Study Guide: *Venus in Fur*

BY: David Ives

DIRECTED BY: Jennifer Tarver

A Canadian Stage production

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Overview and Classroom Activities
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A letter to teachers and students:

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives. Sharing art consistently diversifies our conversations and David Ives’ *Venus in Fur* is no exception. This play is an outstanding example of how theatre may be used as an entry-point to talk about themes around gender, status, and power through the portrayal of a sophisticated relationship that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality.

In *Venus in Fur*, a young actress is determined to land the lead role in a new play based on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 19th century erotic novel *Venus in Furs*. During her audition, she gets caught up in an electrifying game of cat and mouse with the director, depicted through a sophisticated model of metatheatre. Among its many accolades, this intelligent and unexpected showdown of the sexes was nominated for the Best Play Tony Award.

In addition to its depiction of a deeply complex relationship, Ives’ play includes references to a myriad of related ancient and classical sources. Mentions of Greek mythology, ancient tragedies and Renaissance art enrich the piece and move it beyond a simple cat and mouse situation that the audience witnesses. Ultimately, Ives expertly offers a nearly complete survey of gender roles and the opportunity to explore and analyze societal expectations in the classroom.

David Ives’ *Venus in Fur* is a sophisticated and seductive story that will trigger discussions about power among the genders as well as more generally throughout society. Based on the script, this guide explores *Venus in Fur*’s historical and social context, some of Ives’ reference points as well as several themes in order to offer preliminary context for students and teachers. It is meant to be a helpful tool in providing information as well as strategies for utilizing a trip to this production for teaching diverse learners in a variety of subjects. Throughout this document, connections to curriculums including Philosophy, History, Gender Studies, Psychology, Mythology, Media Studies, and of course Drama become evident. This guide will ideally clarify how Ives’ sexy two-hander is tangibly related to the curriculum and an exciting entry-point for thoughtful discussion in diverse classrooms.

See you at the theatre!

Cheers,

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Synopsis

Adapted from www.dramatists.com

Thomas is a beleaguered playwright/director who is desperate to find an actress to play Vanda, the female lead in his adaptation of the classic sadomasochistic tale Venus in Furs by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Into his empty audition room walks a vulgar and equally desperate actress—oddly enough, named Vanda. Though seemingly utterly wrong for the sophisticated part, Vanda exhibits a strange command of the material, piquing Thomas' interest as she uncovers unpredictable layers, unpacks a bag full of S&M props and period costume pieces, and woos him with her seductive talents. As the two work through the script, they blur the line between play and reality, entering into an increasingly serious game of submission and domination. Venus in Fur is a mysterious, funny, erotic drama that brings up questions of gender roles and power while alluding to mythology, art and history.

Characters

Thomas Novachek, a playwright / director
Vanda Jordan, an actress

Theatrical Context

David Ives’ Venus in Fur is described as a “taut, psychological play” (Frochtzwajg, 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".

(Wikipedia 2013)
Playwright David Ives on How Venus Got Her Fur

Originally published on Broadway.com in October, 2011.
http://www.broadway.com/buzz/158278/playwrightdavid-ives-on-how-venus-got-her-fur/

My play Venus in Fur began with a very powerful, very bad idea.

A few years ago I re-read Histoire d’O, the notorious erotic French novel of the 1950s. Story of O (as it’s known in English) is the tale of a woman identified only as “O” who from the very first page accedes to her lover’s demands for various kinds of sexual submission. O masochistically submits for two hundred more pages, the classical severity of the book’s style and the odd purity of the main character’s commitment lending the novel an air of spirituality, of larger meaning and metaphor. By the end, O, who has willingly passed through stations of sometimes gruesome erotic engagement, approaches a state of near personal extinction.

Somehow I got the idea that all this would make for a terrific play. I envisioned an evening that crossed over into performance art. Kabuki! Robert Wilson! High pretension! Well, luckily for me the rights to the book were unavailable because I’m apparently not the only fool who ever dreamt of putting O onstage. Understand, my idea wasn’t bad because of the nature of the material. It was bad because the story is fundamentally undramatic. If your main character submits on page one, where’s the drama? So, yes, it might have been theatrical. But dramatic? Never.

Having x’d O, I was led by process of association to re-read Venus imPelz, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s notorious 1870 novelization of his own submissive erotic entanglement. Venus in Furs has never been considered a “great” novel (its prose is as Teutonically leaden as velvet sandbags) but it is enough of a milestone that Sacher-Masoch put the M in S&M, lending his name, because of the book, to the term “masochism.”

