VENUS in Fur
by DAVID IVES

PLAY GUIDE
Venus in Fur Play Guide written and compiled by Katherine Monberg, ATC Literary Associate. Discussion questions provided by April Jackson, Tucson Education Manager; Amber Tibbitts, Phoenix Education Manager; and Bryanna Patrick, Education Associate.

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ABOUT ATC

Arizona Theatre Company is a professional, not-for-profit theatre company. This means all of our artists, administrators and production staff are paid professionals, and the income we receive from ticket sales and contributions goes right back into our budget to create our work, rather than to any particular person as a profit.

Each season, ATC employs hundreds of actors, directors and designers from all over the country to create the work you see on stage. In addition, ATC currently employs about 100 staff members in our production shops and administrative offices in Tucson and Phoenix during our season. Among these people are carpenters, painters, marketing professionals, fundraisers, stage directors, computer specialists, sound and light board operators, tailors, costume designers, box office agents, stage crew — the list is endless — representing an amazing range of talents and skills.

We are also supported by a Board of Trustees, a group of business and community leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to assist the theatre in financial and legal matters, advise in marketing and fundraising, and help represent the theatre in our community.

Roughly 150,000 people attend our shows every year, and several thousand of those people support us with charitable contributions in addition to purchasing their tickets. Businesses large and small, private foundations and the city and state governments also support our work financially.

All of this is in support of our vision and mission:

OUR VISION IS TO TOUCH LIVES THROUGH THE POWER OF THEATRE.

Our mission is to create professional theatre that continually strives to reach new levels of artistic excellence and that resonates locally, in the state of Arizona and throughout the nation. In order to fulfill our mission, the theatre produces a broad repertoire ranging from classics to new works, engages artists of the highest caliber, and is committed to assuring access to the broadest spectrum of citizens.

The Temple of Music and Art, the home of ATC shows in downtown Tucson.

The Herberger Theater Center, ATC’s performance venue in downtown Phoenix.
INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

Venus in Fur
By David Ives
Inspired by the novel Venus in Furs by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch
Directed by Shana Cooper

One of the sexiest, most intelligent and acclaimed new plays in recent Broadway history. Venus in Fur introduces us to Vanda, a startlingly talented young actress determined to land the lead in a new play based on a classic erotic novel. When Vanda shows up hours late for her appointment, she knows she may have blown her chances. Her emotionally charged audition for Thomas, the demanding playwright/director, becomes an electrifying game of cat and mouse that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, seduction and power, love and sex.

MEET THE CREATORS

DAVID IVES: (Playwright) is perhaps best known for his evening of one-act plays, All in the Timing and for his drama Venus in Fur, which was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play. His plays include New Jerusalem: The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza; The School for Lies (adapted from Molière’s The Misanthrope); The Liar (adapted from Corneille); Time Flies; and Is He Dead? (adapted from Mark Twain). He has also translated Feydeau’s A Flea in Her Ear and Yasmina Reza’s A Spanish Play. A former Guggenheim Fellow in playwriting and a graduate of the Yale School of Drama, Mr. Ives lives in New York City.

LEOPOLD VON SACHER-MASOCH: (Author) was born in 1836 in the city of Lemberg, also known as Lwów, the capital of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria and part of the Austrian Empire, now known as the city of Lviv, Ukraine. The son of an Austrian police chief and Ukrainian noblewoman, Sacher-Masoch studied German, law, history and mathematics before becoming a professor. He would soon leave academia to pursue a career as a writer, publishing mostly non-fiction accounts of Austrian history, before venturing into fictional and romantic stories of Galicia imbued with historical themes.

From the 1860s to the 1880s, Sacher-Masoch published a number of volumes about picturesque archetypes of the various ethnicities of Galicia: Jewish Short Stories, Polish Short Stories, Galician Short Stories, German Short Stories and Russian Short Stories, leading to his local and regional literary acclaim. In 1869, he began a series of short stories to be collectively titled The Legacy of Cain; he abandoned the project before its completion, but from it emerged his most famous story, Venus in Furs (1870), a depiction of his personal sexual fantasies of dominant women dressed in fur.

In addition to his short stories, Sacher-Masoch served as editor of the monthly literary magazine Auf der Höhe, Internationale Review (At the Pinnacle, International Review), a progressive magazine that discouraged anti-Semitism and supported the emancipation of women, among other progressive activist agendas, which he would publicly support for most of his life.

