"Like Venus in disguise or something": The Tragic Infrastructure of Ives' *Venus in Fur*

Critics have applauded David Ives' 2010 revenge comedy *Venus in Fur* as a study of the sexual politics of the theater and for the extravagance of its metatheatricality: a play about a playwright-director auditioning for his current piece, *Venus in Fur*, itself an adaptation of Sacher-Masoch's 1870 classic *Venus in Furs*. But the play's smart humor and rich intertextuality are firmly grounded in the ironies and polarities of Greek tragedy. The combative relationship between 'Thomas Novachek' and 'Vanda Jordan' and the power differential it embodies are defined in the binaries of authority—male over female, director over actress, author over reader. This hierarchy becomes contested, confused and ultimately inverted as it is inscribed upon the respective roles the two assume in the play-within-the-play: 'Severin von Kushemski,' the obsessive aristocrat who seeks to become the slave of the woman he loves; and the regal 'Vanda Dunayev' who, albeit reluctantly, agrees to dominate him with sublime cruelty. As the audition unfolds, the sexual warfare Vanda wages on Thomas becomes textual warfare, a critical dimension of the strategy by which the actress first disarms, and then destroys him.

Euripides' *Bacchae* provides the tragic axis on which this shifting relationship is negotiated. The play declares its model early on. When Vanda suggests that Dunayev is "like Venus in disguise or something come down to get him," Thomas notes "it's the same story as *The Bacchae*," though the full implications of the comparison elude him. Over the course of the audition, Vanda proves herself in every way his superior—as reader, critic, even director. She deconstructs the premises on which his play, and ultimately his authority, are based: in her withering feminist analysis of Sacher-Masoch's novel; in her insight into the meaning of Thomas' play, which she demonstrates in performance and commentary; in the way she commandeers not only the audition but the script itself, rewriting Thomas' play to align it more

truly with the *Bacchae* and casting him as a modern day Pentheus, blinded by his illusions about women, literature, power, and himself.

Vanda's revision of Thomas' text is anticipated in the arrogance of his opening lines: "*I'd* be a better Vanda than most of these girls, all I'd have to do is put on a dress and a pair of nylons." Her manipulation of Thomas drives the action precisely toward that end. She convinces him to improvise a new beginning for the play that corresponds more closely both to Sacher-Masoch's novel and to the prologue of the *Bacchae*—an epiphany in which Venus reveals her intentions and morphs into her surrogate Vanda, just as Dionysus disguises himself as his own priest. As with the miracles that confound Pentheus, Thomas is bewildered by the series of marvels that Vanda presents: from the coincidence of her name, to her mastery of the script, to the period clothes she pulls from her costume bag, to her intimate knowledge of his personal life. "Who *are* you, Frau Vanda Jordan?" he confesses, paraphrasing a line from his play. The shift in the power dynamic reaches its tipping point as Vanda, in a parody of the cross-dressing scene in *Bacchae*, coaxes Thomas into exchanging roles and costume and playing Dunayev, flattering him for knowing the part "from the inside."

Thomas eagerly helps Vanda bring her revenge to its Bacchic completion, giving her stockings to bind him, as the line between actor and role dissolves. No longer hiding behind the props of author or director, and clearly inhabiting the character "from the inside," he delivers Dunayev's speech on woman's true nature, which wants only to be ruled: "Humiliate me. Degrade me." Vanda taunts him with his earlier description of Pentheus as "a mass of quivering feminine jelly." With ecstatic song and dance, she commands him, emasculated and intellectually dismembered, to recognize her: 'Hail, Aphrodite!' In this metatheatrical *coup de*

théâtre, Vanda Jordan—actress, goddess, author—has absorbed Thomas Novachek and his misbegotten play into her triumphant paratragedy, *Venus in Fur*.