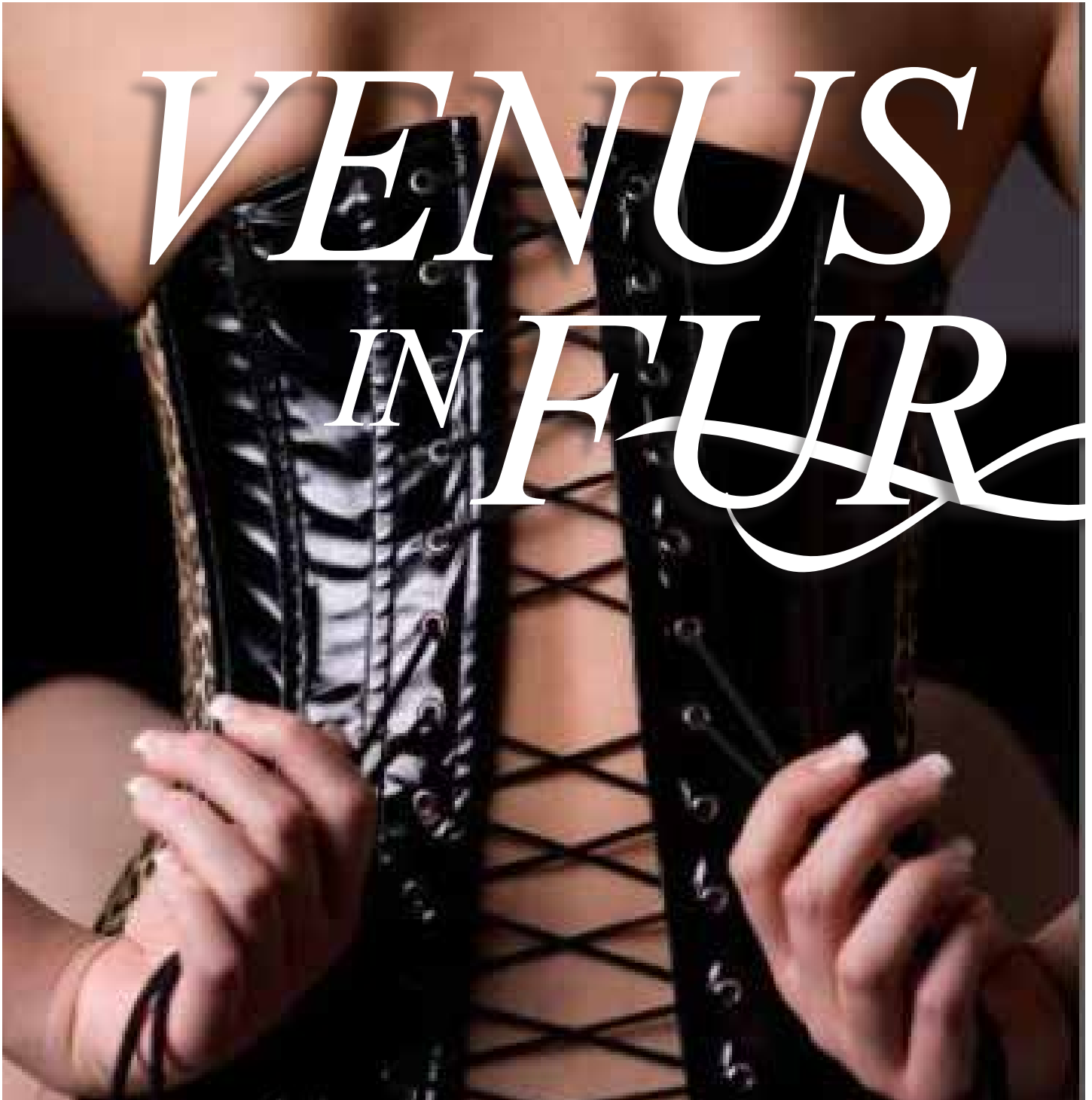*Stiemke Season presented by John and Connie Kordsmeier*

VENUS IN FUR

By David Ives

Directed by Laura Gordon

Ed Seaberg and Patrick Smith, Executive Producers

Milwaukee Repertory Theater presents

VENUS IN FUR

September 23 – November 3
STIEMKE STUDIO

By **David Ives**
Directed by **Laura Gordon**

MARK'S TAKE

"Sexy, thrilling, comic, mysterious, and a great vehicle for two extraordinary actors, *Venus in Fur* immediately captivated me on the page when I first read it—and then had me truly spellbound when I saw it on Broadway. I love that the play encourages audience members to use their imaginations a bit, and I think it will be an absolutely electric evening in the Stiemke!"