Sacher-Masoch was placed in psychiatric care by his second wife when his mental health began to deteriorate in his late fifties. There are conflicting accounts of his final days: some sources claim that he died in an asylum in Mannheim, Germany, in 1905, but official records indicate that he died in Lindheim ten years earlier.
MEET THE CHARACTERS

VANDA JORDAN: A young, immensely talented actress with a slightly sporadic personality.

THOMAS NOVACHEK: A young, somewhat stiff, intellectual playwright/director in the process of casting for his stage adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs.

ON WRITING VENUS IN FUR

“My play Venus in Fur began with a very powerful, very bad idea.

A few years ago I re-read Histoire d’O, the notorious erotic French novel of the 1950s. Story of O (as it’s known in English) is the tale of a woman identified only as “O” who from the very first page accedes to her lover’s demands for various kinds of sexual submission. O masochistically submits for two hundred more pages, the classical severity of the book’s style and the odd purity of the main character’s commitment lending the novel an air of spirituality, of larger meaning and metaphor. By the end, O, who has willingly passed through stations of sometimes gruesome erotic engagement, approaches a state of near personal extinction.

Somehow I got the idea that all this would make for a terrific play. I envisioned an evening that crossed over into performance art. Kabuki! Robert Wilson! High pretension! Well, luckily for me the rights to the book were unavailable because I’m apparently not the only fool who ever dreamt of putting O onstage. Understand, my idea wasn’t bad because of the nature of the material. It was bad because the story is fundamentally undramatic. If your main character submits on page one, where’s the drama? So, yes, it might have been theatrical. But dramatic? Never.

Having x’d O, I was led by process of association to re-read Venus im Pelz, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s notorious 1870 novelization of his own submissive erotic entanglement. Venus in Furs has never been considered a “great” novel (its prose is as Teutonically leaden as velvet sandbags) but it is enough of a milestone that Sacher-Masoch put the M in S&M, lending his name, because of the book, to the term “masochism.”

Never mind the prose: I found myself electrified. Dramaturgically electrified, I mean, because the relationship between Severin and Vanda, the two lovers of the plot, seemed to dramatize itself without the intervention of a playwright’s hands. Unlike Story of O, Venus in Furs sparks with the friction of two buttoned-up people in an erotic power play who challenge, resist and disagree with each other even while bound by mutual sexual attraction. That sure sounded dramatic to me.
So I set about adapting the book for four actors — two to play Severin and Vanda, two for the side roles, all straightforwardly in period and period dress. By the way, for anyone wondering about the title (“Why Venus in Fur? Isn’t it Venus in FURS?”) Venus in FUR has always sounded better, and more natural to me, than the uglier Venus in FURS. And these days, we don’t say that a woman is wearing furs, we say she’s wearing fur or a fur. Nuff, or muff, said.

Having finished my adaptation, I sent it to my friend and longtime collaborator the actor/director/wonder Walter Bobbie, whose taste and judgment I trust absolutely. Walter didn’t know the Sacher-Masoch novel but quickly read the script and told me essentially this: that the relationship between Severin and Vanda was fascinating, but that the play I’d made out of them seemed both uncontemporary and too literal. For what is erotic and suggestive on a page (e.g., whips and chains) can be stunningly unstageable if not ridiculous under lights. And what does this relationship of 1870, however complex, have to do with us in the early 21st century? Walter apologized, I remember, for not being more specific than that. As always, I took his opinion very seriously indeed.

I pondered the matter for some weeks or months with no real idea how to use Walter’s thoughts to readdress or reshape what I’d written, but during this time the story of Venus in Fur, the relationship of Severin and Vanda, was still very present to me. Since their plight wouldn’t let me go, I felt certain that I was bound (so to speak) to go back to it. And then one day I did, though I don’t know what spurred me to take the route I took, which was to strip away everything but my two lovers and create 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. In fact, the writing went quite swiftly and I finished a new draft in 10 days or so.

I sent the revision to Walter, and Walter said, “Let’s do it” — the Cole Porterish music to every playwright’s ears. From those words, it was but an apparent picosecond to a production downtown at Classic Stage and yet another picosecond to the Friedman on 47th Street. And as we proceeded deeper and deeper into Sacher-Masoch’s erotic Black Forest, we met up with Nina Arianda on our way, an actress who not only seemed created to play Vanda, but whose name actually rhymed with that of our heroine… But that’s another tale entirely.

