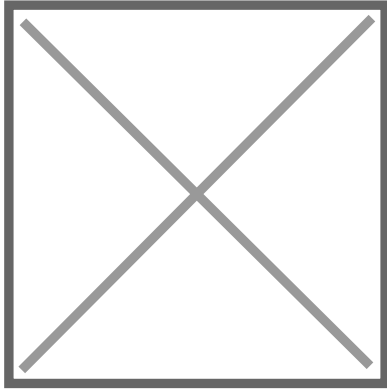




Who's Directing Whom: Power and Consent in Voodoo's *Venus in Fur*

Description

Reviews like this take 10+ hours to research and write. If this one was useful, even \$1 helps. [Support Rhetorical Review](#).

Taylorsville, UT—There's a particular kind of electricity that fills a room when a two-hander gets everything right, when two actors, one small set, and one relentless script are enough to hold an audience captive for ninety-some minutes. Voodoo Theatre Company's production of *Venus in Fur*, directed by Patrick Kibbie and with assistant director Sophia Van Nederveen, delivers exactly that kind of electricity, and the standing ovation it earned on opening night felt entirely deserved.

Venus in Fur, David Ives's two-hander adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel, arrives at Voodoo Theatre Company as a taut, R-rated audition-room thriller about power, consent, and who really holds the pen. What starts as a playwright-director auditioning a late, unqualified actress spirals into a battle over who is actually in control of the room, the story, and each other.

Poster for *Venus in Fur* with the quote And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman's hands.

A Script With Staying Power

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* is the book that gave the world the word "masochism." The playwright's own name literally became the clinical term for what his fiction explored. Ives's two-hander premiered off-Broadway at Classic Stage Company in 2010 with Nina Arianda and Wes Bentley, a production widely credited with relaunching Bentley's career and turning Arianda into a name to watch. The play transferred to Broadway the following year, with Hugh Dancy stepping into the role of Thomas, and Arianda's performance as Vanda went on to win her the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play. Since then, the play has traveled: productions in Australia, Canada, and a 2017 West End run starring Natalie Dormer have all found their own version of the same charged, claustrophobic two-person standoff. Roman Polanski even adapted it into a French-language film in 2013. That the script keeps finding new life across countries and casts says something about how durable its central trick really is: two people, one room, and a power struggle that never plays the same way twice.

In Voodoo Theatre Company's *Venus in Fur*, a woman reclines in the foreground while a man watches Wes Bentley as Thomas and Nina Arianda as Vanda in *Venus in Fur*.

The Setup

The play doesn't ease into its power dynamics; it opens on them. Before Vanda even enters, we hear Thomas mid-rant on the phone with his fiancée, tearing through the day's failed auditions: no actress would take the part for a nickel a week, he complains, and wonders aloud what happened to femininity, claiming he could play Vanda better than most of the women who read for him. It's a blunt, ugly little overture, and Richards delivers it with just enough self-satisfaction that when Vanda actually arrives, drenched, late, and rattled by a man who'd been pressing against her on the train, the audience is already primed to watch Thomas's authority get tested.

He isn't just casting the part; he wrote the adaptation and is directing it himself, a detail Vanda clocks almost immediately, and he initially tries to turn her away outright: she's not on his list, he's exhausted, he has dinner plans. She talks her way back in anyway, changing into a costume mid-phone call while he's still on with his fiancée, wearing him down through sheer persistence until he agrees to read one scene. It's a scene built entirely out of small comic humiliations, hers and his, and Manzanares and Richards play the tug-of-war for real laughs without ever losing the undercurrent that something more serious is already shifting in the room.

Promotional photo for *Venus in Fur*: a man in black sits in a leather chair beside a woman in a black dress. Jaden D. Richards as Thomas Novachek and Deena Marie Manzanares as Vanda Jordan. Photo provided by Voodoo Theatre Company. Photo Credit: Madison Roberts.

Characters

Vanda is two things at once, and the play never lets you fully settle on which is the real her. She's a working actress hustling for scraps of a role, disheveled, swearing, seemingly out of her depth. And she's someone who already seems to know this text better than the man who adapted it, catching its sexism, its self-seriousness, its blind spots, faster than he ever admits to noticing them himself. Her repeated insistence that the material is sexist isn't a throwaway aside; it's close to the character's whole spine, someone unwilling to let a room full of male authority go unchallenged even while she's the one auditioning for whatever's left of it.

Thomas is a man convinced of his own expertise, on women, on desire, on the material he's spent years adapting, and the play spends its runtime quietly dismantling that confidence. It happens in small increments rather than one collapse: a sarcastic compliment he takes at face value, a claim about what every woman wants delivered seconds after being told otherwise, a defensive denial when he's asked to examine his own attachment to the material too closely. He isn't a villain, which is what makes the unraveling land. He's an ordinary man whose blind spots are ordinary too, right up until the play, and Vanda, force him to notice them.

