became the mother of the cherubic, impish Cupid. She was the patroness of Julius Caesar and Augustus as well as the city of Pompeii, where remains of many Venus representations have been recovered. Her Sicilian name was Cythera, which was used as her surname. It is also relevant to note that Venus's son was Cupid, "God of love...Usually depicted as a beautiful, naked, winged boy carrying a bow and arrows, which he used to make gods and mortals alike either falling love with each other or refute that advances of another"

Although Ives does not utilize Cupid in his play directly, his presence within a painting that the playwright refers to, explored in the next section, suggests his significance.

4.2 Titian's "Venus with the Mirror"

VANDA/DUNAYEV: I can certainly understand your fascination [with "Venus in the Mirror"]. The plush red velvet. The dark fur outlining her naked body. The bracelets cuffing her wrists. The opulent hair. Her golden breasts. The pretty little Cupid holding the mirror. The picture's ravishing. But is Venus covering herself with fur—or is she opening the fur to reveal her glories?"

Throughout *Venus in Fur*, Venus-focused art is frequently mentioned. In particular, Ives refers to the Renaissance painting "**Venus with the Mirror**" by the famous Italian painter Titian.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI:

The love of fur is innate. It's a passion given by Nature to us all. Who doesn't know the addictiveness of stroking a thick, soft fur? That peculiar tingle. That electricity. What is a cat but a walking galvanic battery with claws? How did the great painters depict power but by trimming their most illustrious subjects with fur? Did Raphael or Titian find a better frame for their mistresses than a mink?

Worth noting is the presence of fur in this painting. Fur is a luxury object and a reference to contemporary fashion and culture. The presence of fur suggests that Venus has means or is involved with someone who does. The use of her hand to cover herself and the specific draping of the fur enforces the fact that the female subject has control to cover or uncover herself. Venus' self-awareness and confidence are highlighted since she is draped in a revealing manner within this painting which is a strategic choice on the painter's part. The painting's content is not a candid moment yet intentionally selected. The image may be viewed as a meditation on a relatively erotic moment in time. Ives likely chose this particular painting because it displays the gender politics at the time with a female at its centre, significantly larger in stature than the other subjects within it. Titian has depicted Venus in this case in an empowered situation similarly to the power that Vanda bestows within her audition. It is relevant to consider that although the female as the centerpiece is indeed a significant statement of power, and while we accept that she has control over the nature of her exposure, she is painted in the nude and admired for her beauty. This fact, especially by contemporary standards, may be interpreted as objectifying Venus. This too reflects the situations Ives depicts in his play since Vanda specifically owns a highly sexualized power over Thomas.

4.3 Titian and the painting

Titian was the leading member of the 16th century Venetian school of painting. Born in approximately 1490 in the town of Cadore in the Dolomite Mountains, Titian quickly rose to prominence as one of the most diverse and versatile painters of his time. He was equally skilled at landscape backgrounds, mythology, and religious subjects. His patrons included German Emperor Charles V, Philip II of Spain, Francis I of France, and Pope Paul III and his contemporaries referred to him as “The Sun Amidst the Stars,” taken from a line in Dante’s *Paradiso*. After a consistently successful career, Titian died in 1576, and would influence generations of artists. Venus With Mirror was likely one of Titian’s personal favorite paintings. He kept it in his private collection until his death and it is believed that he created the entire piece himself, without assistance from one of the painters in his studio. The painting depicts the goddess Venus, adorned in fur and staring at her reflection in a mirror held by Cupid. According to the National Gallery of Art, which holds the painting, Titian’s masterwork “celebrates the ideal beauty of the female form.”

(from: www.studiotheatre.org)

4.4 The Bacchae

THOMAS: Actually, it’s the same story as The Bacchae, isn’t it?

VANDA: yeah! What’s The Bacchae? Just kidding. It’s an old play, right?

THOMAS: It’s an old play.

VANDA: “Citizens of Corinth!” One of those plays? “Behold this moral man, Testiculus, cursed for his offenses to the gods and totally fucked for all eternity!”