— By David Ives, from www.broadway.com

THE NOVEL

Venus in Furs is a novella, published in 1870 by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and originally intended to be part of Love, the first volume in his epic series Legacy of Cain, which was abandoned before its completion.

The novel centers on an unnamed narrator who dreams of speaking to the goddess, Venus, while she is wrapped in furs. He shares his dream with a friend, Severin, who recommends he read a manuscript, Memoirs of a Suprasensual Man, in order to end his fascination with female cruelty.

The manuscript tells the story of Severin von Kusiemski, whose infatuation with Wanda von Dunajew is so extreme that he asks to become her slave, persuading her to become increasingly cruel and degrading as their relationship progresses. In the midst of his intense attraction to Wanda — what Severin describes as “suprasensuality” — Wanda and Severin travel to Florence, Severin taking on the servant’s name of Gregor, and being continuously brutalized by his mistress.

Severin and Wanda painfully part ways when Wanda meets another man to whom she would like to submit, a hero figure known as Alexis Papadopolis, and Severin’s attraction dissolves. At the end of the novel, he asserts: “[Woman] can only be [man’s] slave or his despot, but never his companion. This she can become only when she has the same rights as he and is his equal in education and work.”
It is suggested that Leopold von Sacher-Masoch based his main character, Wanda, on his real-life mistress Fanny Pistor, with whom he signed a contract to become her slave for a period of six months, during which time she would wear furs as often as possible — particularly when she was feeling cruel.

In 1906, years after the publication of *Venus in Furs*, details of Sacher-Masoch’s private life were published in the memoirs of his first wife, Aurora von Rümelin, under the pseudonym Wanda v. Dunajew — the name of the main character in *Venus in Furs*. In her memoir, Rümelin recounts her former husband’s desire that she act out the sadomasochistic events of his novel, against her own desires; the two eventually divorced and Sacher-Masoch married his assistant and translator, Hulda Meister.

**SADOMASOCHISM**

Sadomasochism (often abbreviated to S&M, SM, or S/M) is the giving and/or receiving of pleasure through the infliction or reception of pain or humiliation. The term “sadist” specifically applies to one who enjoys inflicting pain, while the term “masochist” refers to one who derives pleasure from the reception of pain.

The term “sadomasochism,” a compound of the concepts of sadism and masochism, is complicated by its varied applications. “Sadism” is derived from the name of the Marquis de Sade, a French aristocrat and writer whose work prominently features his experiences as a practitioner of sexual sadism. The contemporary term “masochism” was coined by an Austrian psychiatrist in 1886 in reference to Sacher-Masoch’s inclusion of what was then considered a “sexual anomaly” in his writings, and is derived from Sacher-Masoch’s last name. Both terms originally appear in a clinical context, as scientific terminology meant to describe their occurrences as psychological illnesses or malicious sexual orientations. In 1905, Sigmund Freud described sadism and masochism as consequences of abnormal psychological development in early childhood, and laid the groundwork for Viennese psychoanalyst Isidor Isak Sadger to define sadomasochism as a psychological complex in his 1913 work, *Über den sado-masochistischen Komplex* (Regarding the sadomasochistic complex).

These conceptual models, developed by psychiatrists and based on an assumption of mental illness, began to be challenged in the late 20th century as the term “sadomasochist” came into common usage as a reference to cruel or psychopathic individuals. This led to the adoption of the term “BDSM” as a way to distance the practice from the negative connotations of the common psychological terms. BDSM is used to describe consensual activities with elements of sadism and masochism — a sexual interest rather than a pathological symptom of a psychological disorder — and allows the term to incorporate the three main subdivisions of the culture: B&D (bondage and discipline), D/s (dominance and submission), and S&M (sadism and masochism).
TITIAN'S VENUS WITH A MIRROR

The characters of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s original novel, Venus in Furs, draw the concept of the goddess Venus draped in fur from the famous Titian painting Venus with a Mirror. The original painting, created around 1555, is said to be both a celebration of the female form and a simultaneous critique of vanity. The pose adopted by the goddess, with one hand to her breast and the other on her lap, is thought to be based on the famous Hellenistic statue of Venus de’ Medici in Florence.