-Mark Clements, Artistic Director

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The Play: *Venus in Fur*   SPOILER ALERT!

Director and playwright Thomas Novachek cleans up in a dingy rehearsal hall after a long day of unsuccessful auditions. He complains to his fiancée on the phone about the disappointing women who have auditioned for the leading lady in his new play, an adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's infamous novella, *Venus in Furs*.

Just as he is beginning to leave, a soaked mess of a woman arrives, breathless and desperate to audition. Oddly enough, her name is Vanda, just like his main character. Unfortunately, she seems to fit all of his complaints about every other woman who has auditioned for the part. Thomas tries to get her to leave, but she is persuasive and he decides to let her read a brief portion of the script.

Vanda insists that Thomas read opposite her, and as they begin performing the script, Vanda continuously surprises Thomas with her talent and her understanding of the play and its context. She challenges Thomas at every turn, and the tension between the two rises as the sexual dynamic between the two characters in the play-within-a play escalates.

As Vanda and Thomas continue their reading of the play, they switch roles for the scene in which Vanda von Dunayev finally offers herself in submission to Kushemski. Vanda, the actress, confronts Thomas about the misogyny of his script and forces him to bow to her. The play ends when Vanda reveals her true self and Thomas calls out "Hail, Aphrodite!", finally submitting to the goddess.

The Novella: *Venus in Furs*

Leopold Sacher-Masoch wrote the novella *Venus in Furs* in 1870. Read more about the history of the novella and Sacher-Masoch on page 5 of this guide.

Venus in Furs opens with a frame story of a man's dream of meeting a Venus statue come to life. She is wrapped in fur and the two speak about love and his particular desires.

Upon arrival at his friend Severin's house, the man sees a painting described as:

A beautiful woman with a radiant smile upon her face, with abundant hair tied into a classical knot, on which white powder lay like a soft hoarfrost, was resting on an ottoman, supported on her left arm. She was nude in her dark furs. Her right hand played with a lash, while her bare foot rested carelessly on a man, lying before her like a slave, like a dog. In the sharply outlined, but well-formed linaments of this man lay brooding melancholy and passionate devotion; he looked up to her with the ecstatic burning eye of a martyr. This man, the footstool for her feet, was Severin, but beardless, and, it seemed, some ten years younger.

The man tells his friend, Severin, of his dream and its connection to the painting and Titian's painting *Venus with a Mirror*. Severin then shares with him a manuscript titled *Confessions of a Supersensual Man*. Severin's tale forms the bulk of the novella.

Severin von Kushemski is so in love with Wanda (Vanda) von Dunayev that he asks to be her slave to convince her of his devotion. At first she does not understand the idea, but over time finds it to be interesting and starts to revel in her role. As the relationship becomes more and more degrading for Kushemski, the more devoted he becomes. As a child, Severin was humiliated by an aunt who beat him and regularly wore furs. As a result, the combination of the two has long been erotic for him.

The two travel to Florence, and Wanda gives Severin a common servant's name: Gregor. He acts as her servant throughout their time in Florence. Severin at first finds the submission thrilling, but after Wanda meets other men and treats him progressively worse, he wants to go back on their agreement. Wanda takes a man named Alexis Papadopolis as her lover. Severin gives up on a future with Wanda when she ultimately humiliates him by letting Alexis whip him in her stead. Severin is once again alone.

The frame narrative returns and Severin relates the moral of the tale to his friend: "That woman, as nature has created her and as man is at present educating her, is his enemy. She can only be his 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 . . . The moral of the tale is this: whoever allows himself to be whipped, deserves to be whipped."

The novella is available as an e-book on Project Gutenberg:

http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/8vnsf10h.htm

THE CHARACTERS

Thomas Novachek (Reese Madigan)

Thomas has written what he believes to be a brilliant stage adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*. He is the quintessential frustrated director after a day of long auditions, and thinks he understands everything about his play, women, and the actresses he has seen. He believes he is highly intellectual and superior to those around him. Engaged to a young woman the audience never meets, Thomas struggles with the escalating sexual and ideological tension with Vanda throughout the course of their evening together.