THOMAS: Yes, it’s one of those plays. The god Dionysus comes down and reduces Pentheus the king of Thebes to a mass of quivering feminine jelly in a dress.



VANDA: Sounds hot.

THOMAS: The crazed women of Thebes – the Bacchae – tear Pentheus to pieces and Dionysus leaves triumphant.

The Bacchae is an ancient Greek tragedy by Euripides. This play, one third of a trilogy, won first prize at the City Dionysia festival competition in 405 BCE. The story, much like the mythology of Venus, highlights themes around the power of females and the way in which their sexuality may instigate conflict through the manipulation, intentional or not, of others. It also explores the impact of disguise and blurred distinction between what is real and what is not. These recurring themes are a reflection of how the audience can interpret the dynamic between Vanda and Thomas within **Venus in Fur**.

Plot Summary

The play begins with Dionysus explaining the story of his origin and his purpose in traveling to Thebes. Several years prior, Zeus came down from Mount Olympus to lie with Dionysus' mother, Semele. When she revealed to her friends and family that she was pregnant, no one believed that Zeus was the father of her child. Hera, furious with Zeus for his infidelity, disguised herself as an old nurse and convinced Semele to ask Zeus to appear to her in his true form. When Zeus obliged Semele's request, he appeared as a lightning bolt and killed her instantly. At the moment of her death, Hermes came down quickly to save the unborn Dionysus. Zeus proceeded to sew the baby Dionysus into his thigh to hide him from the wrath of Hera until the young god was fully grown. Meanwhile, Semele's family – her sisters Autonoe, Agave, and Ino, and her father, Cadmus – still believed that Semele lied about the identity of the baby's father and her lies were the direct cause of her death. Dionysus arrives in Thebes to vindicate his mother and to establish his cult of followers.

The next scene begins in Thebes where it is revealed that the women of the city, including Cadmus' daughters Ino, Autonoe and Agave, have been partaking in Bacchic rituals. Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, and Tiresias, the old, blind Theban prophet, reveal that they are just about to go and join the festivities when Cadmus' grandson Pentheus enters the scene. He has just returned to Thebes and is disgusted to find the two in the festive Bacchic clothing. He scolds them and then orders his soldiers to arrest anyone engaging in Dionysian worship. The guards return with Dionysus himself, disguised as his priest and the leader of the Asian maenads. Pentheus begins to question him and in the process reveals that he does not believe that Dionysus is a god. However, he is still interested in the Dionysiac rites but Dionysus refuses to reveal the details. Pentheus is greatly angered by his incomppliance and has him locked up. Being a god, Dionysus is quickly able to break free and create more havoc, razing the palace of Pentheus to the ground in a giant earthquake and fire. Word arrives via a herdsman that the Bacchae on Cithaeron are behaving especially strangely and performing incredible feats, such as putting snakes in their hair, suckling wild wolves and gazelle, and making wine, milk, honey and water spring up from the ground. He continues to explain that when they went to capture the women, they saw them descend upon a herd of cows, ripping them to shreds with their bare hands. When the armed guards tried to capture them they were fended off by the women who were only wielding sticks.

Dionysus then reveals that he plans on punishing Pentheus for not worshipping him or paying him libations. He utilizes Pentheus' curiosity about the Bacchic rites by convincing him to dress as a female Maenad to avoid detection and then attend the rites.

Stranger: *Ah! Would you like to see them in their gatherings upon the mountain?*

Pentheus: *Very much. Ay, and pay uncounted gold for the pleasure.*

Stranger: *Why have you conceived so strong a desire?*

Pentheus: *Though it would pain me to see them drunk with wine-*

Stranger: *Yet you would like to see them, pain and all.*

Dionysus dresses Pentheus as a woman by giving him a thyrsus and fawn skins and then leads him out of the house. As Dionysus leads Pentheus to the women, a mist forms around them and Pentheus can see horns coming out of the god's head (Dionysus often took the form of a bull).