Titian made a number of paintings depicting Venus, but Venus with a Mirror is thought to be the only one entirely in his own hand, done without the contribution of any assistants, and which hung in Titian’s home until his death in 1576.

The red cloak under Venus’ arm has been revealed through X-ray technology to be the cloak of one of two figures in an underlying portrait, which Titian abandoned and painted over. Venus with a Mirror is on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

VENUS: GODDESS OF LOVE

Venus is the Roman goddess of love, beauty, sex, fertility and prosperity, her name derived from the Latin noun meaning sexual love and desire. The Roman counterpart to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, Venus also came to represent eneicience, seduction, the persuasiveness of female charm, victory, and prostitution.

Venus was originally associated with vegetation as the patroness of gardens and vineyards; later she came to be associated with the characteristics and attributes of the Greek Aphrodite, whose creation mythology has been appropriated as her own. Certain mythologies declare Venus to be a daughter of Jupiter, king of the gods, but she is more commonly thought to be born from the sea foam after Uranus’ blood fell into the water when he was castrated by his son, Saturn.

Venus was the wife of Vulcan, god of fire and the Roman equivalent to the Greek Hephaestus. Their marriage is noted as barren and loveless, and Venus is noted for her many extramarital lovers, both divine and mortal. With Mars, the Roman god of war, she gave birth to Timor and Metus, the personifications of fear and terror, respectively; Concordia, the goddess of harmony; and Cupid, the god of desire, affection, and attraction. By Hermes, the god of fertility, trade, and luck, Venus gave birth to Hermaphroditos, the celestial representative of androgyny. She is also said to have had affairs with Bacchus and Jupiter, in addition to her human lovers, Adonis and Anchises. With Anchises, Venus gave birth to Aeneas, Trojan hero and the mythological founder of the Roman people.

As a facet of Aphrodite, Venus can also be said to have caused the Trojan War. Paris of Troy, the handsomest man in the world, was chosen to be the arbiter of a great dispute: who is the fairest of all the goddesses? The three finalists — Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite — each offered Paris a particular bribe in exchange for the prize of a golden apple. Hera, queen of the gods, offered him world domination; Athena, goddess of war, offered him victory in battle; and Aphrodite, goddess of love, offered him the most beautiful woman in the world — Helen, queen of Sparta. Paris awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite and eloped with Helen, whose departure caused Helen’s husband, Menelaus, to raise an army and lead Greece into battle against Troy.
The symbol of Venus, and Aphrodite, consists of a circle above a small cross, and is used today to represent the female sex, the planet Venus, and the element of copper. Venus, the planet, was given the goddess’ name for its beauty as the brightest natural object in the night sky, and the third most important heavenly body after the sun and moon. Copper is one of the seven metals of alchemy, whose metaphysical properties are thought to align with those of the goddess and include energy balance, luck, healing, protection and love. Venus is also frequently portrayed with a hand mirror for many symbolic reasons: the hand mirror resembles the shape of her alchemical symbol, is representative of physical beauty, and relates to the goddess through the coating of copper used in creating the reflective surface.

**ROMAN GODS AND THEIR GREEK COUNTERPARTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>God of the sun, light, truth, healing and prophecy; son of Jupiter and Latona.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacchus</td>
<td>Dionysus</td>
<td>God of wine, ritual madness and ecstasy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cupid</td>
<td>Eros</td>
<td>God of love; son of Venus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Artemis</td>
<td>Lady of wild things and huntsman to the gods; Apollo’s twin sister and daughter of Jupiter, she is the moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juno</td>
<td>Hera</td>
<td>Protector of marriage; Jupiter’s wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>Lord of the sky and supreme ruler of the gods; known for throwing lightning bolts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mars</td>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>God of war; son of Jupiter and Juno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>The messenger of the gods; son of Jupiter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Goddess of wisdom, justice, war, courage, civilization and the arts; daughter of Jupiter alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neptune</td>
<td>Poseidon</td>
<td>Ruler of the sea, known for a three-pronged spear known as a trident; brother of Jupiter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ops</td>
<td>Rhea</td>
<td>The mother of the gods; wife of Saturn, and daughter of Terra and Uranus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluto</td>
<td>Hades</td>
<td>Ruler of the underworld and the dead; brother of Jupiter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturn</td>
<td>Cronus</td>
<td>God of the sky and ruler of the Titans; overthrown by his son, Jupiter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terra</td>
<td>Gaia</td>
<td>Mother Earth; the primal goddess and wife of Uranus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranus or Caelus</td>
<td>Uranus</td>
<td>God of the sky; father of the Titans and husband to Terra, he was overthrown by his son, Saturn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>Aphrodite</td>
<td>Goddess of love, beauty and sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulcan</td>
<td>Hephaestus</td>
<td>The god of fire, the maker of divine armor and weapons; son of Hera, and husband of Venus.</td>
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</table>

