

Sexy or Sexist? Natalie Dormer Mixes S&M, Irony for “Venus in Fur”

BY HILARY WEBB | OCTOBER 18, 2017



Natalie Dormer and David Oakes in "Venus in Fur"
(Credit Tristram Kenton)

The giant shadow of a leather-clad Natalie Dormer dominates the ceiling of Theatre Royal Haymarket in the latest production of David Ives’s “Venus in Fur.”

Dormer leads the entire play with her strong delivery of humor, authority, her several ambiguous characters and, of course, her role within a complex submissive-dominant relationship. Dormer shares the stage with David Oakes in this production, directed by Patrick Marber. While “Venus in Fur” is often painted as being the play of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s founding text of masochism, “Venus in Furs” (1870), the play is also about adaptation, power and, much to the disdain of Oakes’s character Thomas, the consequences of art.

The work has a complicated past. After all, Marber’s version is a British production of an American play about an imaginary play of an Austrian book. That’s not to mention that in 2013 Polish director Roman Polanski made a French film of the play. The story has crossed borders and language barriers, artistic mediums and social movements. What is it about this submission story that has captivated audiences for yet another adaptation? The raunchy subject matter seems like the obvious answer. Dormer’s character Wanda stumbles into a theatre for an audition clad in 21st-century S&M gear, where Oakes (the adapter and director, Thomas) is looking for an impossibly perfect actress to play Vanda in his faithful theatrical adaptation of “Venus in Furs.” What follows is an audition with Thomas reading as Severin, but really it is a hilariously dark struggle between actress and director, dominant and submissive, woman and man. S&M stories have gained popularity after the success of the “Fifty Shades of Grey” series, but perhaps it was “Venus in Furs” that inspired that cultural phenomenon in the first place, as Anastasia Steele’s car is named Wanda on just page four of E L James’s novel.

Audiences are initially shocked, but then tickled, by Dormer's fantastic profanity-filled New York accent. We are perhaps used to the regal accent she sports as Margaery Tyrell in "Game of Thrones," but as her character slowly reveals that she's not as foolish as you or Thomas first think, her transformation into Vanda sees her period English accent flow naturally. Dormer didn't once confuse the accents of Wanda or Vanda as they switch sporadically. The play seems to ask whether faithfully adapting a sexist novel makes the adapter sexist? Wanda seems to think so, especially since the power supposedly lies in the hands of the director, whom she is convinced the entire play is about. Regardless, this play is testament to how powerful an actress can be, as the powerful women found in Dormer, Wanda and Vanda fool the audience, Thomas and Severin.

Wanda holds Thomas's presentation of Vanda to account, accusing it of being sexist. Thomas takes this very personally and flies off into fits of rage crying, "I'm only quoting Sacher-Masoch!" as if that's an excuse. Thomas's intellectual arrogance over the fact it is a "very famous novel" is far more important to him than updating or, at the very least, addressing the sexism present in the text, nor any of the other social issues the novel touches upon. Wanda and the audience are in on the joke as Dormer rolls her eyes at Thomas's weak defense and she reveals little by little that she's there to teach him a lesson.

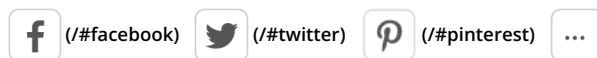
Unfortunately, some of the irony was seemingly lost on the audience, when, to my horror, the three middle-aged men in front of me turned to each other and nodded in agreement at Thomas's rant about the "idiotic urge these days to make everything about some trivial social issue!" When audiences consider Thomas's involvement in upholding a casting couch culture ("working in the theatre is the world's greatest way to get laid") in light of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the play is unwittingly given an uncomfortable 2017 update.

While he is oblivious to it, Thomas is a total art snob. He refuses to consider the problems in Sacher-Masoch's novel to be legitimate issues because of the status of the art in question – a celebrated novel from the 19th century. For the most part, the character of Thomas is so frustrating and ignorant that you might cast some of those feelings towards Oakes. It's not until we see Oakes slip into another role at the end of the play that you begin to marvel at his performance anywhere near as much as you do with Dormer's throughout.

In the middle of the play, music is used so subtly that you begin to wonder if you're imagining it, so quiet in fact that it was hard to tell if that was a volume problem or an intentional embellishment. The rest of the sound effects worked wonderfully as the sound of Dormer thrashing her imaginary birch branch whip was so impactful that I swear for a moment, I saw her shadow holding a whip (or was she?) The two person play requires more costumes than you would expect, and Dormer manipulates them to blur the lines of the characters.

As Wanda arrives on the stage, she complains of a man getting too close on the subway, and it begins to remind us perhaps why we still need this play. Whether we still need to adapt the original "Venus in Furs" remains a more difficult question. David Ives understands women well enough that he constructs the perfect mansplaining, self-professed woman-literate, hypocritical, backwards progressive in Thomas. Despite the potent presence of Dormer's performance in this production, one still can't help but wonder if a woman had total control of this play, or its origin story, how would it be different?

"Venus in Fur" is on at Theatre Royal Haymarket, London, through December 9, 2017.



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