A messenger arrives at the palace to report that once they reached Cithaeron, Pentheus wanted to climb up an evergreen tree to get a better view of the Bacchantes. The blond stranger, Dionysus in disguise, used his divine power to bend the tall tree and place the king at its highest branches. However, once Pentheus was safely at the top, Dionysus called out to his followers and showed the man sitting atop the tree. This drove the Bacchantes wild and they tore the trapped Pentheus down. Led by Agave ripping off his head, the group of women surrounded him and ripped his body apart, piece by piece.

After the messenger has relayed this news, Agave arrives carrying the head of her son. In her possessed state, she believed that she was wielding the head of a mountain lion. She proudly displays her son's head to her father, Cadmus, believing it to be a hunting trophy. She is confused when he does not delight in her trophy, as his face contorts in horror. Agave begins calling out for her son, wanting him to come marvel at her feat and nail the head above her door so she could show all of Thebes. However, as Dionysus' possession begins to wear off and Cadmus continues to reel from the horror of his grandson's death, Agave slowly realizes what she has done. By the conclusion of the play the family is completely destroyed. Agave and her sisters were sent into exile for their acts. Dionysus honored Cadmus and his wife Harmonia by turning them into snakes. Tiresias is the only one not to suffer by the end of the play.



5 Themes and Topics for Discussion

5.1 Play within a play

Throughout *Venus in Fur*, the line between fantasy and reality is constantly blurred, potentially to represent the similarities between Thomas the playwright, Vanda the actress and the fictional characters that appear in Thomas' script. David Ives uses a myriad of literary and dramatic devices in order to achieve this confusion and to suggest the juxtaposition between reality and fantasy. Some elements, such as varying light sources, are helpful in distinguishing between the action in the play versus the character's playing the play within the play. Others, including deliberate name choices, further entangle the two worlds.

Venus in Fur uses a variety of devices which would be categorized as metatheatrical. First, Vanda is an actor and Thomas is a director being observed within an (unconventional) audition setting.

Furthermore, there exists a play within a play, the action continuously bouncing back and forth between Vanda and Thomas acting out the play for which she is auditioning and their more natural interactions outside of playing the script.

Often in the "play within a play" literary device, the inner story's action holds symbolic and psychological significance for the characters in the outer story. In other words, the fiction of the inner story (in this case Thomas' play) is used to reveal the truth in the outer story (Vanda and Thomas' relationship as director/playwright and auditionee). In *Venus and Fur*, for example, Thomas' script serves as a launching point to subvert the expected power dynamic between Thomas and Vanda. Of note is the shift in power once Vanda dons her fur stole, a typical symbol of power and wealth in Renaissance art (see HistoricalContext under 3). At this point, Vanda begins making demands of Thomas. Thomas directs her to do

INFO 2

Theatricality

"Metatheatre" is a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic -- to be nothing but a mirror in which we view the actions and sufferings of characters like ourselves, suspending our disbelief in their reality.

Metatheatre begins by sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness -- in short, the theatricality -- of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide. It may present action so alien, improbable, stylized, or absurd that we are forced to acknowledge the estranging frame that encloses a whole play. It may, on the other hand, break the frame of the "fourth wall" of conventional theatre, reaching out to assault the audience or to draw it into the realm of the play.

“Whatever’s comfortable.” to which she demands “No, tell me.” As the inner story progresses and a dominating arrangement develops the power structures of both storylines blur and dynamics overlap.

5.2 Power positions and Gender

VANDA/DUNAYEV: *A fine argument for integrity. In our society, a woman’s only power is through men. Her character is her lack of character. She’s a blank, to be filled in by creatures who at heart despise her. I want to see what Woman will be when she ceases to be men’s slave. When she has the same rights as he, when she’s his equal in education and his partner in work. When she becomes herself. An individual.- God, old Vanda’s seriously ahead of her time, isn’t she.* (Ives 25)



Power, especially between men and women, is a fundamental theme in David Ives’ *Venus in Fur*. This fact is reiterated through a closer look at several resources which he alludes to within the piece (Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, Titian’s “Venus in the Mirror”, *The Bacchae*, Venus/Aphrodite).