**THE EVOLUTION OF EROTICA**

Erotica, derived from but traditionally distinct from pornography by its inclusion of literary tenets instead of or in addition to visual elements, has a long and complicated history. Some of the oldest extant writings of Western culture concern the human interest in sex, sexuality, and erotic fantasy, including many poems and writings from Ancient Greece and Rome, erotic verse from Latin authors, and many examples from the Renaissance period, when erotica was handwritten and intended for a very small distribution among friends and acquaintances. The invention of printing in the 15th century enabled erotica to be more widely distributed, and first introduced issues of censorship and legal restraint to limit the distribution of potentially obscene materials.

The English Restoration (1600-1688) brought to light many aristocratic writers of obscene verse known as Restoration rakes, who came to be characterized by their carefree, witty, and sexually explicit style and include John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, Sir Charles Sedley and George Etherege among them. Scottish poet Robert Burns is also noted for his collection of bawdy Scottish folk songs, *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, that are often counted as an early example of explicit printed material.
The introduction of the novel in the 18th century expanded the literary potential and the audience for erotic works, and the publication of *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland in 1748 began to significantly stretch the boundaries of explicit material in print. Other notable examples of erotica from this period include French philosopher Diderot’s *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (*The Indiscreet Jewels*), *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*) by Pierre Choderlos de Lacos, and *120 Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade, who would later lend his name to the term “sadism.”

The explosion of popularity surrounding the novel as a form led to an eventual decrease in the quality of erotic fiction as the Victorian period progressed, and erotica began to notably feature social stratification and elements of sadomasochism. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* is one of the notable examples of erotica from this time, and brought about the public knowledge of the previously underground notion of masochism as a sexual interest.

The end of the 19th century brought about slightly more sophisticated themes in popular erotica, and made popular the inclusion of paganism, lesbianism and sadomasochism. Works depicting male homosexuality began to appear, as well as other historically taboo relationships.

The 20th century introduced many of the works now considered to be cornerstones in the genre of erotic fiction including Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1938), which would become central figures in censorship and free speech legislation in the United States; *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabakov, which melded erotic elements with more traditional and widely accepted aspects of literary fiction; *The Story of O* by Anne Desclos, published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage, which received both great literary acclaim and censorship for obscenity; and the works of Anais Nin, now hailed as one of the premier writers of literary erotica and a leading figure in the expanded awareness of the female as a sexual being and body. Contemporary erotic fiction continues to evolve with the recent inclusion of new subgenres exploring themes such as steampunk erotica, paranormal romances, and fairy tale erotica.

Writers and publishers of erotica have long been prosecuted and censored for “obscenity,” the issue sliding in and out of legal focus as public and governmental opinions have shifted through the ages. The Licensing Act of 1662 in England included a provision to prosecute “heretical, seditious, schismatical, or offensive books or pamphlets,” but was primarily exercised to censor writing that criticized the church or the state rather than erotic content. Edmund Curll became the first obscenity conviction in England in 1727 for his publication of *Venus in the Cloister or The Nun in her Smock*, though most prosecutions in the 18th century included seditious and blasphemous material in addition to erotic obscenities.