Never mind the prose: I found myself electrified. Dramaturgically electrified, I mean, because the relationship between Severin and Vanda, the two lovers of the plot, seemed to dramatize itself without the intervention of a playwright’s hands. Unlike Story of O, Venus in Furs sparks with the friction of two buttoned-up people in an erotic power play who challenge, resist and disagree with each other even while bound by mutual sexual attraction. That sure sounded dramatic to me.

So I set about adapting the book for four actors—two to play Severin and Vanda, two for the side roles, all straightforwardly in period and period dress. By the way, for anyone wondering about the title (“Why Venus in Fur? Isn’t it Venus in FURS?”) Venus in FUR has always sounded better, and more natural to me, than the uglier Venus in FURS. And these days, we don’t say that a woman is wearing furs, we say she’s wearing fur or a fur. Nuff, or muff, said.

Having finished my adaptation, I sent it to my friend and longtime collaborator the actor/director/wonder Walter Bobbie, whose taste and judgment I trust absolutely. Walter didn’t know the Sacher-Masoch novel but quickly read the script and told me essentially this: that the relationship between Severin and Vanda was fascinating, but that the play I’d made out of them seemed both uncontemporary and too literal. For what is erotic and suggestive on a page (e.g., whips and chains) can be stunningly unstageable if not ridiculous under lights. And what does this relationship of 1870, however complex, have to do with us in the early 21st century? Walter apologized, I remember, for not
being more specific than that. As always, I took his opinion very seriously indeed.

I pondered the matter for some weeks or months with no real idea how to use Walter’s thoughts to readdress or reshape what I’d written, but during this time the story of *Venus in Furs*, the relationship of Severin and Vanda, was still very present to me. Since their plight wouldn’t let me go, I felt certain that I was bound (so to speak) to go back to it. And then one day I did, though I don’t know what spurred me to take the route I took, which was to strip away everything but my two lovers and create a frame story set today in an audition room where a playwright seeks an actress to play Vanda in his adaptation of, what else, *Venus in Furs*. In fact, the writing went quite swiftly and I finished a new draft in 10 days or so.

I sent the revision to Walter, and Walter said, “Let’s do it”—the Cole Porterish music to every playwright’s ears. From those words, it was but an apparent picosecond to a production downtown at Classic Stage and yet another picosecond to the Friedman on 47th Street. And as we proceeded deeper and deeper into Sacher-Masoch’s erotic Black Forest, we met up with Nina Arianda on our way, an actress who not only seemed created to play Vanda, but whose name actually rhymed with that of our heroine...

But that’s another tale entirely.

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**Historical / Social Background**

David Ives’ *Venus in Fur* is based on the erotic novel by Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch written in 1870. Below is a translated introduction from one version of the book that provides great context and a synopsis.

**Venus in Furs: The Novella**

**INTRODUCTION from Venus in Furs by Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch as translated to English from German by FERNANDA SAVAGE**

(Fernanda Savage, 2003)

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch 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 Hohe*, 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.

During his career as writer an endless number of works poured from Sacher-Masoch's pen. Many of these were works of ephemeral journalism, and some of them unfortunately pure sensationalism, for
economic necessity forced him to turn his pen to unworthy ends.

There is, however, a residue among his works which has a distinct literary and even greater psychological value. 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*. The whole was to be divided into six subdivisions with the general titles *Love, Property, Money, The State, War, and Death*. Each of these divisions in its turn consisted of six novels, of which the last was intended to summarize the author's conclusions and to present his solution for the problems set in the others.

This extensive plan remained unachieved, and only the first two parts, *Love* and *Property*, were completed. Of the other sections only fragments remain. The present novel, *Venus in Furs*, forms the fifth in the series, *Love*.

The best of Sacher-Masoch's work is characterized by a swift narration and a graphic representation of character and scene and a rich humor. The latter has made many of his shorter stories dealing with his native Galicia little masterpieces of local color.

There is, however, another element in his work which has caused his name to become as eponym for an entire series of phenomena at one end of the psycho-sexual scale. This gives his productions a peculiar psychological value, though it cannot be denied also a morbid tinge that makes them often repellent. However, 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.

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. As a creative artist Sacher-Masoch was, of course, on the quest for the absolute, and sometimes, when impulses in the human being assume an abnormal or exaggerated form, there is just for a moment a flash that gives a glimpse of the thing in itself.