Rooted in the preexisting dynamic that exists within an audition setting, Ives effectively tests the relationship between his two characters in both a real and fictional setting By

distributing action in different periods with varying sensibilities around gender roles including references to Renaissance art, a play set in the Victorian era and a modern audition, Ives is able to offer an extensive survey of gender roles and societal expectations. Furthermore, by introducing extreme interactions such as a relationship based in consensual masochism, the possibilities for acceptable power dynamics are almost boundless. The evolution of Vanda and Thomas' relationship throughout the play, within all of these contexts, brings awareness to our own understanding and appreciation of gender roles within modern society.

Within the script, the playwright character Thomas challenges the fact that the script he's written is truly about gender power relationships. His argument, however, seems in some ways to support that it is, regardless of how he looks at it. The following exchange also points out that these themes are timeless though meanings may change when seen in different contexts.

THOMAS: There are no villains in this piece. It's a plea for people to understand that. Understand there's something out there more powerful than we are, and it can run us or it can ruin us. This is a chemical reaction. Two people meet and ignite each other. Look. I wrote this. I've been studying this. I should think I know what my own play's about. It's not making some general statement about men or women.

VANDA: Sex, class, gender, pal.

THOMAS: It's about a woman who recognizes something in herself

– possibly - and about a man who until he meets her is forced to hide his true self away.

THOMAS:

You're taking power. Take a power position.

VANDA: What age are you living in? He brings her into this, and she's the one who gets to look bad, she's the villain.

THOMAS: There are no villains in this piece. It's a plea for people to understand that. Understand there's something out there more powerful than we are, and it can run us or it can ruin us. This is a chemical reaction. Two people meet and ignite each other. Look I wrote this. I've been studying this. I should think I know what my own play's about. It's not making some general statement about men or women.

Assignments

1. Beyond gender, Ives is commenting on other variables that determine power in modern societal structures such as class.

How is this reflected in either the inner (script) or outer (audition) story within *Venus in Fur*?

2. How is status displayed physically? Consider varying levels, postures and other variables in blocking.

5.3 Sexuality

This play is based on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 19th century erotic novel *Venus in Furs*, and in his introduction to the book the author states that “it is well to remember that nature is neither good nor bad, neither altruistic nor egoistic, and that it operates through the human psyche as well as through crystals and plants and animals with the same inexorable laws.”

There are many (non-sexual) aspects of human nature ... the need for power, the desire for wealth, ambition, empathy, humility, the need to be recognized, loved, understood.

Assignment

Discuss how human sexuality is portrayed in the play.

Select any one, and discuss how they are similarly ambivalent / ambiguous, with particular attention to current media coverage.

6 A review

NEW YORK TIMES November 8, 2011

THEATER REVIEW | 'VENUS IN FUR'

Struggling Actress Who Wields Script and Whip

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Lightning flashes intermittently throughout “Venus in Fur,” the spooky sex comedy by David Ives that sizzled open on Broadway at the Samuel J. Friedman Theater on Tuesday night. But you’re not really likely to notice. The flickering of those stage lights barely registers beside the incandescent Nina Arianda, the sensational young actress recreating the role that made her a name to watch when she first starred in the play Off Broadway. Portraying an actress giving the audition of a lifetime, Ms. Arianda is giving the first must-see performance of the Broadway season, a bravura turn that burns so brightly you can almost feel the heat on your face.

To describe Mr. Ives’s play as a sex comedy may conjure images of creaky old farces involving philandering bosses and naughty secretaries. But while it’s as funny as any play currently on Broadway, “Venus in Fur,” stylishly directed by Walter Bobbie, is also something darker, stranger and altogether more delicious: a suspense-packed study of the erotics (and the semiotics) of power, in which the two participants — the terrific Hugh Dancy portrays the writer-director hosting the audition — prove to be seriously, almost scarily adept.

The play opens with a thunderclap, as Ms. Arianda’s Vanda staggers into the generic room where Mr. Dancy’s Thomas is getting ready to wrap up his day, having failed to find the

actress he was hoping for. In a tempest of irritation and mortification, Vanda rails at the subway, the rain and the fates, spewing expletives about the creepy guy who was feeling her up on the train.