> "There *are* no women like this. No young women, or young-*ish* women. No beautiful-slash-sexy women. No beautiful-sexy-articulate young women with some classical training and a particle of brain in their skulls. Is that so much to ask?" -Thomas

Severin von Kushemski

Severin loves Vanda so madly that he wishes only to submit to her every desire, to be her slave. He attributes his proclivities to an experience with his aunt when he was a child. As he falls further and further into the relationship with Vanda, he finds the experience exhilarating, but also terrifying. He becomes a broken man after his plan does not go as he had hoped.

Vanda Jordan (Greta Wohlrabe)

Vanda at first appears uneducated, scatterbrained, vulgar, and desperate. As the play progresses, she reveals that she has much more depth and intelligence than she originally discloses. A young actress with little experience, Vanda arrives to the audition with a bag full of props and a goal in mind beyond getting the part.

Vanda von Dunayev

Vanda is a regal and beautiful woman. At the beginning of her relationship with Severin, she is cautious and wary of not only his plan of submission, but also of his affections. As Vanda accepts her place of dominance in their relationship, she discovers that she enjoys the power and takes it to places Severin never anticipated.

Costume renderings for Thomas and Vanda. Costume designs by Rachel Laritz.

Production History

Venus in Fur premiered Off-Broadway at the Classic Stage Company in January of 2010, starring Nina Arianda and Wes Bentley. It opened on Broadway in November of 2011 at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre with Nina Arianda reprising her role and Hugh Dancy taking over the role of Thomas. Arianda won the Tony for Best Actress in a Play and the show was nominated for Best Play. David Ives and Roman Polanski recently collaborated on a film adaptation of *Venus in Fur*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May of this year.

"*Venus in Fur* is a great love story. It's a serious novel. It's a central text of world literature." – Thomas, *Venus in Fur*
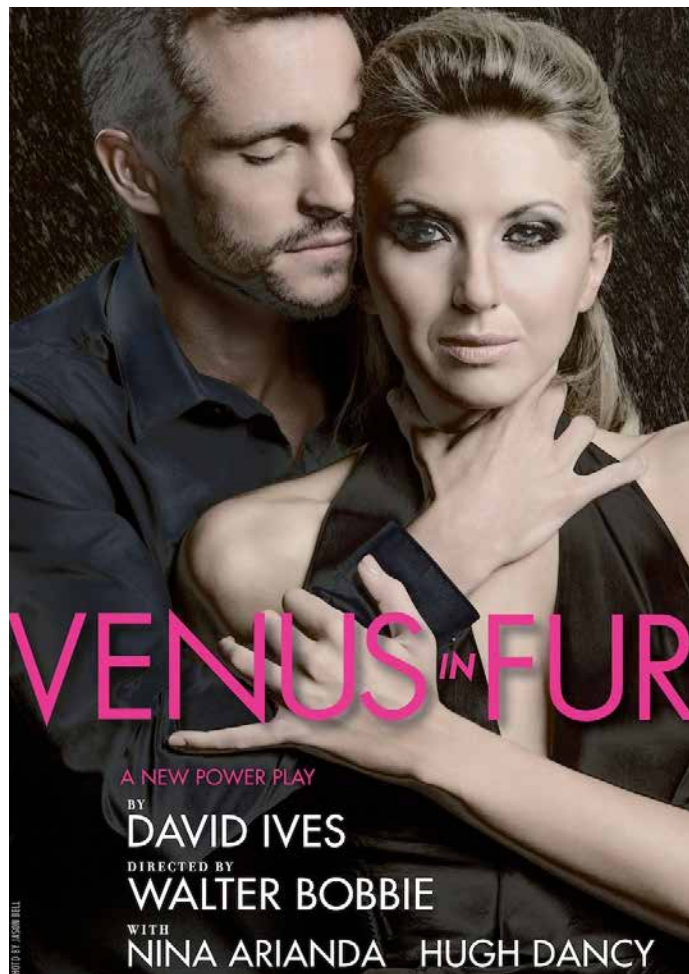
Poster for the Broadway production of *Venus in Fur*, 2011.

