

## Domination drama

### *Sexual tension drives edgy 'Venus in Fur'*

By [PAUL WOZNIAK](#) of the Lansing City Pulse

May 13, 2015

It feels like a mistake: no set, no stage lights, no actors and the audience sits on the stage. A man walks into the theater on his cell phone! But don't be fooled. This is David Ives' steamy, self-reflexive examination of power and gender, "Venus in Fur."



It's also Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s final production of the season and a stellar must-see mind-trip.

In "Venus and Fur," playwright Thomas (Joseph Mull) desperately seeks an actress to play Vanda, the lead role in his adaptation of the classic sadomasochistic story, "Venus in Furs." Arriving to audition is Vanda (Mary Dilworth), an equally desperate actress with the right name but obviously wrong for the role. Vanda the character is poised and refined. Vanda the actress is crude and clumsy. But before Thomas can turn her away, Vanda's reading reveals a strangely adept knowledge of the subject, transforming the audition into an erotic game that blurs the lines of reality.

One of the best elements of this production is its hidden complexity. Everything from the bare stage to the seeming lack of stage lights to the compact cast suggests simplicity. Director Rob Roznowski's ingenious decision to place the audience on the stage enhances the intimacy of the show, morphing the stage into a black box space.

And so all audience attention focuses on the two actors, whose combustible chemistry drives the show. Dilworth is particularly mesmerizing to watch. She's pure energy — like a child without fear or doubt, gleefully lacking a filter that might restrain embarrassing speech or excessive profanity. When she reads from the script, Dilworth's body and voice mutate into a refined goddess. Dilworth's seamless transitions between her two characters are a delightful juggling act of control and timing.

Dilworth beautifully counters Mull's stodgy, patronizing Thomas. Thomas is the epitome of a sexist, self-righteous know-it-all. Mull miraculously makes this monster feel human and all too familiar.

While the dialogue flits around with the randomness of a caffeinated brain, Roznowski manages to keep the show focused on the power dynamics between the two characters. The play tackles gender roles and misogyny, but it's also a celebration of theater — a behind the scenes exploration of the rehearsal process. It's a process that can be fun or, in the case of this play, fraught with sexual tension.

---

#### "Venus in Fur"

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. Through May 17 8 p.m. Thursday- Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday \$15/\$10 student & seniors 65+ Miller Performing Arts Center 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing (517) 372-0945, [peppermintcreek.org](http://peppermintcreek.org)