The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 first made the sale of obscene material a statutory offence in England, restricting the sale of erotic and pornographic materials and allowing the seizure and destruction of anything deemed to be “obscene.” In America, censorship was largely undertaken by the Postal Inspection Service through the enactment of the Comstock Act in 1873, which made it illegal to send “obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious” materials by U.S. Mail. Debate about “obscene material” continued through the 20th century and is largely determined to be protected as freedom of the press under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The distinction between obscenity and literature began to be debated in the 20th century, and led to the adoption of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 in England which protected "literature" but increased penalties for “pornography.” The contemporary debate regarding what content constitutes pornography, erotica, romance, erotic romance, memoir, or literary fiction is ongoing, popularized by the release of the immensely successful *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by E.L. James in 2012, and further spurred by easy access to erotica made available on the Internet that has contributed to the quick evolution and blurring of genre boundaries.
REFERENCES AND GLOSSARY

**ACTOR’S EQUITY:** The American labor union that represents professional stage actors and stage managers.

**ALBAN BERG’S LYRIC SUITE:** A composition for a string quartet written in six movements during the mid-1920s.

**AMBIGUOUS:** Open to interpretation; unclear.

**AMBIVALENT:** Having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas in regards to a specific subject.

**ANCHISES:** From Greek mythology, a mortal lover of the goddess Aphrodite.

**APHRODITE:** The Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation; the Greek equivalent of the Roman goddess Venus.

**APOCRYPHA:** Statements or claims of dubious authenticity; also used to refer to the collection of ancient books found between the Old and New Testaments in some editions of the Bible, or as an appendix after the New Testament.

**ASCETIC:** A person who practices severe self-discipline and abstention.

**ATHENS:** Among the oldest cities of the world, the Grecian city that laid the foundations of Western civilization with its cultural achievements.

**AUF WIEDERSEHEN:** A common German goodbye meaning “until we meet again.”

**AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE:** A constitutional monarchic union in Central Europe formed between the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary and in existence from 1867-1918; the Empire consisted of modern-day Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, large parts of Serbia and Romania, and small parts of Italy, Montenegro, Poland and Ukraine.

**BORGIA:** Reference to Rodrigo Lanzo Borgia, who became Pope Alexander VI and was known for having many mistresses despite his papal occupation.

**BREADWINNER:** The person who financially supports his or her household.

**CARPATHIA:** Region on the eastern edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire where the Carpathian Mountains stretch from the Czech Republic in the northwest to Romania in the east, and to the Iron Gates on the River Danube between Romania and Serbia in the south.

**“CITIZENS OF CORINTH!”:** Reference to the dramatic literature of Ancient Greece and their frequent address or imploration to the citizens of Corinth, one of the largest and most important cities of Ancient Greece.

**COUNTESS:** A woman of high rank who is the wife or female equivalent of a count or earl; can refer to nobles of varying status, but generally conveys a rank between the highest and lowest nobility.

**COY:** Making a pretense of shyness or modesty that is intended to be alluring.

**CUR:** A surly or cowardly fellow; a mongrel or inferior dog.

*Aphrodite,* the Greek goddess of love, portrayed as her Roman counterpart, Venus, in *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli.
DAS FEMALE: German for “the female.”

DEESTANGAY: Phonetic pronunciation of “distingué,” the French word for “distinguished,” meaning illustrious or elegant.

DEGRADATION: The process through which something is ruined or damaged.

DEMURE: Reserved or modest.

DESPOT: A person who holds absolute power and exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way.

DICTAPHONE: A classic dictation machine used to record speech in order that it may be played back and transcribed.

DILETTANTE: A person who engages in a field as an amateur out of casual interest rather than as a profession.

DIONYSUS: The Greek god of wine, ritual madness, theatre and ecstasy; the Greek equivalent of the Roman Bacchus.

DISDAIN: Contempt or scorn.

DIVAN: A piece of furniture similar to a couch yet without any arms or a back, often placed against a wall and used as a bench or a day bed.

DOGGEREL: A derogatory term for verse considered of little literary value.

EPIGRAPH: A phrase or quotation placed at the beginning of a piece of writing as a preface to the work.

FAUST: The protagonist of a classic German legend about a scholar who becomes so dissatisfied with life that he makes a deal with the devil to exchange his soul for unlimited worldly pleasures.

FLORENCE: The capital city of Italy, known as the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance.

FRANKENSTEIN’S MONSTER: Dr. Frankenstein is a fictional character from Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, Frankenstein, who reanimates a creature made of flesh; popular culture often mistakenly uses the name “Frankenstein” in reference to the monster itself.

FRAU: A German word which equates to the English “Mrs.” and implies that the woman being addressed is married.

FREUD: An Austrian neurologist known as the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud pioneered the psychosexual theory of human behavior and had major impact on the field of counseling psychology.

FROCK COAT: A man’s fitted knee-length coat popularized in the Victorian era.