The Novella and Sacher-Masoch


Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Marquis de Sade.

Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch planned to write an epic series entitled *Legacy of Cain* with sections entitled *Love*, *Property*, *State*, *War*, *Work*, and *Death*. *Venus in Furs* was part of the first volume, *Love*. Originally published in 1870, the book fictionalizes Sacher-Masoch's own experiences in a sexual relationship with Baroness Fanny Pistor. While Sacher-Masoch wrote many non-fiction works about his homeland and its people, as well as several other novels and short stories, *Venus in Furs* is his only work that is widely available in English. The book continues to have influence in popular culture including several film adaptations, songs, and of course, Ives's play.

Sadomasochism:

The term *sadomasochism* derives from the names of two authors who wrote infamous texts that deal with submission and domination: the Marquis de Sade, author of *Justine*, and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, author of *Venus in Furs*. Originally, the term was coined by psychologists to describe those who find sexual pleasure from these practices and was classified as a paraphilia, a mental disorder based on sexual preferences. In recent years, the classification has been changed and the term has been replaced with the acronym BDSM, which includes the three main areas of the culture: bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism.
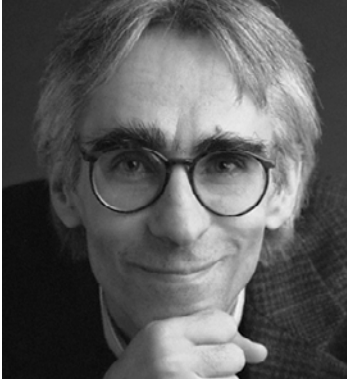
David Ives

David Ives.

David Ives grew up in South Chicago, and later attended seminary and Northwestern University. After a hiatus, he attended Yale School of Drama and earned an MFA in playwriting.

Ives' first play in New York, *Canvas*, premiered in 1972 at Circle Repertory Company. In the late 1980s, Ives began adding his unique comic voice to the Manhattan Punch Line's annual one-act festival. Some of the plays in the festival later became part of *All in the Timing*, an evening of Ives' one-acts that premiered in 1993 and ran for 606 performances. That play won Ives the Outer Circle Critics John Gassner Award for Playwriting.

In the following years, Ives released another collection of short plays, *Time Flies*, and a collection of his full length plays, *Polish Joke*. While Ives is best known for his original comedic works, he also adapts classic French comedies such as *The Misanthrope* and *A Flea in Her Ear* and writes librettos for operas, books for musicals, children's books, and more serious theatrical fare.

David Ives with cast and director of the 20th anniversary production of *All in the Timing*, 2013.

Ives received his first Tony Award nomination for Best Play for *Venus in Fur* in 2012. He is currently working on a musical with Stephen Sondheim entitled *All Together Now*.

Ives' Thoughts on *Venus in Fur*

On 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.

On why he chose *Venus in Furs:*

Venus in Fur is about two people locked in an intense erotic relationship, and if that's not dramatic I don't know what is.

On the characters in the play-within-a-play:

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 . . . *Venus in Fur* 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.

On adapting the novel:

The play actually began with me doing a straight, full-length adaptation of the novel. Four actors, set in period. Once I had that, I basically took that adaptation and edited it for whatever was most dramatic and used that for the play-within-a-play. I wrote what's currently on Broadway in about ten days.

From interviews with Ives from *The Economist* and *Broadway.com*.

VENUS/APHRODITE

Venus with a Mirror by Titian, 1555.

Venus with a Mirror by Titian

The Italian Renaissance artist Titian painted *Venus with a Mirror* in 1555. A celebration of the female form, the painting portrays Venus wrapped in fur, gazing at herself in the mirror held by her cherubs. In the novella *Venus in Furs*, the narrator of the frame story is fascinated with a painting he sees in Severin's home that is inspired by the piece. This image of Venus serves as a motif in the novella and the play, inspiring the title.

The Roman goddess Venus and her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, represent love, beauty, sexuality, and prosperity. There are several different versions of her birth story. In some mythology, she was born of sea-foam, and in some she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione. Venus had many lovers such as the gods Mars, Bacchus, and Vulcan (Ares, Dionysus, and Hephaestus) as well as humans such as Anchises. She birthed Aeneas, the hero of the *Aeneid,* and many minor gods and goddesses. Venus and Aphrodite were central to many religious rites and festivals in Rome and Greece, respectively.