Actor Highlights

Deena Marie Manzanares as Vanda Jordan

Deena Marie Manzanares is a revelation in the role. She has said this was a dream part since seeing the show on Broadway, and that history shows: she navigates Vanda's whiplash shifts (scattered in one moment, commanding seductress the next) with a control that never once feels like showing off. She handles the play's constant toggling between period seductress and present-day skeptic without ever losing the thread of who Vanda actually is underneath the performance. It's the kind of performance that makes the audience recalibrate, again and again, exactly who is in charge of the room.

Promotional photo for Venus in Fur: a woman with long wavy hair in black gloves and a black dress
Deena Marie Manzanares as Vanda Jordan. Photo provided by Voodoo Theatre Company.
Photo Credit: Madison Roberts. Photo Credit: Madison Roberts

Jaden D. Richards as Thomas Novachek

Jaden D. Richards, as Thomas, is the ground on which the play destabilizes, and Richards claims that authority well. Thomas's confidence erodes by degrees rather than collapsing all at once, which makes the final shift in power land with real weight rather than melodrama. Richards and Manzanares have rich chemistry onstage, playing off each other well throughout, which is the whole engine of a play with nowhere to hide.

Promotional photo for Venus in Fur: a man in a black shirt holds a fur coat over his shoulder.
Jaden D. Richards as Thomas Novachek. Photo provided by Voodoo Theatre Company.
Photo Credit: Madison Roberts. Photo Credit: Madison Roberts

Storm, Shadow, and Silhouette

The storm outside isn't just a scripted convenience to trap the two characters together; Austin Ray's lighting and Melanie Kamau's sound design turn it into an unnerving experience. Lightning flashes projected onto the back of the stage lit the whole space in sharp, sudden bursts, timed with cracks of thunder loud enough to make the audience jump in their seats. Every time the tension between Thomas and Vanda seemed to reach a plateau, the storm would surge again, as if the room itself were keeping pace with the power shifting between them.

Alicia Kondrick's costume design deserves its own applause. Vanda's transformation from a bedraggled modern arrival, dripping raincoat and all, into the full-period silhouette of Wanda von Dunayev happens almost in front of the audience, and it does real storytelling work: the shift in fabric and shape tracks the shift in power just as much as the acting does. It's the kind of costuming that doesn't just dress the actors; it argues the play's whole thesis in cloth.

Analysis

One of the script's smartest mechanisms, and one that this production handles with real skill, is its constant toggling between the period world of the play-within-the-play and the present-day rehearsal room. Every time the tension of the "Venus" text threatens to tip into something too heavy or too straight-faced, Vanda snaps us back to the present: she breaks character to needle Thomas, mocks a line as dated or absurd, or flatly tells him a moment "wouldn't fly today." It's a release valve, and a pointed one. Ives isn't just giving the audience comic relief; he's using Vanda's modern

voice to interrogate the material in real time, holding the old text up against a contemporary eye even as the play keeps pulling us back into it.

Thomas is also given room to explain, at least to himself, why heâ??s drawn to material this extreme. Pressed on whether he ever had his own â??innocent instantâ?• as a kid, he denies it flatly, then pivots into a small speech about loving the sheer size of these charactersâ?? emotions, comparing Kushemski and Vanda to Tristan and Isolde, to Paolo and Francesca, doomed lovers consumed by their own passion. Itâ??s Ives being knowingly literary, and Vanda immediately punctures it, refusing to let outsized passion sound extinct, and when he asks whether we go to plays for feelings we donâ??t get in life, she flips it back on him: maybe weâ??re supposed to go to life for that instead. Itâ??s a quick exchange, but it needs something real, whether Thomas is using the play to talk about feeling or to avoid having any of his own.

Written by Men, About Women

Thereâ??s a second layer worth naming here, since itâ??s baked into the script rather than something Iâ??m reading into it: this is, twice over, a man writing a woman. Sacher-Masoch wrote the 1870 novel; Ives adapted it into the play. And the play seems aware of that lineage, because it keeps having Vanda say so directly. She calls the material sexist more than once, over the line about never being safe â??in the hands of a woman,â?• and again over how the female character ends up cast as the villain despite feeling everything just as intensely as the man does. At another point, right after Kushemski delivers a speech about wanting to be reduced to nothing at his loverâ??s feet, Vanda breaks character to tell Thomas, dripping with sarcasm, that he really understands women. He answers completely straight-faced: years of study. He doesnâ??t catch the joke at all. Itâ??s one of the sharpest, funniest beats in the show, a man mistaking his own theorizing for insight while the woman across from him is visibly laughing at him. That same blind spot resurfaces later, when Kushemski insists that every woman wants to be worshipped, seconds after Vanda has told him she doesnâ??t want that at all. I watched more than a few women in the audience nod along at that line anyway, which says something about how persuasive a confident man can sound even inside a scene explicitly built to catch him being wrong. None of this fully resolves itself; a male playwright writing a woman who calls out a male-authored fantasy doesnâ??t exactly escape the fantasy so much as comment on it from one layer up. Whether that self-awareness is enough is, I think, a fair question to leave open.

