

Venus In Fur – Stage Whispers review

By David Ives. Starc Productions. Bakehouse Theatre



kehouse

Theatre, SA. April 7-17, 2021

First performed in 2010 and written by David Ives, director Tony Knight* and actors Stefani Rossi and Marc Clement are immensely courageous in presenting the multi-award winning, but not widely performed play, *Venus In Fur*. Also made into a French erotic drama by Roman Polanski in 2013, it is an intricate piece that can be enjoyed on multiple levels: an obvious comedy/drama level; as a titillating risqué night at the theatre; and it can be mined for the fragile layers of shale that the story embraces. *Venus in Fur* is a 90 minute two-hander that leads the audience directly into the middle of a field of power plays between the sexes, between director and actor, between mistress and slave, between artist and muse.

Starc Productions, as they so often do, are presenting this as a complex reflection of a number of issues, particularly those of male/female power, sexual abuse and manipulation, and the masochism that lurks within many of us, delivering the message, ‘We are all explicable, but not extricable.’

Always a ‘rustic’ venue, the audience is greeted at The Bakehouse by a somewhat utilitarian warehouse set, designed by Mathias Forge, being used by a very frustrated director, Thomas Novachek (played with growing and intensifying energy by Marc Clement), who is the writer-director of a new play opening in New York City. He has written and is auditioning actors for this play-within-the-play which is an adaptation of the 1870 novel ‘[Venus in Furs](#)’ by the Austrian author [Leopold von Sacher-Masoch](#), and happens to be the novel that inspired the term “[masochism](#)”. Lighting by Stephen Dean, is, as usual, perfectly placed, supporting the mood and ensuring that the audience sees every nuance clearly, and well.



Enter Stefani Rossi. Both ‘dizzy’ and extremely insightful, Rossi’s Vanda is a ‘force of nature’. She struts, she slinks, she postures, she simpers, she brutally challenges, sometimes all in the same minute. Rossi delivers an ‘exquisite despot’ flawlessly. Using a mid-Atlantic accent, somewhat reminiscent of Katherine Hepburn, she commands the stage effortlessly. Clad for part of the performance in a skimpy and revealing sado-masochism corselet, we discover that Vanda’s personal life is juxtaposed against the role that she ultimately seems to have been born to play. Always excellent with

New York accents, in this play, Rossi delivers several different accents, seamlessly ‘chopping and changing’, maintaining character and pace. Her ‘over the top’ Marlene Dietrich inspired accent is very funny and her delivery of a ‘virtual kiss’ is beautifully titillating to watch.

Clement and Rossi harness their real life partnership, smoothly delivering ‘rapid fire’ dialogue, titillating and using each other’s space confidently, and sometimes proactively. Rossi as the temptress, ‘scissoring’ Clement between her thighs, simply has the audience holding their breath in anticipation. No move or gesture is wasted or accidental, a tribute to the tight ‘Starc team partnership’. The energy in the room during this production is absolutely tangible throughout; it is an unexpected, rapid rollercoaster of dialogue, ideas and emotions for both the players and the audience. Additionally, both actors captivate and command respect and admiration for their professionalism whilst appearing to be having ‘loads of fun.’



Clement, as Thomas/Kushemski, and even pointedly, but briefly as the female Dunayev, is a delight to watch. The play is written to particularly showcase Rossi’s role, but he is smooth, confident, commanding, and, at times totally vulnerable. His accents, and vocal work in portraying characters within the sub play ensures that, at all times we connect with who he has become in the story.

In #MeToo times, this play has vivid relevance to conversations that men, women, organisations and legislators are having. It highlights that demanding women ask nicely in the right way and in the right outfit, for their basic human right to not be harassed or assaulted is a

symptom of the problem we’re trying to solve.

Starc Productions, once again, leaves us with a message delivered in a fun, challenging way. Their purpose is value added entertainment and Rossi and Clement deliver ‘in spades.’ *Jude Hines*

**Tony Knight also writes for Stage Whispers*