Venus continues to appear in popular culture, and her role as the goddess of love reappears in art, literature, film, songs, television, and theatrical works.

The Birth of Venus by Botticelli, 1485.

Venus on Seashell, from the Casa di Venus, Pompeii, before 79 AD.

IDEAS IN *VENUS IN FUR*

"It defies easy description . . . it is like a box within a box within a box."
- *Venus in Fur* Director, Laura Gordon

Venus in Fur is a complex piece asking many questions. The following ideas are central to the play.

Fantasy vs. Reality

Venus in Fur plays on the idea of what is real and what is only imagined, both in the context of theater and also in the story of the play-within-a-play. The play blurs the line between the world of the play-within-a-play and the real world of the audition, questioning the carefully crafted realities and personalities of the characters. In the end, the audience must decide where that line is drawn and what this distortion might mean in the world of the play and in our perception of reality.

"And Vanda really is Venus, right? Am I crazy? She's like Venus in disguise or something, come down to get him. To like torture him." - Vanda

"It's about a woman who recognizes some-thing in herself – pos-sibly – and about a man who until he meets her is forced to hide his true self away."

- Thomas

"See what your nature is. Or change your nature."

- Kushemski

Roman Polanski, Emmanuelle Seigner and Mathieu Amalric on the set of *Venus in Fur* film, 2013.

Power Relationships and Gender

Venus in Fur deals with many levels of power relationships: actor and director, man and woman, goddess and mortal, submissive and dominant. What *Venus in Fur* does not do is leave the audience with a definitive answer about the power play that happens throughout the course of Thomas and Vanda's evening together. Vanda and Thomas's struggle with power dynamics parallels the battle between Vanda and Severin in the play-within-a-play, confronting our notions of power, gender, and identity. What makes one powerful? What defines feminine and masculine? How do we judge a person's identity based on gender? Does power define gender?

"In our society, a woman's only power is through men . . . . I want to see what Woman will be when she ceases to be man's slave. When she has the same rights as he, when she's his equal in education and his partner in work. When she becomes herself. An individual." - Dunayev

"Look. I wrote this. I've been studying this. I should think I know what my own play's about. It's not making some general statement about men *or* women." - Thomas

"In time you'd only try to wrest power from me, as every lover does. Why waste time in the struggle?" - Kushemski

"Power, that's what you want. You want to have me and then put your foot on my neck like every petty tyrant who's ever lived."

- Kushemski

Hugh Dancy and Nina Arianda in *Venus in Fur* on Broadway, 2011.
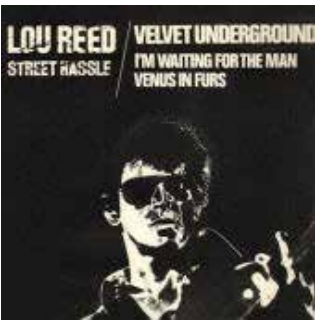
GLOSSARY OF ALLUSIONS IN *VENUS IN FUR*

Vanda: I'm like made for this part, I swear to God. I was amazing as **Hedda Gabler**.

Elizabeth Robins as Hedda
Gabler, England, 1891.

Henrik Ibsen's play, *Hedda Gabler,* premiered in 1890, and has become a classic of nineteenth century theater.

Vanda: This is like based on something, right? Besides the Lou Reed song? *Venus in Furs*?

Velvet Underground
album cover, 1967.

"Venus in Furs" by Lou Reed, appeared on The Velvet Underground's debut album and is one of several songs inspired by Sacher-Masoch's novel. A verse shows how the song addresses themes and characters in the novel:

> "Severin, Severin speak so slightly
>
> Severin down on your bended knee
>
> Taste the whip, in love not given lightly
>
> Taste the whip, now plead for me."

Vanda: Come on. You're perfect. You are **Kowalski**.

Thomas: Kushemski.

Vanda: Kushemski. You're him.

Marlon Brando and Kim Hunter as
Stanley and Stella Kowalski in the film
adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

One of the most common Polish surnames, **Kowalski** is also the last name of Stella and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Tennessee Williams classic.

Vanda: Yeah. "And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman's hands." What is that?

