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Theatre Review: Venus in Fur @ Theatre Royal Haymarket

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Despite amazing acting, provocative visuals and a thought-provoking story, Patrick Marber's *Venus in Fur* is let down by some below-par storytelling.





A two-act play within a play, not dissimilar to *Woman in Black*, *Venus in Fur* stars David Oakes (*Shakespeare in Love*) as Thomas Novachek, a writer-director, who is casting for a play based on the 1870 novel *Venus in Fur* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. The novel, controversial for its time, was the root of the term masochism.

In the novel, Severin von Kusiemski becomes so infatuated with Wanda von Dunajew that he submits to being her slave. Wanda is initially bemused by the whole idea but eventually agrees.

The story begins with thunderous lightning, Thomas can't find an actress to play Wanda. He bemoans on the phone to his fiancée, Stacey, when suddenly an overzealous actress, Vanda Jonson (Natalie Dormer, *Game of Thrones*) abruptly works on in and convinces Thomas to let her audition.

Despite it initially looking as though Vanda has no chance of succeeding, she and Thomas get engrossed in performing the play, and the audience begins to wonder just why does Thomas have such a specific and rigid interpretation of the play and characters? And is Vanda really who she claims to be?

The acting is phenomenal, not least because both Oakes and Dormer are acting as characters acting as other characters. Meanwhile, the stage with a large pole in the middle and vintage furniture provides a good backdrop to the play.

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The dynamic between Thomas and Vanda and Severin and Wanda is captured perfectly. Thomas grows increasingly agitated as the play goes on, Vanda becoming empowered. The shift between New York and classic English accents is seamless and evident.

Oakes shows Severin's desire, almost desperation, to be dominated perfectly and yet within seconds, Thomas is back, trying to assert his directorial vision upon Vanda.

Dormer, meanwhile goes from being a bemused figure, out of her debt, to a strong-willed, feminist, act

The mood is matched by stunning lightning, the stage is engulfed by shadows and fluorescent lights, with contrast and change from scene-to-scene, the sound effects of thunder and lightning and rain, foreshadow



a climatic ending.

The ending is quite reminiscent of the aforementioned *Woman In Black* and with Oakes bearing a resemblance to Keanu Reeves's look in *Knock Knock*, it has shades of the ending to the 2015 erotic thriller.



But it's almost too foreshadowed, the hints are there from within 10 minutes and Vanda practically gives it away around halfway in. As such, what could be a clever twist is all too predictable way before it happens.

That said, as an exploration of relationships, dominance, and psychology, it is a good play. It asks the audience ethical questions, as Vanda points out, Severin wants to be humiliated, so why does Wanda look like the bad person?

Venus in Fur has the potential to be a brilliant play, it just needs to be structured and told better.

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