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*. It would be interesting to trace the masochistic tendency as it occurs throughout literature, but no more can be done than just to allude to a few instances. The theme recurs continually in the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau; it explains the character of the chevalier in Prevost's *Manon l'Escault*. Scenes of
this nature are found in Zola's *Nana*, in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, in Albert Juhelle's *Les Pecheurs d'Hommes*, in Dostojevski. In disguised and unrecognized form it constitutes the undercurrent of much of the sentimental literature of the present day, though in most cases the authors as well as the readers are unaware of the pathological elements out of which their characters are built. In all these strange and troubled waters of the human spirit one might wish for something of the serene and simple attitude of the ancient world. Laurent Tailhade has an admirable passage in his *Platres et Marbres*, which is well worth reproducing in this connection:

"Toutefois, les Hellènes, dans, leurs cités de lumière, de douceur et d'harmonie, avaient une indulgence qu'on pourrait appeler scientifique pour les troubles amoureux de l'esprit. S'ils ne regardaient pas l'aliené comme en proie à la visite d'un dieu (idée orientale et fataliste), du moins savaient-ils qu'un amour est une sorte d'envoûtement, une folie ou se manifeste l'animosité des puissances cosmiques. Plus tard, le christianisme enveloppa les âmes de ténèbres. C'est la grande nuit. L'Église condamna tout ce qui lui parut nefand pour les dogmes implacables qui reduisaient le monde en esclavage."

Among Sacher-Masoch's works, *Venus in Furs* is one of the most typical and outstanding. In spite of melodramatic elements and other literary faults, it is unquestionably a sincere work, written without any idea of titillating morbid fancies. One feels that in the hero many subjective elements have been incorporated, which are a disadvantage to the work from the point of view of literature, but on the other hand raise the book beyond the sphere of art, pure and simple, and make it one of those appalling human documents which belong, part to science and part to psychology. It is the confession of a deeply unhappy man who could not master his personal tragedy of existence, and so sought to unburden his soul in 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.

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. When several years ago cheap reprints were brought out on the Continent and attempts were made by various guardians of morality—they exist in all countries—to have them suppressed, the judicial decisions were invariably against the plaintiff and in favor of the publisher. Are Americans children that they must be protected from books which any European school-boy can purchase whenever he wishes? However, such seems to be the case, and this translation, which has long been in preparation, consequently appears in a limited edition printed for subscribers only. In another connection Herbert Spencer once used these words: "The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly, is to fill the world with fools." They have a very pointed application in the case of a work like *Venus in Furs*. 
Artistic and 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.

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.

(Ives 26)

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.

(Dixon-Kennedy, 1998, pp. 317-8)

Similar to how some may describe Vanda in Ives’ Venus in Fur, Venus was considered “powerful ... not to be trifled with” (Salisbury, 2001). The goddess “was a divinity who was strong in her passions, her rage, and her compassion, and she was venerated throughout the ancient world” (Salisbury, 2001, pp. 11-2). Through a look at certain tales it becomes evident that Aphrodite, or Venus, was influential and had much clout over the behaviours and actions of both gods and mortals. For instance, consider the fact that Venus became known as the goddess of war since she often instigated or was found at the epicenter of conflict that resulted in war. One example of a war in which she played a role is the infamous Trojan War.

The Trojan War was the longest lasting as well as the largest-scale military conflict in classical mythology. In brief outline, the chief events were as follows. When human beings became so numerous that their
weight oppressed the earth, Zeus decided to bring about a great war at Ilios, or Troy, in order to reduce their numbers by means of death. So Eris (Strife) showed up at the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, which the gods were attending, and caused Hera, Athena, and Aphroditê to dispute among one another about which of them was the most beautiful. The question was referred to Alexander, or Paris, a Trojan shepherd and prince, who decided in favor of Aphroditê, thereby earning her favor and the hatred of the other two goddesses. Paris sailed to Greece, where he visited the palace of King Menelaos of Sparta and his beautiful wife, Helen. Seduced by Paris, Helen deserted her family and followed Paris back to Troy as his wife.

(Hansen, 2004, p. 314)

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 fall in love with each other or refute that advances of another” (Dixon-Kennedy, 1998). 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.

Art History References: 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?”

(Ives 13)

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. A conversation with Alexandra Suda, Curator of European Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, helps understand the implications of the inclusion of this famous work.