She is hours late and knows she's probably blown her chances, but proceeds to cajole, apologize and charm Thomas into hearing her out, flickering between abjection and steely insistence, modes that will prove to be unusually appropriate for the role she's come to try out for.

Ms. Arianda is the best physical comedian the stage has produced in some time, as affirmed by her physically exuberant performance in the Broadway revival of "Born Yesterday" last spring. Here her klutzy ballet of desperation as Vanda wrestles with a recalcitrant umbrella, roots around in her bag for a costume and then suddenly strips down to her saucy black lingerie, is a dazzling comic set piece.

Funnier still is Vanda's attempt to wriggle into the ruffled white dress she's bought to play the character in question, a 19th-century European noblewoman. It's like watching a manic cat wreaking havoc on a flocked Christmas tree.

When Thomas tries to dismiss her, Vanda slumps into a despairing monologue about the humiliating life of a struggling actress. After he puts her off with the glib line that they're looking for "somebody a little different," she stops him short with a blunt rebuttal. "Somebody who isn't me," she says, the last of her exuberance draining away into resignation. "I'm too young, I'm too old. I'm too big, I'm too small. My résumé's not long enough. O.K."

It's more her force of will than his sympathy that finally carries the day, but soon Vanda has pulled out the coffee-stained script she's acquired, rather mysteriously, and has leapt into character with a conviction that both thrills and unsettles Thomas. The role she's hoping to snare is the female lead in Thomas's adaptation of the 1870 novel by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch that gives Mr. Ives's play its title. As it happens the character is also named Vanda: eerie coincidence or a calculated put-on? (Both are technically named Wanda, but Vanda's parents pronounced her name with a V, and it stuck.)

"Basically it's S-and-M porn," Vanda bluntly asserts about the script, riling the self-important Thomas, who corrects her with a half-hidden snarl. "'Venus in Fur' is a great love story," he lectures. "It's a serious novel. It's a central text of world literature." (Vanda's retort when she discovers that Sacher-Masoch was — duh! — the guy for whom masochism was named is too hilarious to spoil.)

It is when Vanda and Thomas begin performing their roles in his play — the nobleman Kushemski, whose youthful encounter with a reed-wielding aunt has given him a taste for the pleasure in pain, and Vanda Dunayev, the woman he meets at a resort and implores to subjugate him — that the psychosexual fun and games in "Venus in Fur" really begin.

The mysteries begin to multiply too. How exactly is it that Vanda, who claims to have just glanced through the script on the subway, is practically word-perfect in the role, not to mention so commanding that Thomas is almost embarrassed to be reading opposite her? And while she manages to wheedle a little information from him about his personal life — Thomas's fiancée, Stacy, keeps calling on his cellphone — Vanda seems to know more about him than she reasonably should.

Ms. Arianda's performance is so electrifying that a lesser talent than Mr. Dancy might fade into the scenery. But Mr. Dancy, the British actor with a long film résumé who appeared on Broadway in "Journey's End," holds his own and then some in the role of Thomas. As Vanda slowly takes control of the room, insisting that Thomas pour himself more deeply into the role as she gathers sexual steam as the imperious dominatrix, Mr. Dancy makes us feel the sweat of self-revelation that begins to unnerve Thomas.

His willingness to dive head-first into the psychology of the role, going so far as to improvise a scene in which the goddess Venus toys with Kushemski, so upends the traditional power relationship between director and actress that he fights hard to keep his bearings. Vanda, meanwhile, repeatedly steps outside her role to berate or interrogate Thomas about the real dynamics of the relationship in the play: Is the woman wielding the whip in charge, or does Kushemski really dictate the terms of their affair?

