

HOW VENUS GOT HER FUR

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

A few years ago, partly to brush up my French, partly because I admire the book, I re-read *Histoire d'O*, the notorious French S&M novel of the 1950s by “Pauline Réage.” That name was a pseudonym and it had remained opaque for decades until Réage was unmasked as a young woman who had written the pornographic novel as bait in an effort to hang onto her lover, a renowned French literary man. Still living with her parents at the time, she would slip out and meet him in a car and read him the new material she’d written. Apparently, the ploy worked. She kept him – and he helped her get her book published. There’s a terrific documentary about the whole affair called “Writer Of O.”

Story of O, as it’s known in English, is the tale of a woman identified throughout the book as “O,” who from the very first page accedes to her lover’s demands for various kinds of extreme sexual submission and then goes on submitting for another 200 pages. The classical severity of the book’s style and the odd if not inexplicable purity of the main character’s commitment lend Réage’s novel an air of spirituality, of larger meaning and metaphor. By the end, O, who has willingly passed through stations of sometimes gruesome sadomasochistic engagement, approaches a state of personal extinction. Of sainthood, if you will. Somehow I got the idea that this story would make a terrific play. I envisioned an evening that crossed over from play into performance art, a show somewhere between Kabuki and Robert Wilson.

My idea wasn’t bad because of the S&Mness of the material. It was bad because the story is fundamentally undramatic. If your main character submits on page one, where’s the drama, where’s the conflict, what’s the problem? So, yes, the novel might have been stunningly

theatrical in the right hands. But *dramatic*? Never. Luckily for me, the stage rights turned out to be unavailable, lost in a Gallic legal tangle.

Having put *O* aside, partly to brush up my German, I re-read *Venus im Pelz*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's notorious 1870 novelization of his own real-life submissive erotic entanglement. Unlike *Histoire d'O*, *Venus in Fur* has never been considered much of a novel (its prose is like Teutonic sandbags) but the book is enough of a milestone that Sacher-Masoch put the M in S&M, lending his name to the term "masochism."

Despite the book's ponderous style and inarticulate plot, I found myself electrified – *dramatically* electrified, I mean, because the relationship between Severin and Vanda, the novel's two lovers, seemed to dramatize itself. So I set about adapting the book for four actors: one each for Severin and Vanda, two actors for the side roles, all straightforward and in period dress.

By the way, for anyone wondering about my title *Venus In Fur* ("Why *Venus in FUR*? Isn't the book *Venus in FURS*?") *Venus in FUR* has always sounded better and frankly more erotic to me than the harsher *Venus in FURZZ*, no matter what The Velvet Underground says. And these days we don't say that a woman is wearing *furs*, we say she's wearing *fur* or *a fur*. And "Pelz" is singular *in the German*...

Well, nuff said.

Having finished my straightahead adaptation I sent it to my friend and long-time collaborator Walter Bobbie. Walter wasn't familiar with the Sacher-Masoch novel but read my script and told me in no uncertain terms that it didn't work. Yes, the relationship between Severin and Vanda was fascinating, but the play seemed both un-contemporary and too literal. He pointed out the obvious: what is erotic on a page (say, whips and chains) can be stunningly

unstageable and, worse, ridiculous onstage. And what does these two people's relationship of 1870 have to do with us in the early 21st century? As always, I took his opinion seriously. I put the play away.

For months, though, the characters and the story bugged me. Severin and Vanda wouldn't let me go. So one day I took the script off the shelf and grabbed a pencil. First, I stripped away everything but my two lovers. I cut all the side characters. Then I cut further, leaving only the scenes that looked like *drama*. Then for reasons I couldn't explain I created 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 Fur*. The writing went swiftly and I finished a draft in ten days or so.

I sent the revision to Walter and he said, "Let's do it." Brian Kulick of Classic Stage Company offered to host a closed reading of the play with two excellent actors. The reading was so terrific, the actors so good, it looked like the show would be a piece of cake to put up. As it turned out, the actors from the reading turned us down for various reasons and we spent six months auditioning. The problem was that we needed two actors who could go from the classical style of Severin and Vanda to the contemporary realism of Tom and Wanda in an eye-blink. Plenty of actors could handle one but not the other.