Why “Venus with the Mirror”?

Information taken from an interview conducted between Canadian Stage Education Intern Megan MacDonald and Alexandra (Sasha) Suda, Curator of European Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario

To appreciate why Ives would have chosen this Titian painting we must first begin to understand the Renaissance period. The Renaissance years (c. 14th-17th century) mark the beginning of a new philosophical search for the truth among Europeans. Throughout the Middle Ages, the church was the governing body and there was a wide acceptance that the world was created by god. During the Renaissance, however, the church began to lose power and there was a return to reason and a greater interest science: a search for objective truth. This shift in ideology and quest to rationalize faith rather
than accepting it may be attributed to a changing economic and socio-political climate. Some of the outcomes included the appearance of a middle class and the beginning of empowerment for women.

These evolving principles were reflected in art. Figures began to appear naturalistically – no longer flat and symmetrical, or idealistically, but now more realistic in volume and form. Subjects of art work also transitioned from being strictly religious to secular, which is a reflection of the distinction between church and state. This shifting style and content, reflective of shifting belief systems and politics, is immortalized in the paintings of later Renaissance artists like 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?

(Ives 16)

Also 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 situationsimilarly 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.
About Titian and the painting
from: www.studiotheatre.org

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.”

(Features: Venus in Fur)

Other famous portrayals of Venus in art that your class can explore:
Birth of Venus – Botticelli
Mars and Venus – Botticelli
Venus of Urbino- Titian
Venus and Cupido (oor The Rokeby Venus) – Velazquez

STUDY GUIDE: VENUS IN FUR
Venus before a Mirror – Rubens
Judgement of Paris – Watteau
MademoiselleO’Murphy (or Young Girl Reclining) – Boucher
Olympia – Manet
The Dream – Rousseau
Manet’s Olympia – Mel Ramos (Contemporary exploration of what we consider to be “Venus” now)

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.

(Ives 26-7)

*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

Cited from: (The Bacchae: About the Production, 2007)
http://www.stanford.edu/group/sica/ptny/about.html

Dionysus*, son of Zeus, seeks vengeance on Thebes, the city of his birth and site of his mortal mother Semele’s cruel and horrible death. Leading his army of women into the surrounding mountain glens, Dionysus casts a spell on the city’s females, who abandon their husbands and fathers in order to engage in forbidden revels. When the young and highly repressive king Pentheus discovers that his own mother Agave has given herself over to this upstart god of wine and erotic joy, he declares a state of war, despite the very stern warnings of Cadmus, the former king and the famed prophet Teiresias. Incredibly,
Dionysus' unarmed women defeat Pentheus' formidable royal army. When the king meets the god in a face-to-face confrontation, the result takes on a horrible logic all its own. Hitting the voyeuristically-inclined young king where it hurts, Dionysus lures him into the glens where, at the very site Semele's destruction, he is seduced into disguising himself as a woman in order to watch the forbidden orgies unabated. Unable to resist the sexual lure of the Maenads' holy eroticism, Pentheus attempts to join in only to be torn, literally limb from limb, by the frenzied Bacchae. The following morning, Cadmus discovers the terrible aftermath: the still-raving Agave dancing through the woods, her dead son's head clutched in her hands. Now joined by Teiresias, the former king forces his daughter back to her senses and the horrifying realization that not only is her son dead, but that Agave herself was "amongst his butchers."

*Dionysus: Roman name Bacchus, is a god who has two distinct origins. On the one hand, Dionysus was the god of wine, agriculture, and fertility of nature, who is also the patron god of the Greek stage. On the other hand, Dionysus also represents the outstanding features of mystery religions, such as those practiced at Eleusis: ecstasy, personal delivery from the daily world through physical or spiritual intoxication, and initiation into secret rites. Ambiguity or ambivalence or both?
Study Links

Here are some curriculum connection points and sample discussion questions. These questions may be used to prompt conversations in your classroom.

**Social Sciences and Humanities**
Although there are only two actors in the play, Vanda and Thomas socialize in several ways throughout the play, both with each other and others (e.g. Thomas with his fiancé on the phone).

Observe their interactions carefully, and consider the ever-shifting power dynamic between Vanda and Thomas. What inferences can you make from an anthropological, psychological and sociological perspective about these two characters? Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of comparing their behaviours from each of these perspectives.

Extension: Once you have collected all of the clues within Ives’ *Venus in Fur* about Vanda and Thomas, create a backstory for each of them that would justify how they have reached this point. Include their careers, interests, confidence, etc.