Thomas: It's quoted a couple of times in the novel. It's from **the Book of Judith**.

Vanda: Is that the Bible?

Thomas: Yes, the Book of Judith is from the Apocrypha of the Bible.

Judith and her Maidservant by
Artemisia Gentileschi, 1613.

The Book of Judith is in a third section of the Bible, **the Apocrypha**, which comes between the Old and New Testaments in some Christian sects. The story of Judith is that of a woman who rises to save her Israeli town of Bethulia from the evil King Nebuchadnezzar and in doing so, beheads the king's general, Holofernes.

Vanda *[as Dunayev]*: I found this book in the birch grove last night. A copy of ***Faust,*** with your bookplate inside.

Faust in his Study by Eugène Delacroix.

The story of **Faust** is a classic German legend in which an unhappy scholar sells his soul to the devil in exchange for what he believes will bring him happiness. The version referred to in the play is most likely Goethe's epic length drama, a classic of German literature.

Thomas *[as Kushemski]*: I needled her rudely, I insulted her, I called her **Messalina**.

Sculpture of Messalina, circa AD 45.

A woman with family ties to the Roman Emperors Nero, Augustus, and Caligula, **Messalina** was the wife of Emperor Claudius. Accused of and executed for conspiring against her husband, Messalina influenced affairs of state through her connections, both familial and sexual.

Vanda *[as Dunayev]*: I love the ancients not for their pediments or their poetry, but because in their world Venus can love **Paris** one day and **Anchises** the next . . . . I want to live the way **Helen** and **Aspasia** lived, not the twisted women of today, who are never happy and never give happiness.

Aspasia by Marie Geneviève Bouliar, 1794.

Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite competed to see which one was the most fair of the goddesses; the winner would be awarded a golden apple. Zeus chose a mortal man, **Paris**, to judge the contest. Aphrodite bribed him with the offer of **Helen**, the most beautiful woman in the world, so Paris bestowed the golden apple upon Aphrodite.

Aphrodite desired a young man named **Anchises**, so she turned herself into a human and they had two children. When she returned to her godly state, and Anchises started boasting about sleeping with a goddess, Zeus struck him down with a thunderbolt.

According to myth, **Helen** was the most beautiful woman in the world, and her kidnapping by Paris with Aphrodite's approval led to the Trojan War.

Aspasia was the mistress of the Greek statesman, Pericles, and some say that she ran a brothel in Athens. Aspasia's insistence that she be treated as an equal was scandalous in Athens, but she still participated actively in the political life of the city.

Thomas: Actually, it's the same story as *The Bacchae*, isn't it?

Furious maenad, from Vulci, circa 490 BC.

Written by Euripedes, **The Bacchae** is an Ancient Greek tragedy based on a mythological story about Pentheus's punishment by Dionysus. The bacchant women follow Dionysus through the world, and rip Pentheus apart at the conclusion of the play.

Thomas: Kushemski and Vanda are like **Tristan and Isolde**.

Tristan and Isolde by Edmund Leighton, 1902.

The story of **Tristan and Isolde** is a classic Romance that later became part of the Arthurian legend. The story centers on a love triangle between a young man, his uncle, and his uncle's wife.

Thomas *[as Kushemski]*: Give me a woman honest enough to say, "I am **Pompadour**, I am **Borgia**, I am the master to whom you are bound" – and I'll kneel to her.

Madame de Pompadour by François Boucher, circa 1750.   *Portrait of Lucrezia Borgia* by Bartolomeo Veneto.

Louis XV's royal mistress, the **Marquise de Pompadour**, wielded much control behind-the-scenes of the French Court during her tenure at Versailles.

Lucrezia Borgia married four husbands to create alliances for her very powerful family; her father was a Cardinal, and later Pope Alexander VI. Lucrezia's charm, beauty, and political connections gave her some power within the Italian world of the early 1500s.

Thomas *[as Kushemski]*: This isn't **Pompeii**, you know. This is civilization.

The ruins of Pompeii.

In 79 A.D. Mount Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the city of **Pompeii**, which was a popular vacation spot for Greeks for many years. Archaeologists have used the well-preserved remains from the site to gain a better understanding of Ancient Greek life.

VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center, downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The entrance to the Stiemke Studio is located by the large rotunda staircase.

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