Then one doleful afternoon after we'd apparently seen every actress in town, Nina Arianda walked into the audition room, a young woman who not only seemed created to play Vanda, but was Slavic and whose name actually rhymed with that of our heroine: Vanda / Arianda. Also, just like Vanda in the play, Nina had almost nothing on her resumé.

Nina read, we thanked her, she left the audition room, and we scrambled to get her agent on the phone. As she reached the subway Nina got a call offering her the part. Wes Bentley, eager to get back onstage after many years away from it, quickly signed on to play Thomas.

John Lee Beatty created an extraordinary set for the space at Classic Stage: when you entered the theatre you saw a subtly shifting, mysterious black box three stories high created by a hanging black silk. The audience surrounded the thing on three sides. There was no walk-in music, and that ambient vacuum plus the sinister portent of the black silk shape created its own pre-curtain tension. Lights went out, a very loud thunderclap was heard and the black silks dropped to the ground revealing a raised stage rather like a boxing arena. I recall John Lee measuring what would be the best, most effective height for the stage so that an audience member would feel both voyeur and participant, simultaneously in Thomas and Vanda's erotic dance and apart from it.

I had written one stage direction that said simply "Thomas changes Vanda's shoes." Walter told me early on that that was going to be "a big moment" in the evening. I had no idea what he meant – or how big the moment would end up.

He told Anita Yavitch, our brilliant costume designer, that he wanted a pair of the most extreme S&M boots she could find. They pored over bondage catalogues and online dominatrix sites and settled on an outrageous zip-up thigh-high pair in shiny black patent-leather with very sharp stilettos and buckles. Hideous and hypnotic. Unfortunately, Anita found out that those boots were sold out because of a fetish convention in Berlin. Luckily, through a contact in Germany she got hold of a pair.

The "moment" Walter had promised at that point in the action was this: when Thomas has to "change Vanda's shoes" about an hour into the show, Walter told Wes to take as much time as he wanted, in fact to take as much time as he *could*. In total silence, Vanda reclined on the yellow divan and Thomas at her feet removed her high heels and put the boots on her. "*Zip them up very slowly,*" Walter told him, and slow it was, the zipper audibly meshing all the way

up the inside of Nina's leg. The scene – in total silence – took minutes and the audience sat rapt as Thomas submitted and Vanda subtly *writhed*.

Word got around about the show while we were still in early previews and we attracted some interesting audience members. There was a night during the boot scene when a man from the audience came down the middle aisle and stood right at the front edge of the stage to watch Wes change Nina's shoes from only several feet away while standing at mesmerized attention. He faded back to his seat once the boots were on. Another night, four young male Wall Street types in the top row broke out a bottle of brandy and some snifters at the top of the show and comprised their own sort of Edwardian gentlemen's club for the evening. Another night there was a woman in the front row who, every time Vanda scored some "feminist" point, would thrust her fist into the air and shout "YESSSSS!"

POSTSCRIPT, some years later: in this essay at one point I say "for reasons I couldn't explain I created 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 Fur*." I meant that.

Then one day, some years after *Venus*'s premiere, I rented Carlos Saura's flamenco film version of *Carmen* from 1983 and re-watched it. I'd been at Yale Drama School when the film came out and had seen the movie five times in one week at the York Street Theatre, obsessed by the obsessive love story of the film. The last time I went, the theatre manager spotted me at the box office and waved me in for free. He knew a real-life obsessive when he saw one. Why not? It's an obsessive movie about...a director trying to find a dancer to play the lead in his dance version of *Carmen*...who falls in love with her...and ends up acting out the very same tragic story he wants to put onstage...

Obviously that story had planted itself in some dark alleyway of my brain, only to surface when I sat down to re-work *Venus In Fur*.

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