Venus in Fur | The Drama Merchant

By kian dillon | 12 May 2021 | 0

Review of May 9th Performance | ARCANA

"Happy Mother's Day" I say, turning to my middle-aged, primary-school-teaching mother, as we exit the self-described "50 Shades of Grey – but Intelligent" performance that was *Venus in Fur.* As I waited for her shellshocked face to form some sort of reaction, I was not in the least surprised that her first words had less to do with the emotional experience – that came later – and more to do with, in the most mum way possible, a genuine level of concern for the actors who went without rest for the entire 90-minute performance. "I was even just exhausted watching them" she said – an ode to mothers everywhere.

And yet, she was right. Dom Bradley as self-assured playwright and director Thomas, and Jenna Eve as the unapologetically zealous actress Wanda, breathed an unrelenting feverishness into The Drama Merchant's adaption of David Ives 2010 play script, staged in the Moon Room at Anywhere Hub Spot ARCANA. There was no pause for air, no moment of respite, and nowhere really to hide in the immersive form as it saw audiences in and amongst the performance action. Secret witnesses to an audition that began to turn in on itself, obscuring the line between acting and the real world. It was fascinating to watch how events from the 1870 novella were interwoven as audition scenes, played out by Thomas and Wanda. In this way, the characters were afforded the capacity to comment on and have opinions about Sacher-Masoch's original text.

We were simultaneously flies on the wall bearing witness to this toxic setting, and yet still cognizant of our existence as spectators of a highly stylised performance. I was struck by how the performance space enhanced and augmented this sense of surveillance by having three walls lined with floor to ceiling mirrors. There were points in which I found my eyes straying from the actors themselves and beginning to observe the performance as it was reflected to me in infinite iterations of a fur draped shoulder, or a leather strap cracking through the air. Early into the show, Wanda turned off all the lights bar a small rig set to cast the space in a dim blue and pink glow. It was the colour of late nights and of dingy clubs which, when reflected amidst these mirrored walls, fostered a sense of unease and indecency.

From the outset the construction of the director/actor hierarchy was, well, self-evident. Thomas was auditioning Wanda for his adaption of the highly controversial 1870 novella *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. The audience entered into the space as it was already alive with performance and we left in much the same way, without being afforded the cathartic moment of applause. It was not just the form that necessitated this decision, the story itself begged to be heard, it refused to provide audiences with the privilege of simply clapping, then walking to the bar and going on with our evening. We were left stuck in the limbo of an event without a 'clean ending', left tantalised by whispers of what would happen next and of what we wouldn't get to see.

The work did not claim to provide me with answers to any of the questions it raised, questions of sexuality, of power, of performativity and the coded language of gender. There were many moments when, just as I felt I had begun to understand the performance and its narrative, or it's – for lack of a better term – 'message', the entire thing would be undercut, and I would be left doubting the direction I had arrived at only minutes before. Yet, it was indicative of powerful theatre to have left me brooding in this way. Where, in order to simply unpack the experience, I was forced into discussions of kinks, of BDSM, and of the structures of power that underpin these, with my mother. Who was as simultaneously perplexed and in awe as I was.

The Drama Merchant's production of *Venus In Fur* is still running across two Brisbane locations between the 14th and 22nd of May, with tickets available via the [Anywhere Website](#).