The Weight Beneath the Wit

That toggling between comedy and something heavier is also what makes the playâ??s harder material land the way it does. Within the â??script-within-the-script,â?• Thomas, reading as the character Kushemski, delivers a monologue about his childhood: at twelve, his aunt, a domineering countess, arrives with two servants who hold him down while she beats him with a birch switch, an ordeal he describes as the origin of his lifelong fusion of pain, fur, and desire. Itâ??s spoken, never staged, but itâ??s specific rather than euphemistic, and it does real structural work: itâ??s the origin story for the masochistic dynamic the rest of the play plays out. Ives doesnâ??t leave the question implicit, either. The moment Thomas finishes the speech, Vanda breaks character to say the play is essentially about child abuse, and Thomas, almost defensively, waves the idea off. Judging by the audible discomfort in the house on opening night, the monologue landed exactly as intended, and unlike most of the playâ??s back-and-forth, thereâ??s no quip to soften it here; the joke button doesnâ??t arrive until after

weâ??ve sat with it.

I read that scene as a kind of test that the production is quietly running on its audience. Before weâ??re asked to find the power games between Thomas and Vanda seductive, playful, even erotic, weâ??re handed a piece of context that complicates any uncomplicated pleasure in what follows. Itâ??s the play, and this production doesnâ??t shy from it, asking how far weâ??re willing to suspend our moral footing for the sake of the story, and whether we notice ourselves doing it. Kibbieâ??s production threads that needle by keeping the moment verbal, brief, and unresolved; it sits with you rather than announcing itself.

Critique

The productionâ??s stated ambitions run in two directions, and they donâ??t quite land the same way. Kibbie and Van Nederveen, in an interview ahead of opening night, said they donâ??t see the show as particularly weighted toward themes like domestic abuse, and pointed instead to the enormous care that went into building trust and boundaries in the rehearsal room, work Kibbie credited largely to Van Nederveenâ??s background in consent and sexual health. That care is evident onstage: nothing about the production feels exploitative, and the actorsâ?? visible trust in each other is part of what makes the piece work. But Iâ??d argue the directors undersell their own script. The passage I keep returning to is doing exactly the kind of thematic work they say isnâ??t really there, quietly, but unmistakably. It may be that the productionâ??s success lies in this very gap: a show built with enough care that it can house material this loaded without ever feeling unsafe to watch, even when the show itself seems reluctant to name what itâ??s holding.

Verdict

A two-hander, this exposed lives or dies on control, and this production has it, not because it smooths over the scriptâ??s edges, but because it trusts two actors and a storm to carry material most productions would flinch from. Itâ??s funny when it wants to be, uncomfortable when it needs to be, and it never lets you settle on who holds the power. That control isnâ??t just a credit to the cast; itâ??s a credit to the whole team behind them; the lighting, sound, and costume design are doing as much storytelling here as anyone standing onstage. *Venus in Fur* is demanding, for its audience as much as its actors, and this cast and creative team clearly understood the weight of what they were handling. For those unbothered by the rating, I call it a must-see.

[Tickets](#)

Show Info

Title: *Venus in Fur*

Playwright: David Ives, adapted from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch

Director: Patrick Kibbie

Assistant Director: Sophia Van Nederveen

Venue: Studio 5400, Mid-Valley Performing Arts Center, Taylorsville, Utah

Dates: July 17-26, 2026

Run Time: 75 minutes, no intermission

Rating: Recommended for mature audiences ages 16 and up

Cast: Deena Marie Manzanares as Vanda Jordan, Jaden D. Richards as Thomas Novachek

Production Highlights

Venus in Fur, presented by Voodoo Theatre Company

- **Directed by:** Patrick Kibbie
- **Assistant Director:** Sophia Van Nederveen
- **Featuring:** Deena Marie Manzanares as Vanda Jordan; Jaden D. Richards as Thomas Novachek
- **Stage Manager:** Taylynn Rushton
- **Costume Design:** Alicia Kondrick
- **Sound Design:** Melanie Kamaau
- **Lighting Design:** Austin Ray
- **Producer:** Jack Cobabe
- **Assistant Producer:** Ellie Otis
- **Dates:** July 17-26, 2026
- **Venue:** Studio 5400, Mid-Valley Performing Arts Center, Taylorsville, Utah
- **Run Time:** 75 minutes, no intermission
- **Rating:** Recommended for mature audiences ages 16 and up

Category

1. Reviews

Tags

1. adaptation
2. David Ives
3. Deena Marie Manzanares
4. Feminist Theatre Criticism
5. gender in theatre
6. Jaden D. Richards
7. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch
8. Mid-Valley Performing Arts Center
9. Patrick Kibbie
10. power and consent
11. R-Rated Theatre
12. Salt Lake City Theatre
13. Sophia Van Nederveen
14. Studio 5400

- 15. Taylorsville theatre
- 16. two-hander
- 17. Utah theatre
- 18. Venus in Fur
- 19. Voodoo Theatre Company

Date

2026/10/30

Date Created

2026/07/19

Author

keola06

default watermark