**Philosophy**
The distinction between Vanda the actress and the character Thomas has written in his play is constantly blurred. Consider philosophies around the definition of human nature. Is there support in these philosophies that Vanda either is or is not human?

There is a blurring between reality and illusion (the play) throughout this play. Consider what constitutes reality for yourself, how the major philosophers define reality and how effectively their definitions distinguish between reality and illusion.

**Canadian History**
*Venus in Fur* at Canadian Stage is an original production of an American script. What aspects of this production make it uniquely Canadian? How would you update Ives’ script to more closely represent Canadian identity? Are there aspects of his piece, or of this particular production, which are conflicting with Canadian culture?

**World History**
Looking at the references that Ives refers to chronologically including Greek mythology about Venus, the ancient Greek tragedy *Bacchae* and Italian Renaissance artist Titian’s painting *Venus with the Mirror*, what evolution/growth is visible with respect to women’s issues? What other issues stand out as being consistent throughout these points of reference? Are there other literary sources, works of art, historical or current events that illustrate the same themes?

Consider specifically the changing aspects of women’s economic, social, and political lives in Western and non-Western societies since the sixteenth century.

**Gender Studies**
Consider Vanda and Thomas as real people. What socially constructed attitudes, behaviours, roles, and norms relating to gender do you think have affected them? As characters in a play, assess their representations of their genders and consider how they may perpetuate or challenge some of these socially constructed expectations.
Consider this audition happening in pre-Renaissance Europe. How might it have been different?

**Psychology**
What are some psychological reasons for participating in an S&M (sadomasochistic) relationship? Why are certain individuals theoretically prone to masochism? What are potential after-effects?

**Mythology**
How does Vanda’s character, both the person auditioning for the role and the character Thomas has written into his script, resemble the traditional goddess of love Venus (or Aphrodite)? What are the distinctions between the Greek and Roman goddesses of love?

**Drama**
In what ways does David Ives effectively use dramatic conventions in his play *Venus in Fur*? Consider specifically use of light and metatheatre.

How does Jennifer Tarver’s direction emphasize the constantly shifting power between the two actors in the play?

**Visual Arts**
In what ways is Renaissance art most significant historically? What social and political events are reflected in art from this time?

Ives has selected to emphasize Titian’s “Venus in the Mirror” as a painting that accurately reflects the themes within his play. What are some other relevant works of art to the production?

**Media**
Observe a variety of current and past advertisements and determine who or what has the power position in these advertisements.

Consider the video “Representations of Gender in Advertising” from the University of Saskatchewan and the corresponding CBC Article exploring the video’s veracity. **Please note: this video is restricted to adult use.**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaB2b1w52yE


Do you agree with the suggestion that "Often men are portrayed [in advertisements] as strong, dominant, looking at the camera," said by Kayla Hatzel. "Whereas the women are shown sort of draping over them, shown as subordinate, not looking at the camera, that type of thing. Very passive-looking."? Can you find additional examples of advertisements that support or challenge these notions?

Additional Resource from *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*
"Woman and Man in Advertising: Narrative Illustration of an 'Equality which Cannot Be Found'."
Critical Exploration

Metatheatre

The use of metatheatre is essential to the effectiveness of David Ives’ *Venus in Fur*. According to Stuart Davis:

“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. It may -- by devices like plays within plays, self-consciously “theatrical” characters, and commentary on the theatre itself -- dwell on the boundaries between “illusion” or artifice and “reality” within a play, making us speculate on the complex mixture of illusion and reality in our ordinary experience. Any theatrical device can work metatheatrically if we sense in it a certain deliberate reflexiveness, a tendency to refer to itself or to its context in a more general mode: to theatre itself; to art, artifice, and illusion; and perhaps above all to language as such.

(Davis)

*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 Historical Context section). At this point, Vanda begins making demands of Thomas. Thomas directs her to do “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.
Venus in Fur is one of many works that employs the motif of a play within a play. A concise list of other classical works in which metatheatre is prominent includes:

Shakespeare’s A Midsummer’s Night Dream
Shakespeare’s Hamlet
Shakespeare’s Love’s Labour Lost
Luigi Pirandello, Six Characters in Search of an Author
Anton Chekhov, The Seagull
Brecht’s The Caucasian Chalk Circle
Tennessee Williams’ The Two Character Play
Alan Ackbourne, A Chorus of Disapproval

Reality vs. Fantasy

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. A few of the details to consider are:

Light

The first stage direction described in the script establishes immediately that the events following occur during a thunderstorm.