GALVANIC BATTERY: A source of electrical energy that derives from spontaneous redox reactions that take place in a series of galvanic cells, connected in parallel; a galvanic cell generally consists of two different metals connected by a salt bridge, or half-cells separated by a porous membrane.
Guten Abend: German phrase meaning “good evening.”

Hedda Gabler: The title character from Ibsen’s play, a woman of prospect who becomes bored with her new husband; manipulative, intelligent, and unpredictable, she causes mischief throughout the play, eventually resulting in her suicide.

Helen and Aspasia: Women who caused major wars in ancient Greece; Paris’ desire for Helen caused the Trojan War and Pericles’ desire for Aspasia brought Athens to war with Sparta.

Imperious: Assuming authority without justification.

Insidious: Beguiling or treacherous.

Kazakhstan: A Russian-speaking country that borders Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan; the last country to sever ties with the Soviet Union through its declaration of independence in 1991.

“Venus in Furs”: A song written by Lou Reed and performed by The Velvet Underground on the 1967 album, The Velvet Underground & Nico; inspired by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s original novel, the song includes sexual themes of submission, sadomasochism, and bondage.

Marlene Dietrich: German-born American actress and singer who rose to fame with her performance in the 1930 film The Blue Angel; her glamour and exotic looks catapulted her to stardom, and led her to become one of the highest-paid actresses of the 20th century.

Messalina: A descendant of the Roman emperor Augustus and wife to Emperor Claudius, known for her promiscuity and eventual execution for plotting the death of her husband.

Meter: The rhythmic structure of poetic verse.

Opulent: Lavish or luxurious.

Pagan: An irreligious person, or one who follows a polytheistic religion; often deemed uncivilized and morally deficient.

Paris: The son of Priam, King of Troy, who sparks the Trojan War by his elopement with Helen, Queen of Sparta; known for defeating Achilles in the Trojan War.

Pedantic: To be overly concerned with minute details or formalisms.

Pediments: A triangular area on the face of a building below the roof, above an entrance; in classical architecture, the space is often filled with relief sculpture.

Pentheus: The King of Thebes in Greek mythology, most commonly known for his role in Euripides’ The Bacchae in which he angers the god Dionysus for not worshiping him.

Pièce de Résistance: A French term that refers to the best part or the highlight of something; implies that the element referred to is outstanding, notable or defining.

Phallic: Of resemblance to a phallus or erect penis.

Pompadour: Madame de Pompadour was a member of the French court who rose to be the official mistress of King Louis XV, during the 18th century.

Pompeii: An ancient Roman city destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, and revealed through excavation to have had a distinctly erotic artistic culture.
RAPHAEL: Italian Renaissance painter, one of the great trinity of artistic masters alongside Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

RENAISSANCE: The cultural movement of the 14th through 17th centuries that began in Italy and spread to the rest of Europe; through invention and art, the Renaissance led to the expansion of Latin and vernacular languages and widespread educational reform.

S&M: Reference to sadism and masochism (sadomasochism), the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure through the infliction of pain or humiliation.

SABLE: A forest-dwelling species of marten, native to Kazakhstan and known to be harvested for its highly valuable fur.

SCAN: referring to “scansion,” a method of analyzing poetic verse in an attempt to understand the manner in which it should be spoken via stressed and unstressed syllables.

SCREAMING MIMI’S: A New York clothing store established in the 1970s, known for its collection of vintage pieces.

SCULLERY MAID: A low-ranking female servant that acts as an assistant in the kitchen; common duties include monitoring kitchen fires and waiting on the servant staff.

STAGE LEFT: The left side of the stage, from a performer’s point of view when facing the audience.

STOLE: A piece of woman’s clothing worn loosely over the shoulders, similar to a shawl or scarf; often made of fur or a similar material.

SUBJUGATION: To conquer or control.

SWADDLED: A method of tightly wrapping infants in blankets in a way that keeps their movement restricted and their body heat contained.

SWEATSHOP: A negative term associated with an unacceptable and often harmful work environment.

SWITCH: A flexible rod used for corporal punishment, commonly made from birch wood.

TARTAR: Of or relating to the Tartars, more often spelled Tatars, a Turkic ethnic group in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia including parts of present day Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

TEUTONIC: Of or relating to the Teutons; reference to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages.