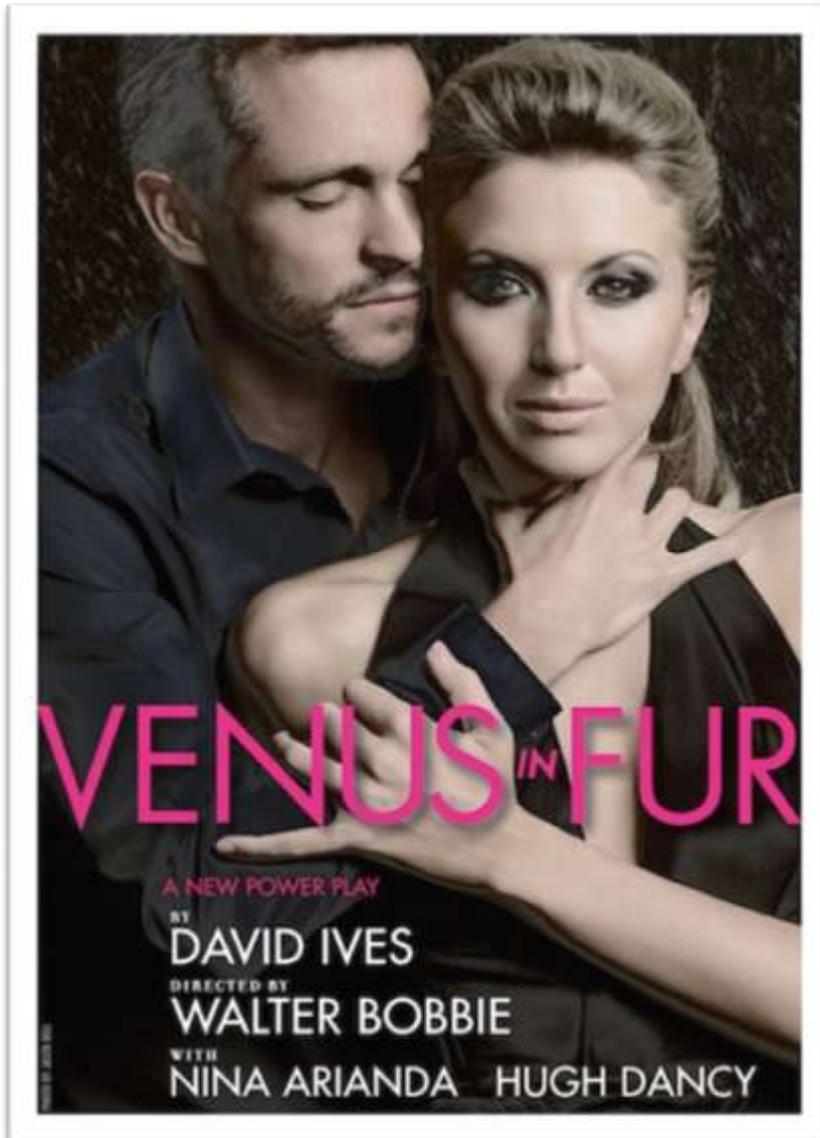
It would be no fun to give away much more detail because the mysteries of Vanda's motives and Thomas's true desires are what keep the tension on the boil for the play's running time of a little more than 90 minutes. The excitement in watching "Venus in Fur" is in not knowing exactly what the emotional and sexual stakes really are.

When Vanda compliments him on his thorough grasp of his play and its characters, Thomas makes a telling comment about the elusive nature of self-knowledge. "Sometimes today I felt as if I didn't know the first thing about them — or this play," he says. "Suddenly, an actor turns to you and says, 'What should I do, who am I right here,' and you have no idea. You can't remember who you are, much less what they're supposed to be."

I'm not sure Mr. Ives himself has settled firmly on a resolution to the play's central mystery — the motives and identity of the elusive Vanda — but who cares? With the commanding Ms. Arianda giving a performance of such intoxicating allure, "Venus in Fur" provides a seriously smart and very funny stage seminar on the destabilizing nature of sexual desire: vanilla-flavored, kink-festooned or anything in between.

VENUS IN FUR

WITH: Nina Arianda (Vanda) and Hugh Dancy (Thomas).



Assignment

Write a review of the ETF production!