(A clash of thunder and a burst of lightning reveal THOMAS in a bare, rented studio.)

Throughout Venus in Fur, David Ives continues to play with natural light sources from the storm, as well as unnatural sources of light, such as fluorescents, in a deliberate and meaningful way. Immediately before we hear or see Vanda for the first time, for example, the stage directions specify that there is “Thunder and lightning. The lights in the room flicker” (Ives 1). On the other hand, before the two begin to dive into Thomas’ script, Vanda asks Thomas if he minds if she changes the lights because she “hate[s] fluorescents” (Ives 12). With his permission she adjusts the lights creating a “more dramatic” setting (Ives 12). These intentional lighting transitions, and who controls them, are essential in establishing transitions between the overlapping action of the play and the play within it as well as declaring who is in power at certain moments.
**Names**

The name given to the characters within *Venus in Fur* suggests critical questions about the play, including where reality ends and fantasy begins. Consider the fact that Vanda shares a name with the goddess-based fictional character she has come to audition to portray. This fact makes the distinction between who she is versus the character Thomas has written into his play, what is “real” and what is “acted”, almost impossible to decipher.

Furthermore, the way in which Vanda addresses Thomas is notable. As they read through the scripted contract that is part of Thomas’ play which establishes that Vanda will be his “madam”, Vanda says: “And from now on I’m going to call you ‘Thomas’” (Ives 57). Vanda adamantly dismisses Thomas’ correction (“It’s Gregor in the script…” Ives 57) and continues to refer to him by his true name. The significance of this ‘error’, and Vanda’s insistence on using his true given name, again reiterates the fact that fantasy and reality are not necessarily mutually exclusive. By the end, Vanda goes so far as to refer to him as “Tommy” (Ives 72), a shocking nickname given their rapport thus far, as she criticizes his work for being “degrading to women” (Ives 72), a real-life concern.

**Stage Directions and Props**

VANDA: Oh, wait a minute. Wait a minute.

THOMAS: What.

VANDA: (digging in her bag) My fur. She’s wearing a fur stole when she comes in, isn’t she?

THOMAS: she is.

VANDA: (takes out a thrift-shop shawl and puts it on) There. Okay. Fur. Soft fur. Soft fur...So where am I, where do you want me?

(Ives 10-11)

The way Ives plays with his use of metatheatrical devices emphasizes the overlap between the fantastic and the real. At points, the characters read stage directions out loud, bringing awareness to the fact that they are “acting” out Thomas’ script. At other times though, these stage directions are embedded and the two players seemingly just know where to move to in the space. Similarly, there is evident thought behind when real props are utilized as opposed to certain articles being mimed or alluded to in spoken word. These choices continue to blur the line between truth and fiction.
Power

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) as explored in the Historical/Social Background section of this study guide. 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 (see Metatheatre section). 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.

(Ives 51)
Ask any actor and they will tell you that auditions are notoriously fraught with unforgiving power dynamics – the director, producer, or playwright who has all the power and the actor who has all the need. Most actors come equipped with their own personal audition horror stories. From overly authoritarian directors to casting directors more interested in eating lunch than hearing another monologue, auditions can be a brutal experience even for the most seasoned professional.

In *Venus in Fur*, playwright David Ives sets his adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 novella in a contemporary Manhattan audition room. As a playwright, Ives delights in the audition process. Explaining the “a-ha moment,” when the perfect actor enters the room, he says:

“I love auditions. Audition rooms are joyful when the right person walks into the room, and you hear somebody else’s voice fill out a character, a different voice than you had in your head, but one that’s absolutely right. The funny thing about audition rooms, is that moment—I haven’t tried to name it until right now—that moment when actors have walked in, and read their piece, and then turn to look at you and they know, they always know, if they've gotten the job.”

Ives admits, however, that the process is not all fun and games for those on the other side of the table. He admires actors and their ability to face an often-unfriendly panel of people whose sole purpose it is to judge and critique every aspect of their looks and talent.

“The courage it takes at that moment to shake your hand. Auditions are a series of little Chekhovian heartbreaks that walk in and out of that room. Or a series of little joys. Again, it’s the gallantry of actors—that they’re willing to walk into the room and put themselves on the line and say, ‘Here I am.’ “

In setting *Venus in Fur* within an audition room, David Ives turns the process on its head giving power to the usually powerless (a choice that would delight any actor).

