

BWW Review: VENUS IN FUR

at The Bakehouse Theatre

from STARC Productions



Bondage, discipline, and sexual power games, all done in the best possible taste. 90 minutes in the Bakehouse may just be the spark your love life needs. [Venus in Fur](#), by American playwright David Ives, gives STARC productions every opportunity to play to the company's strengths. It's not the first time Tony Knight, Stefanie Rossi, and Marc Clement have picked up Ives's work and had immense of fun with it, for this play about sex, power, and consent has many laughs, while luring the audience on to an intriguing climax.

Tony Knight is not a director who wields a whip hand over his actors. He knows these two intimately and lets them loose.

David Ives's play, premiered off-Broadway in 2010, strikes so many chords with contemporary Australian sexual politics and politicians, over and above its intricate exploration of sex and power, that a short season in Canberra would be highly rewarding. There is a moment when Andrew Laming springs, unbidden, to mind. You'll know it the minute you see it.

Marc Clement is Thomas, a playwright first heard bemoaning the difficulty of casting a woman for a remount of his play, *Venus in Fur*, based on the scandalous novel of 1870 by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Sacher-Masoch gives us the M in BDSM. The S of course is de Sade. The other two letters stand for bondage and discipline. You know that, you read *Broadway World*.

A storm is breaking over the city. Just as he gets ready to leave, having phoned his fiancée, in through the door tumbles Vanda. She's running late, there was trouble with the bus, yadayada, it started to rain, yada more yada. She's sorry but can she read for the part? Not for the first time does Stefanie Rossi's almost ungovernable mane of hair take on a major role in a STARC production. Even those of us only peripherally distracted by the sight of a physically beautiful woman in exotic underwear can appreciate the sight of Stefanie Rossi stripped for action. I was more concerned about that small problem with the garter belt.

As the action progresses, they take on the roles of Kushemski and Dunayev, residents of an exclusive health spa. The rapid changes of character exploit the two actors' well-honed gifts for timing and delivery.

Kushemski is dealing with the impact of an event when, as a boy on the edge of puberty, he was held down on a sable coat, by two servant women, and lashed on his bare behind by his imperious aunt. It left a lasting impression. Madame Dunayev wants to be free to explore her deepest natures, careless of social constrictions. She'd also like to have sex with the handsome Hungarian who has arrived on horseback with his two black attendants. There are mysteries.

Vanda has a full copy of the play. She just happens to have suitable costumes and some confronting props in her collection of shopping bags. She knows an alarming amount about Thomas's fiancée. It will dawn on you, probably only moments before Thomas realises who has come into his life, just who this woman really is. At this point, Thomas has been tied with silk stockings, black of course, to the set, and the references to *The Bacchae* and the death of King Pentheus torn apart by a drug-crazed mob of women led by his wife and his mother, become intense.

The program cover rather gives it away. Don't fuck with a goddess.

I have questions. Did David Ives set up to adapt the original book to the stage before getting caught up, entangled in the complex toils of contemporary awareness? It felt like that to me. I'd also like to see it again, maybe even in this production, with two actors with whom I'm not familiar; two actors who aren't an off-stage couple. That would raise the stakes, because it's our familiarity with the actors developed over the last couple of years that just takes the edge off the experience. I'd really like to see the same story told by a woman.

While Stephen Dean's exemplary lighting adds to the atmosphere, the play should end with the roof of the Bakehouse Theatre splitting open, and the Evening Star shining balefully down.