THE BACCHAE: The name given to the female followers of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and intoxication and the equivalent to the Greek god, Dionysus.

THEBES: A Greek city often mentioned in mythology; the setting of Euripides’ The Bacchae, where king Pentheus offends Dionysus.

“THE OVERTURNING OF A DRAGONFLY’S WING”: A line by Greek lyric poet Simonides of Ceos, who asserted that a reversal of the human condition comes more quickly than the beat of a dragonfly’s wing; Simonides is famous for his colorful character, and the invention of some of the letters of the Greek alphabet.

TITIAN: An Italian painter of the 16th century who often painted women with red-tinted hair; Titian hair refers to a red hue with a hint of golden brown.

TITIAN’S VENUS WITH A MIRROR: Famous painting of Venus wrapped in a fur-fringed cloak, resembling the classical statues of the Venus de’ Medici in Florence or the Capitoline Venus in Rome; the painting is said to both celebrate feminine beauty and offer a critique of vanity, and is the only known Titian painting done entirely by the artist’s own hand.

TRANSYLVANIA: A historical region in Romania known for the scenic beauty of its Carpathian landscape.
TRISTAN AND ISOLDE: A 12th century Celtic romantic tragedy about an adulterous love affair between a Cornish knight and Irish princess; the legend has remained widely popular and has had a substantial impact on Western art and literature.

TRITE: Lacking in freshness and originality owing to constant use or excessive repetition.

TUBERCULOSIS: A common bacterial infection of the lungs; prior to the 1950s, the disease was often fatal, though it is now often curable with antibiotics.

TUNING FORK: A two-pronged fork shaped like a wishbone that emits a pure musical tone via vibrations when struck.

VENUS: The Roman goddess of love, beauty, sex, fertility, and prosperity; the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess, Aphrodite.

VENUS IN FURS: The 1870 German novella written by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch known for its themes of female dominance and sadomasochism, as inspired by the author’s own life.

VOLUPTUARY: A person devoted to luxury and sensual pleasure.

VOLUPTUOUS: Something characterized by luxury or sensual pleasure.

WEIMARANER: A German breed of dog primarily used as a royal hunting dog in the early 19th century.

WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST: The antagonist in L. Frank Baum’s The Wizard of Oz, adapted for the screen in 1939; her black garments, green skin, and pointed hat became a standard portrait of a witch and an archetype of human wickedness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Vanda, when she first enters, seems to fit exactly the description Thomas has given of all the other unsuitable actresses he’s auditioned so far. What is it that makes Thomas continue the audition? Why does he keep pushing for more?

2. Why do you think Thomas becomes so upset when Vanda states that his play is “like, all about child abuse”? Do you agree with his assertion that making “everything about some trivial social issue” is diminishing of us, of our society?

3. Severin, in the novel Venus in Furs, asserts that “[Woman] can only be [man’s] slave or his despot, but never his companion. This she can become only when she has the same rights as he and is his equal in education and work.” How much do you think the play Venus in Fur grapples with this issue? Is there ever equality between Thomas and Vanda? And if there is a power inequity, with whom does the power lie, and in what way?

4. In character as Kushemski from the play-within-the-play, Thomas says “This is the future of men and women. Let the one who would kneel, kneel.” Do you think this accurately predicts the future of gender roles and identity? Has our society reached the point at which woman can finally be man’s companion, according to Severin’s definitions?
5. Vanda tells Thomas that he really understands women, to write this female character so well. Do you think she’s being honest? If so, do you agree with her?

6. Vanda and Thomas disagree over the definition of the book as pornography or an erotic love story. How would you define it? How much of the definition of the novel is dictated by the person who wrote it? Or by the person reading it?

7. Life mimics art, and vice versa, throughout this play. Do you believe the character of Vanda is both idolized and villainized similarly to the Countess from von Sacher-Masoch’s original story?

8. The character of Vanda has come to life through multiple men’s imaginations. What effect does this have on the character in the end? How fair/realistic/three-dimensional is her portrayal?

9. The actress playing Vanda has several onstage costume changes throughout the play, adding and removing layers of clothing. Other than the obvious erotic undertones, what do you think these costume changes signify?

10. What does Vanda mean when she says, “You thought that you could use me to insult me?” Do you think this story — either the original by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch or the play by David Ives — would have unfolded differently if it was written by a woman?