(About Venus in Fur)

**Terms to know**

**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.

(Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009)
Subversion:

Subversion refers to the process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed, thus eroding the basis of belief in the status quo. Throughout *Venus in Fur* power dynamics are constantly flip-flopping, cleverly inviting us to re-examine our notions of power, gender, and sex.

**Discuss as a class**

“You’re taking power. Take a power position.” (page 29)

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

**Extension:**

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.

VANDA: Sex, class, gender, pal.

Ives 51

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*?
Classroom Activities

Warm up: Status Tableaux Activity

1. In pairs, determine a relationship in which one person is of higher status/authority than the other (examples: student and teacher, beggar and royalty). Create a still image (tableaux) to depict this relationship.

2. Show your image to the others and let them guess who is "high" and who is "low". Discuss why students have guessed the way that they did. Discuss why there may be areas of disagreement.

3. Using the same relationship, create a different tableau challenging the students to think of alternate ways of establishing the same impact.

4. Challenge students to create a tableau where it is unclear who has higher status. In discussion identify relationships that are ambiguous.

5. Finally, try to make an image where you have equal status and see if the onlookers agree.

http://dramaresource.com/games/improvisation/status-pictures

Status Card Activity

*A deck of playing cards is required for this activity*

Discuss how status can affect the body language, the voice, the dialogue and the overall truthful portrayal of a character.

1. Split the class in half. One set of student actors becomes the audience and the other half sit in audience position. The teacher places a playing card on the forehead of each student without the student seeing what card it is.

2. Instruct the actors that an Ace is the highest status in the room and Two is the lowest. Instruct students that the following activity is to be done in SILENCE focusing on body language and facial expression. The students then begin to mill around the room as if they are at a social engagement, meeting new people for the first time. They are to treat the other people at the party according to the status (card ranking) on their forehead. They are to quickly adapt their character by physically responding to the cues given to them by their fellow actors.

3. When it appears that students are discovering their “status” tell them to stand in a line from highest to lowest status and place themselves based on what they think their status (card ranking) is.

4. Tell students to keep the cards on their foreheads but ask each of them why they believe they belong in that particular place in line. Example questions: What kind of body language did others use towards you to make you feel that you are this particular status (card ranking)? How did you reflect your view of your status (card ranking) when interacting with others? How did this make you feel?
5. Students may now remove their cards and view their ranking (status). Often times students will have guessed properly based solely based on other students body language towards them.

6. Ask students in the audience for their insights into what they viewed.

7. Switch the audience and the participants and repeat the activity.

Optional Additions to Activity:

Add Improvisational Dialogue

You may have students repeat this activity using not only body language and facial expression but also adding improvised dialogue. Discuss how status is portrayed through dialogue.

Internal and External Status

Repeat the activity, however this time students are given a card to hold in their pocket. They can look at their own card but may not show it to others.

Extension: In addition to the hidden card in their pocket, equip each student with a card on their forehead. This round then begins with improvised dialogue as the actors struggle to justify their internal and external identities.

While viewing Venus in Fur ask students to take note of moments when notice the status of each character being displayed. How is the status being displayed physically? How is the status being displayed through dialogue? Are there any switches in status throughout the play? How is this portrayed?

Debriefing the Performance: Discussion Questions

1. What is/who are the “correct/appropriate” audience for this production?

2. What is the difference between ambiguity and ambivalence? In what ways do the characters, (actions and setting) reflect these terms? (Thomas corrects Vanda several times in the play when she refers to something in his play as being ambivalent, and he corrects it to ambiguous)

3. Consider the following two exchanges:

   Thomas: You only say that because you yourself are so individual.

   Vanda: A man usually says that to a woman whose individuality he is about to undermine.

and later, similarly...

   Thomas: You are a magnificent creature.
Vanda: A man usually says that to a woman whose magnificence he’s about to undermine.

How are these exchanges reflective of the relationship between the genders today, in mid-20th century? In what ways can these terms be applied to Thomas, to Vanda? How, as a society do we promote or not people to be individuals and/or magnificent?

4. How would you prepare a senior high school class to see this production?

5. Discuss how human sexuality is portrayed in the play. 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, etc. Select any one, and discuss how they are similarly ambivalent/ambiguous, with particular attention to current media coverage.
Works Cited


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